

# WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN PREHISTORIC AND ANCIENT GOZO

Anthony Bonanno\*

It may come as a surprise to those involved in some way or another in gender studies, or in the women liberation movement, to learn that this same movement has had its fair share of responsibility in the building up of a mythology whose political aim was to exalt the role of women in the remote past and to show how things fared much better while they were in charge. One cannot, in all honesty, attribute the responsibility for the fabrication of this myth to this movement because most of its originators were male scholars whose aim, I have reason to believe, was far from that of lending support to this movement when it was still in its infancy.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental tenet of this myth is that, right from the emergence of anatomically modern man (*homo sapiens sapiens*) in the Upper Palaeolithic down to the end of the Neolithic, most, if not all, prehistoric societies were matriarchal, that is, female-dominated. According to this theory, this set-up only came to an end when Neolithic societies were replaced in most parts of the world, from the onset of the third millennium BC onwards, by the male-dominated cultures of the Bronze Age. Along with this change came the end of an era of peace and equality among people, the end of the mythical Golden Age, and the beginning of a new age characterized by unrestrained crave for power and resulting rivalries and armed conflicts. This traditional view has been embraced by anthropologists and archaeologists alike, from Gertrude Levy to E.O. James,<sup>2</sup> from Erich Neumann to Marija Gimbutas,<sup>3</sup> the latter still enjoying a wide support among the feminist wing of students of prehistory.<sup>4</sup>

---

\* Anthony Bonanno BA(Hons)(Malta), D.Lett (Palermo), PhD (Lond.), FSA (Lond.) is Professor of Archaeology and Head of the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Malta. He has lectured at the University of Malta since 1971 but has also conducted lecturing visits to various universities in Europe, the USA, Zimbabwe and Egypt. Prof Bonanno has authored various publications on Roman Art and Maltese archaeology including: *Portraits and Other Heads on Roman Historical Relief up to the Age of Septimius Severus*, Oxford 1976; *Roman Malta – the Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands*, Rome 1992; *Il-Preistorja*, Malta 2001; and *Malta, Phoenician, Punic and Roman*, Malta 2005. He has served on a number of national committees relating to cultural heritage and on academic committees.

1 J. J. Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht*, Stuttgart 1861.

2 G. Levy, *The Gate of Horn*, London 1946; E.O. James, *The Cult of the Mother Goddess*, London 1959.

3 E. Neumann, *The Great Mother, an Analysis of the Archetype*, London 1955; M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, London 1989.

4 See, for example, C. Biaggi, *Habitations of the Great Goddess*, Manchester (Connecticut) 1994.

Such a female-dominated society was made possible by the presumed universal recognition and worship of an all-powerful divinity, the Mother Goddess, to whom all creatures of the animal and vegetative world were subjected. Equally subjected to her were all the other spiritual and divine beings that might be conjured up by the human mind.<sup>5</sup> The damage procured by this very myth to the feminist cause was laid bare by a collection of essays, authored by female scholars (except for one) and edited by Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris.<sup>6</sup>

Where does Gozo come into all this? The answer is in the theme of this paper. The task I have set myself in this contribution is to investigate whether it is possible to shed any light on the role of women in Gozo in antiquity, starting with prehistory.

### Prehistory

Was society matriarchal or patriarchal in prehistoric Gozo? For a start, I cannot but make the usual assertion that, so far, there is nothing in the archaeological record to suggest that there was any substantial difference of culture between Gozo and Malta in prehistory.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, most of what is said of one island can be applied to the other island.

### Neolithic

It is by now common knowledge that the two Gozitan sites that have made a contribution of some sort to our knowledge of the Neolithic age of these islands are Il-Mixta and Taċ-Ċawla, in that order of discovery. Neither of these sites appear in Evans's monumental survey of 1971 because they were discovered, or found their place in the archaeological record, after its publication.<sup>8</sup> Although the use of the Santa Verna site spans the whole of prehistory, the Neolithic is only represented by three pottery sherds.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, only a few sherds of the Ghar Dalam type are recorded from the site of Iċ-Ċnus ta' San Ġwann in Xewkija.<sup>10</sup>

A cave at Il-Mixta, one of the many below the edge of the Ghajn Abdun plateau, was excavated clandestinely in the 1960s and the retrieved archaeological material was eventually submitted to the Museum Department. On the indications he had, Francis Mallia, then Curator of Archaeology in the same Department, started

5 M. Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, London 1982. See contra B. Hayden, 'Old Europe: sacred matriarchy or complementary opposition?' in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. A. Bonanno, Amsterdam 1986, 17-30.

6 L. Goodison & C. Morris (ed.), *Ancient Goddesses: the myths and the evidence*, London 1998.

7 The sequence of changes in material culture and the transcendental beliefs reflected by it are identical in both islands. Similarly, apart from a series of bone pendants found in the *Żebbuġ* phase chamber tomb within the Xaghra Stone Circle and the cache of six plank-like figurines found in the larger Xaghra Hypogeum (both groups referred to below), that are not paralleled in Malta, the repertoire of artistic expressions is also identical.

8 J. D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands, a Survey*, London 1971, 233-234.

9 *Ibid.*, 186-190.

10 *Ibid.*, 191-192.

digging the deposits under a cave which had already been extensively destroyed by the greedy quarry feasting itself on the plateau at that time.<sup>11</sup> His investigations had to be abandoned because of the impending danger of the cave structure. The only remains surviving from this site are, consequently, pottery sherds with impressed decoration but without any relevance to the theme of this paper.<sup>12</sup>

I am on record in not