'Cultural icons, tourist attractions, sites of sacred encounter: Contemporary Engagements with Malta's Neolithic Temples'

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It was the Neolithic temples – unique, megalithic monuments dated to around 3,600BC – that first lured me to Malta. I wanted to understand their meanings and values for Maltese people, especially in the light of their valorisation and appropriation by foreign women belonging to the modern Goddess movement. My research focussed on a range of Maltese attitudes, interpretations and agendas in relation to the temples and to the Goddess pilgrim-tourists who visited them.[1] At that time – it was 1998 – I knew nothing about an indigenous Maltese Neo-Pagan movement or any agendas it might have with respect to the temples. The movement was then, and still is, fairly well-concealed, and at that time was in its infancy.

In this paper I recap on my earlier research and discuss some new work on Maltese Neo-Pagan engagements with the temples begun in 2005. This forms a small part of a larger ethnographic study which I am currently conducting on contemporary Paganism in Malta. The paper illustrates that the bi-partite categories of hosts and guests, indigenes and visitors, tourists and pilgrims, Pagans and non-Pagans are not especially useful when trying to understand the variety of meanings, values and functions of these ancient sites. Interest groups contesting the management and meanings of sites cross-cut these binary categories and individuals within them find both unexpected allies and dissenters. Moreover, the constitution of different 'stakeholder' groups and the pattern of relationships amongst them are constantly changing.

Maltese Relationships with the Temples

It is difficult to generalise about Maltese relationships to the Neolithic past and the temples. Local villagers and communities, farmers and hunters who live or carry out their activities near temples are likely to have different attitudes and concerns from urban-dwellers. People working for heritage organisations, archaeologists, tourism operators, historians, politicians, policy-makers, planners, antiquarians, artists, temple guides and custodians all have different standpoints, and the variety of views within any of these stakeholder groups – which together comprise only a small minority of the Maltese population – is considerable.

It has to be said that while many Maltese feel a strong affinity with, and passion for, the temples, and particularly the landscape in which they are embedded, many more do not. This is partly due to the fact that most Maltese perceive no distant genealogical connection between themselves and the people of the temple period. Archaeological opinion has long held that the temple culture was entirely wiped out by, or became extinct before the arrival of, waves of later peoples: the Bronze Age people, the Phoenicians, the Romans and so on.[2] Therefore, in the eyes of most, the temple builders were not their remote ancestors, but a quite separate, little-understood people that once occupied these islands thousands of years before Christ. Indeed, until the 20th century and the scientific excavation of sites, the Neolithic remains were something of a mystery. One of the earliest accounts, published in 1647, suggested that the temples were built by cyclopean giants. It later turned out that the skulls of these 'giants' belonged to an extinct species of dwarf elephant found in the islands.[3] It was not until the turn of the 20th century that archaeologists began attributing the temples to a prehistoric culture.[4]

When I talked with Maltese people in an effort to understand the temples' meanings and importance, it became clear that most, while proud that Malta is home to such remarkable sites, saw them as primarily things that tourists were interested in. Apart from middle-class and educated people and those with a special interest in the sites, it seemed that most Maltese grew up with a sense of the temples as a taken-for-granted part of the Maltese landscape and their cultural heritage, but this sense was vague and seldom thought about. Their relative lack of interest in the temples contrasted sharply with their pride, interest, and knowledge in relation to other historic buildings, especially churches and other structures built during the period when the Knights of St. John ruled Malta (1530-1798). As a Maltese university student told me: 'We see the link with the Maltese of the time of the Knights because they were Christians like us, but somehow the link is lost throughout the millennia it took between us and the people of the temple period'.

The absence of a felt connection – ancestral or cultural and certainly not religious – with the temple culture is perhaps hardly surprising given its antiquity and the paucity of knowledge about it. The temples constitute the remains of a past so distant that it can scarcely be imagined, let alone identified with. Writing about 19th century painting, Maltese anthropologist Paul Sant Cassia concluded that the Neolithic ruins were 'mute testimonies of an unknown silent past with very little connection to contemporary realities'.[5] He shows how the relationship between the Maltese, Christianity and their pre-Christian 'pagan' past is constructed as a very different kind of cultural narrative from, for example, that constructed by Greeks about their relationship with their 'pagan' (Classical) past. Since the birth of the independent Greek state in 1834, Acropolis Hill and its monuments in particular were chosen as the national symbol of the new state, forging a link between past and

present.[6] Sant Cassia says that Malta's Neolithic temples never became a symbol of nationhood in the way that Greek temples did, at least for a long time.[7] In Malta nationhood began with Christianity and literacy. For Maltese, he writes, the arrival of St Paul on the island in 60AD following his shipwreck en route to his martyrdom in Rome marked not only the beginning of their history, but also their designation as a 'chosen people, having been selected by divine Providence to become Christians before the rest of Europe'.[8]

It is not only that many Maltese have chosen not to construct a strong link with the Neolithic past. Reuben Grima argues that the 'otherness' of the past has been reinforced by a long history of exclusion. During the early 19th century, when Malta was a British colony, the people actively interested in these sites were almost exclusively foreign and primarily British'.[9] For Maltese, Grima claims, the conclusion has been that 'it is the foreigner who can relate to these stones and make them speak'. The 'prehistoric sites have not yet been appropriated by Maltese culture at its grass-roots'.[10] In particular, Grima says, the communities which live closest to the temples located in rural settings have seen them as places of foreign interest and activity. This interest is not always welcomed, especially by those who have traditionally used the countryside around the temples for bird-trapping and hunting, activities which do not complement tourism. The government's proposal to create a heritage park on a section of the beautiful southern coast encompassing Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra temples has particularly enraged some of these hunters and trappers who have felt that their traditional, God-given rights were being curtailed.

In 1996 the southern Mnajdra temple was spray-painted with graffiti which included the name of Malta's Green party (with which the hunters are paradoxically associated) and 'RTO' (an abbreviation of '*Reservato*' used in the countryside to

mark where a hunting or trapping concession has been rented out). Grima interpreted the vandalism to the temple as 'a perverse but eloquent cry of dispossession' from those who see an intrusive state as 'the direct successor of a foreign colonial power': the temples had become symbols of the established order rather than a proud national heritage.[11] In April 2001 (Friday the 13th) there was an even more devastating attack by vandals, who cut through the flimsy wire fence around Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra and, armed with crowbars and other tools, managed to dislodge, topple and smash 60 megalithic stones. In the wake of this tragedy, there was a huge public outcry and a strong call for much better security, conservation and protection (from the weather as well as vandals) for the temples.

Despite these isolated events and the more generalised distancing described by Sant Cassia and Grima, the temples have been and are widely regarded as important symbols of Maltese identity, particularly since the end of the colonial era, and this importance is growing. Sparked by Maltese independence from Britain in 1964 and by the broader global questing of the period, the 1960s saw an intellectual and artistic renaissance in Malta, along with a questing for self-understanding, roots and identity. Academics, artists, philosophers, musicians, writers, historians, scientists and linguists were all exploring what it meant to be Maltese, and the temples were employed as symbols of an essentially Maltese identity.[12] A class of students I spoke with at the University of Malta, children of parents who grew up during the 1960s, emphasized that the temples were part of their heritage and cultural identity. They grew up learning poems which romanticized the Neolithic sites, engendered patriotic pride, and formed a part of their national consciousness.[13] But they also acknowledged that while the temples were co-opted as symbols to support the artistic revival and

nationalistic agenda of the post-independence era, 'the populace' was probably much less aware of this essentially middle-class project.

In the contemporary context as the colonial period recedes, the heritage industry grows (in Malta as elsewhere), more people value the uniqueness of the Neolithic remains, and EU funding is now available for temple preservation, the temples have undoubtedly become symbols of nationhood for Maltese.[14] While they are important cultural icons and unique tourist attractions with historic, economic and scientific values, however, they are not termed 'sacred sites' – even in a nationalistic sense – in official Maltese heritage discourse. And with the exception of some – mostly middle-class, educated – people, it would be an overstatement to say they are sacred in the thinking of most Maltese.

Comparisons with Greek and British Sites

This situation is very different from that in Greece, described by Kalliopi Fouseki, where, following independence in the 19th century, Acropolis Hill was imbued with 'sacredness' in an effort to transform 'the remains of the glorious, classical past of the Acropolis and its landscape into a monumental place in time and space'.[15] 'Sacredness' in this context refers to feelings of respect, national pride and admiration for the aesthetics of the monuments, Fouseki says, and the notion has powerfully helped shape Greek people's identities and perceptions. Of course the iconic importance of the Acropolis is equally enormous for foreign tourists in signifying 'Greekness'.

We might also compare Malta's temples with powerful British cultural icons like Stonehenge. Stonehenge, which is 1500 years younger than the Maltese sites,[16] is, like them, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, sacred to modern Pagans, and vital to

tourism. Its meanings, preservation and management have also been contested by a range of interest groups and stakeholders, although the debate over Stonehenge has been a great deal longer and more heated with a higher political profile than the one over Malta's temples. (See, in particular, Barbara Bender's book *Stonehenge: Making Space* and her 1993 article.)

One of the groups with an interest in Stonehenge is the diverse and fast-growing British Pagan community, which has, after a chequered history of engagement with the site and with heritage managers, achieved managed open access Solstice celebrations at Stonehenge. As Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis have illustrated, a number of other ancient sites across Britain have also become the focus of Pagans' attention, whether they are visiting sites, conducting ceremonies at them, campaigning for their preservation, protesting about damage or potential damage to them, contributing to community education about heritage, trying to get Pagan interpretations of sites recognised, or to have input into heritage management plans.[17] As a result of political activity and negotiations by British Pagans over a number of years, the work of scholars like Bender and endeavours like Blain and Wallis's 'Sacred Sites, Contested Rights/Rites' project (www.sacredsites.org.uk), Stonehenge and some other high-profile sites are now defined in British heritage discourse as 'sacred site', 'spiritual place' or 'special place' to acknowledge that for some people, including Pagans, the sites hold these values.[18] It should be acknowledged, however, that not all involved in British heritage who use the term 'sacred' are using it in the religious sense; some are referring to the sense of respect, admiration and national pride that a wide range of people have for these sites.

This is where heritage discourse in Britain and Malta differs. To be fair, Maltese Neo-Pagans have not, as a group, entered the political contest over the

interpretation, use and management of prehistoric sites in the way that British and other much larger cohorts of Pagans have. Greek Neo-Pagans, for example, gained international media coverage in January 2007 when, to the great consternation of the Greek Orthodox Church, they performed a dramatic costumed ritual at an ancient sanctuary to Zeus in the heart of Athens, ignoring a ban by the Greek culture ministry. A high priestess within the group, Doreta Peppa, was quoted as saying, 'We are Greeks and we demand from the government the right to use our temples'.[19]

While a few Maltese heritage managers know about the local Neo-Pagans, it is undoubtedly true that the majority have never heard of them. In any case, they are easy to overlook because of their tiny numbers, largely youthful demographic, necessarily low profile and lack of a defined or coherent political stance in relation to the temples. By and large, the importance of the temples to Maltese Pagans goes unregistered in the wider public consciousness around heritage because it is simply not known about. When special access to Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim is organised by Heritage Malta at dawn on the equinoxes and solstices – times when remarkable astronomical alignments can be witnessed within the temples – it is so that people (tourists and local people who can afford to join the tour) can be informed by Heritage Malta employees about the scientific aspects of the events, rather than for Neo-Pagans to celebrate their holy days in ways they might deem appropriate.[20]

Maltese Artists and Writers

Four and a half millennia of foreign appropriation and two millennia of Christianity have resulted in most Maltese feeling disconnected from these monuments and the past they represent. Even so, some Catholics, including priests, see the temples as 'primitive people's' attempts to worship God, and there are Maltese with various

backgrounds and interests for whom the temples are enormously important, not only for their historical and heritage values. I met some employed as temple guides and curators who felt personally – as well as professionally – deeply engaged with these places, people from various spiritual paths who go to the temples to meditate or find peace at times of stress, individuals whose passion for Maltese history and landscape is more than academic or nationalistic.

Before I met Maltese Pagans, however, the group of Maltese I encountered who were most passionate about the temples comprised artists – painters, writers, architects, sculptors and ceramicists – amongst whom there has been a fresh renaissance of interest in the legacy of the Neolithic. Some had been working with these themes and images since the 1960s, while others had grown up in the post-independence era and saw the temples as sources of indigenous symbols and global connections.

In early 2000 I visited studios and galleries, talked with art critics, and interviewed10 Maltese artists who had worked with temple imagery. Those interviewed had diverse motivations for using Neolithic symbols and themes, but all were concerned with questions of individual and/or national identity and had a strong ecological awareness. They spoke with feeling about their sense of intimate connection with the temples, expressed in terms of nationalistic pride, spiritual rootedness, and a deep reverence and love for the landscape in which the temples are embedded. These configurations of earth, stone, sea and sky were places in which they felt energised and inspired, where spirit and artistic muse were awakened. They talked about their respect for the Neolithic artists, the metaphor of the earth as Mother, of the birth-death-rebirth cycle, and of the Neolithic society as peace-loving and earth-honouring. One woman spoke of the need to conserve the 'invisible

heritage of temples' as well as the actual stones. When she meditates she senses the presence of the Neolithic ancestors. Another, writing about an installation she had created inspired by the temples, wrote: 'I am left with the strange feeling of stretching through time… a sense of being ancient and yet unborn'.[21] Another, who had received permission to paint at some sites, told me that by the fourth time she entered the Hypogeum to work: 'I would feel like I'm going home… comfortable and protected'. The ardour with which these artists spoke about the temples and their environment was at least equal to that of the foreign Goddess pilgrim-tourists I encountered.

Whether they are foreign or Maltese, Pagan or Catholic, people for whom these sites are sacred space often indicate that in the context of the temples a series of common binaries dissolve and become continuities: human body and earth body, past and present, inner and outer worlds, self and other, human and deity. A profound connection to the earth and Malta's 'metaphysical heritage', for example, is poignantly evoked in Maltese poet Marlene Saliba's volume of poems *Time-faring*. In 'To the Earth, my Mother' the protagonist's relationship to the earth and all beings is expressed in terms of vital, loving kinship, concluding:

> Lying within the beat of your maternal heart
> I listen to your whispers as you tell me
> that united in cosmic harmony and understanding
> infinite space is infinite love
> So here I am my dearest earth
> Today and all the days my soul breathes within you.[22]

A sense of kinship with, reverence for, and timelessness within a sacred landscape is similarly explored in many of Maltese writer and architect Richard England's poems.

In ‘This Holy Earth’ the protagonist kneels on the earth and prays that the ‘spirits of this place/ may once again attain/ their long-lost custody of this land’. The temple’s winding paths mirror his life’s journey; the stones ‘carve alchemies in my changing bones/ and guide me through the walls of time’. [23] Kinship with ‘Mother Earth’ is also potently expressed in some of the works of Antoine Camilleri, one of Malta’s best known artists of the 20th century, where he embeds self-portraits in paintings of Neolithic statues from the temples.[24]

Clearly, perceiving the temples as sacred places and feeling a spiritual bond with natural landscapes are not the sole prerogative of foreign Goddess pilgrim-tourists or local Pagans. Other Maltese, albeit a minority, view them this way too, and often did so long before the emergence of Neo-Paganism in Malta. For these people the temples are not mute testimonies to an unknown past; the stones do speak.

Maltese Pagans

It would be difficult to argue that Maltese Neo-Pagans, as a whole group, have a substantially different relationship with the temples from the minority of other Maltese for whom they are special, sacred places. For Pagans, too, the temples are a source of mystery and national pride, something of an enigma in terms of deciphering their meanings with certainty or understanding the society that built them. One of my key research participants, Adam, eloquently expressed what I also heard from non-Pagans:

> I think that something important in the Maltese setting is what I may call the illusion of ‘absence of myth’. While modern Greeks, Romans, Scandinavians, British and Irish have a large corpus of myths from their own ancestors to draw from, in Malta little is known about the mythology of our prehistoric cultures. I am not saying that Maltese people do not have access to other mythological cycles and pantheons, but I do think that this lack of knowledge about the people

who lived in our islands in times gone by is something significant, for better or worse.

Unlike Pagans in other countries which harbour prehistoric sites once connected with ancient 'pagan' religions, Maltese Pagans have not really claimed the temples as part of a specifically Maltese Pagan identity. Like other Maltese, Pagans emphasise that the temples are World Heritage sites for all to share, and they do not seem to feel that their Malteseness gives them any kind of special claim or connection. Unlike British prehistoric sites or temple sites in Greece, Malta's temples have not become places where local Pagans have openly asserted and performed their religious identity by conducting organised, publicly visible ceremonies. They have not used the temples to legitimise the indigenous roots of their contemporary Paganism, and some Maltese Pagans seem to feel just as strongly drawn to sites overseas – especially British and European ones (Glastonbury looms large in the imagination of several). The temples have not been incorporated into a programme of regular holy day celebrations, become sites of protest, or the focus of other political claims and activity. Individual and group rituals are more likely to be carried out in Pagans' homes or, occasionally, in public places where they can find a private place away from prying eyes. Far from making dramatic displays or contentious claims to ancient sites in terms of interpretation, management, access, or the legitimisation of Maltese Neo-Paganism, Maltese Pagans have been deliberately unobtrusive.

Maltese Pagans *do* pray, meditate and conduct rituals at temples, but these activities tend to be carried out quietly by individuals, or, rarely, by small *ad hoc* groups. Some Pagans have special connections with particular temples: Viviane, for example, has a strong connection with Mnajdra and frequently goes there to pray, leave offerings and connect with the Goddess. When she returns from a trip overseas,

she goes straight from the airport to this temple before going home. Indeed for her it is 'home', her literal touchstone for reconnecting with Malta. Isabella, on the other hand, has seldom visited the temples and none of the rituals of the Pagan study group she organised were conducted at temples. The Lammas ritual a small group of us did at Mnajdra in August 2005 was not only the first time Isabella had participated in a ritual held in a Maltese temple, it was also the first time she had visited Mnajdra.

This occasion was one that pointed up the contested nature of Pagan and tourist engagements with sites. While the tourists meandered through the officially-accessible areas of the temple, chatting and posing for photographs, the Pagans slipped beyond the cordon and quietly set up their altar on the ground in a concealed apse, conducting the ritual in hushed tones, watchful for tourists who might glimpse (and possibly complain about) them. In official terms, the tourists were there for legitimate purposes, the Pagans were not. Yet the Pagans occupied an inner, private space within the temple, while the tourists were confined (confined themselves) to the restricted space designated for visitors on the other side of the cordon. While the site is explicitly constructed as a place for tourists (including local tourists, perhaps accompanying their visiting overseas relatives), Pagans slipped beneath the radar of this official construction, feeling that their spiritual identification with the temple builders gave them valid access.

To say that the temples have not been employed as symbols of an essentially Maltese Paganism does not mean that they are unimportant to Maltese Pagan identity or imagination. To some extent, the temples function for Maltese Pagans in ways similar to their functioning for other Maltese, like the artists discussed above, who are passionate about them. As well as being important national icons, they are places which endow a sense of harmony and connection. As one young man, Julian, said:

> The temples have always been very sacred to me. Standing near Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim, I get such a feeling of deep calm – maybe that is also connected to the landscape out there; the land slopes off to a magnificent view of the sea and [the island of] Filfla poking out of the waves. To sum up, I'd say it's a feeling of connection, with the world and with the past which still touches us today.

These are places of energy, prayer, communication with ancestors, and spontaneous insights about the ancient culture. Like other Maltese for whom the temples are special places, Pagans visit them when they have a particular problem to solve or feel stressed, or simply to experience the special energy they feel there.

But for Pagans the temples are also more than this: they are places of worship which feel more potently charged with sacred meaning and energy than Christian churches. As Julian said, 'They are more representative of our inclination to the spiritual (in my eyes) than the largest, most frilly, Gothic cathedral'. Like the foreign Pagans who visit the temples, Maltese Pagans make a connection between their own contemporary spiritual path and what they understand to be the religion of the temple period, particularly with respect to reverence for the earth Goddess and nature's cycles. They make this connection not as a political claim for Pagan legitimisation; it is something felt in the deepest part of a person, in the soul and in the bones. One man, Arthur, who has worked at the temples for 30 years, wrote to me:

> the more I came in contact with the temples, the more I felt connected with them... spiritually, as if the sound of the wind that blew through the fissures of the rock turned into words I could understand, as if the spirit of those that built them were trying to communicate something important to me. I came to understand some of the techniques used to build these magnificent temples just by looking beyond the physical structures and listening. Anyway, I find it always hard to express my experiences in words. I saw people being healed of physical and psychological stress.

This kind of vision, where the stones came alive, reminded me of one an American Goddess pilgrim described to me, where she heard the stones breathing beneath her while she was meditating in a temple.

Maltese Pagans talk a lot about the energy of the temples. A Pagan of Maltese descent living in Canada described feeling 'a lot of built up and very old energy' which connected her with particular ancestors. For some Pagans the megalithic stones themselves are reservoirs of enormous energy, while for others the stones are more importantly channels of the earth's energy. Isabella described the stones as working the way a lightning rod does when it earths lightning – except that the stone is channelling energy from the earth below. Adam agrees, saying that 'the temples' energies are generated not so much by the individual stones, but by the interaction of the built structure with the land.' When individual stones are removed from sites and placed in the National Museum of Archaeology (so that their decorations will be better preserved), he cannot feel their energy so strongly. One young woman, Elizabeth, told of her frustration when the temples are seen as mere commodities for tourism, when for her and others they are 'sacred space, an area for worship that for some can be more spiritual than a church':

> I do tend to get quite annoyed when temples are marketed as a dead relic of the past, as a stone structure devoid of spirit, as one of the many secular attractions Malta has to offer to tourists. This is not to say that temples should not be promoted, yet I am very much against their commercial exploitation, very much against the sullying of the surrounding landscape, which is part and parcel of the sacred space itself. The temples, whose essential significance has remained unchanged throughout the ages, are testimony to the living soul of the past.

This approach differs vastly from those Maltese who joke when they see busloads of tourists going past 'to look at a pile of old stones', for whom the temples register not wonder and admiration but dull familiarity, homologous as they are with the rest of the Maltese landscape. As an academic at the University of Malta told me, for most Maltese 'they're stones, basically! That's all they are.' Whereas for Elizabeth, Julian, Adam and Isabella the surrounding landscape is sacred because of its association with the temples, for many Maltese the temples are mundane and unremarkable because of their homogeneity with the landscape.

Apart from Pagans' apprehension around current conservation plans in relation to the temples, there seem to be no tensions so far between archaeologists, heritage managers and local Pagans. As noted above, this is because Pagans have kept a low profile, have not acted as a lobby group, and most heritage managers do not know they exist as a recognisable community distinguishable from other Maltese individuals who love the temples. Maltese Pagans who visit the temples regularly are more likely to be well known to people who work at sites – temple guards, guides and site officers – with whom they have developed friendships. It is the foreign pilgrim-tourists, and particularly their leaders, who are better known to those who have power over the sites in terms of interpretation and management decisions.

Goddess tour leaders have been in regular dialogue with archaeologists, museum staff and heritage personnel for over fifteen years, longer than Maltese Neo-Paganism has been around. An American woman who set up a non-profit foundation to help foster international and local appreciation for Malta's prehistoric heritage has been involved in several temple conservation projects, written a novel about the temples and material for Maltese classrooms, and in 2003 organised an international conference in Malta for 'Exploring the Maltese Prehistoric Temple Culture'.[25] The

foundation has donated an archaeology laboratory to the University of Malta and chairs for the Museum of Archaeology's seminar hall. Maltese archaeologists give talks on Malta's prehistory to Goddess tour groups and experts on the temples have been flown to the United States to talk to Goddess enthusiasts. Over the years Goddess tour groups have arranged special access to temple sites – some of which are not normally accessible to other visitors – for educational tours and rituals. This kind of official access arranged by mostly foreign Goddess tour leaders through formal channels contrasts with the informal, friendly and somewhat surreptitious arrangements made by Maltese Pagans with guards on site with whom they communicate in Maltese. The latter follow the pattern of traditional Maltese patronage relationships where favours are sought through unofficial approaches using social networks. Being local gives a convenient invisibility to Maltese Pagans' activities but also means any claims they might have go unregistered.

Some Maltese Pagans have intermittent contact with foreign Pagan visitors to the temples, often as a result of a first meeting through internet-based groups. Local women are occasionally invited to participate in the activities of American Goddess tour groups, and on two of my field-trips I was introduced to Priestesses of Avalon who were on pilgrimages from England. These occasions provide opportunities for mutual learning, rituals, temple tours and the making or deepening of much-valued friendships. Occasionally Maltese Pagan women have been co-opted by foreign Goddess tour leaders as indigenous priestesses to authenticate and embellish the tour experience and to advise and help with local arrangements. While Maltese Pagans are quick to embrace such opportunities for sharing, their time and expertise have not always been recompensed which has, on occasion, led to a feeling of 'being taken for granted'. Given that Goddess tours can reap considerable financial rewards for their

overseas organisers, this could seem a form of exploiting local goodwill and generosity (although I should emphasise that I did not hear local women complain).

Temple Conservation

Having survived five and a half thousand years, Malta's Neolithic temples are a remarkable testimony to endurance, but they are under continuing, accelerating threat. The vandals' attacks of 1996 and 2001 wreaked instant and devastating damage, but on-going weather damage from storms, salt-laden winds, harsh sun, fluctuating temperatures and humidity are causing daily erosion and occasionally major destruction. Other threats such as quarrying and a threatened landfill in the vicinity have caused concern and occasioned protest over the years. Interestingly, I was told, it was only when the Catholic Church joined voices with those opposing the landfill scheme and the archbishop claimed that the temples were sacred space, that the scheme was dropped.

A few days after I arrived in Malta on my first trip in 1998, before I had gone to see the temples (much to my regret), the headlines on the front page of *The Times* read: 'Haġar Qim falls victim to the weather. Thousands-years old megalith collapses'. Rough weather, the article said, had caused a stone to fall, creating a domino effect on other standing stones.[26] Four years previously, part of Mnajdra had collapsed during a storm and the repairs had only just been completed. In his report about the damage to Haġar Qim, architect Alex Torpiano recommended, as had others, 'some form of shelter to protect the temples from the weather'.[27]

In 2003 an international competition was launched to design protective shelters for Mnajdra and Haġar Qim. The winning entry was submitted by a Swiss architect whom I heard speak about his design in October 2005 at one of a series of

public consultation meetings organised by Heritage Malta. The design involves erecting 'tents' constructed of an opaque, Teflon-like textile stretched over steel frameworks and tethered by wire ropes attached to the ground using an anchoring system grouted in boreholes.[28] The tents were due to be completed by the end of 2007, but as the company to construct the shelters has yet to be chosen, the deadline seems unlikely to be met.[29]

The prospect of placing tents over the temples has caused vigorous debate amongst people passionate about the sites. There are those who think that the 'space-age' appearance of the proposed tents is uncomplementary to the environment of the temples and an aesthetic crime. Some struggle with the thought of any kind of covering for the temples because it will alter the special relationship between stones, sea and sky essential to the natural beauty and sacred atmosphere of the area. The latter group includes some of those who visit the temples for solace, artistic inspiration and quiet reflection, including artists and Pagans, both foreign and local. A few people told me that they almost preferred that the temples naturally erode away and return to the landscape rather than be severed artificially from the environment of which they are a part. To this, others reply that the temples were originally roofed, not open to the sky (although a 21st century Teflon tent is a far cry from a corbelled roof of limestone slabs). A number of Pagans are worried about how the energy of the temples will be affected by having steel and Teflon structures erected over them. Others point out that the tents may provide protection from the elements, but not from vandals. Their detractors reply that additional security personnel, an illumination system, a more robust boundary fence and closed-circuit cameras will hopefully deal with the problem of vandals. Some Goddess tour leaders have been so upset by the

plan to cover the temples that they have vowed not to bring any future groups to Malta.

Yet as the debate rattles on, there seems to be a growing reluctant but pragmatic acceptance, at least amongst the Maltese Pagans I have come to know, that conservation of the temples is urgent and essential, and that some form of roof over them is unavoidable if they are to be preserved. They are somewhat comforted by the fact that the proposed shelters are 'temporary' (designed to last 30 years) and can be removed in the future should some better solution be found. On the way home from the public meeting with the Swiss architect, a friend (not Pagan) who had long been involved in debates about saving the temples told me she felt exhausted but resigned in the wake of the meeting. With poignant nostalgia she recalled playing and picnicking freely at Mnajdra as a child. Now, she said, the temples were about to be entombed. Another woman, Pagan, was so upset at the thought of the temples being shrouded by a synthetic tent that she said she 'might as well pack up and leave Malta if I can't even save my temples!' Clearly Pagan ideas about what it means to 'save the temples' differ from policy-makers', architects' and archaeologists' ideas. For Pagans the temples are more than national icons, tourist attractions, and unique feats of Neolithic engineering comprising megalithic stones susceptible to erosion. They have a timeless numinous energy which is also vulnerable to erosion from the very sources intended to stall weather damage.

A couple of weeks after the public meeting I went with two friends to meet with an archaeologist involved with the project, and we discussed the proposed shelters and the new visitor centre to be built close to Haġar Qim. In the course of the meeting one of my friends 'came out' as Pagan, and this was the first time that an explicitly Pagan voice had joined the debate. The tents were presented, and

tentatively accepted, as a *fait accompli*, but there seemed to be some room for manoeuvre regarding the visitor centre. We talked about the possibility of creating a space in the centre where a range of visitors' voices might be presented, including those of Pagans and people involved in Goddess spirituality, and where the temples could be acknowledged as sacred space. It was an amicable discussion and the archaeologist seemed open to ideas, although he stressed he is only one of many decision-makers.

The outcome remains to be seen, but given that Maltese Pagans are a small, fragmented and largely invisible group disinclined and unaccustomed to political lobbying, I would be unsurprised if they remain more-or-less invisible stakeholders in the temple conservation and interpretation project. Undoubtedly they will continue to engage privately with the temples as sacred space, and they are consoled by the knowledge that their grandchildren will have a better chance of having this opportunity too.

Conclusion

Attitudes to Malta's Neolithic temples do not divide along Pagan/non-Pagan or foreign/local lines. For those Maltese who are passionate about them – whether Neo-Pagan or Catholic – the temples hold a similar place in people's imagination and experience: they are sites of sacred heritage, numinous encounter, connection with landscape, peace and beauty. This affinity with the temples shared by a minority of Maltese has more to do with class, levels of education and attitudes to heritage, landscape, ecology, history and archaeology than to do with an individual's particular religious or spiritual path. Foreign pilgrims and some tourists also have these feelings and experiences, although in their case, the sense of 'sacred heritage' obviously lacks

the nationalistic component. Foreign Pagans share with Maltese Pagans, and indeed some Catholics, the sense that the ancient religion connected with these sites was the distant ancestor of their own contemporary spiritual path, but for Maltese, irrespective of their religion, the temples are additionally cultural icons and symbols of nationalism.

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[1] Some further research explored the embodied experiences of the Goddess pilgrims. See Rountree 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2006.
[2] Bonanno 1997, Trump 1990:31.
[3] Mifsud and Ventura 1999:3.
[4] Grima 1998:34.
[5] Sant Cassia 1993:359.
[6] Fouseki 2006:534.
[7] Sant Cassia 1993:358.
[8] Sant Cassia 1993: 359.
[9] Grima 1998:39.
[10] Grima 1998:39.
[11] Grima 1998:42.
[12] Some of those who became well known in Malta during this period were Richard England (architect, artist and poet), Father Peter Serracino Inglott (philosopher, academic), Charles Camilleri (music), Francis Ebejer (dramatist/novelist), Antoine Camilleri (artist), Gabriel Caruana (sculpture/ceramics), and Envin Cremona (artist).
[13] Examples of such poems are '*Il-Ggantija T'Ghawdex*' and '*F'Hajar Qim*' by Gorg Pisani. Both poems invoke ancient scenarios where maidens are being sacrificed in the temples for their beloved country, either to save it from famine or from foreign invasion. There is, however, no archaeological evidence that human sacrifice every occurred in the temples (Trump 1990: 30).
[14] Malta was admitted to the EU on 1 May 2004.
[15] Fouseki 2006:541.
[16] However, prior to the erection of the stones, a circular bank and ditch enclosure were constructed around 2,900-2,950 BC (Bender 1998:47).
[17] Blain and Wallis 2004:238.
[18] Personal communication, Jenny Blain, 1 February 2007. Blain says that for some in heritage management, defining a site as 'sacred' may be intended to mean a place that was once sacred and needs quiet contemplation.
[19] *The Guardian*, Feb.1, 2007 http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2003096,00.html; *New Zealand Herald*, January 23, 2007, B3.

[20] I was fortunate to be able to join one of these tours at Summer Solstice 2006, and it was a well organised, informative and enjoyable event, but not one intended to offer a numinous experience.
[21] Ruth Bianco, writing on her 'Veils of Absence' exhibition, 1999, text provided by artist.
[22] Saliba 1994:15.
[23] England 1994:36-7.
[24] In the exhibition catalogue of Bank of Valletta sponsored exhibition *Antoine Camilleri: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 5 June-2 July 1999, see 'Mother Earth with Self-portrait', 'Embracing Mother Earth', 'Back in Time: The Patrimony of our People'. Antoine Camilleri died on 23 November 2005. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to interview him in January 2000, shortly before his 78th birthday.
[25] The foundation is called the OTSF (Old Temples Study Foundation). See http://www.otsf.org/index.html; http://www.otsf.org/LindaEneix.htm Linda Eneix's novel is titled *People of the Temples*, published by OTS, Sarasota, Florida, printed in Malta by Progress Press Co. Ltd., 1997.
[26] *The Times*, Monday November 30, 1998, p. 1, article by Jesmond Bonello.
[27] 'Unesco funds for repairs to Ħaġar Qim' by Jesmond Bonello, *The Times*, Wednesday December 9, 1998, p. 5.
[28] 'Malta might miss out on EU funding for temples' protective cover' by Juan Ameen, *The Malta Independent on Sunday*, January 28, 2007. http://www.independent.com.mt/news.asp?newsitemid=45431
[29] *The Malta Independent* January 28, 2007 http://www.independent.com.mt/news.asp?newsitemid=45431

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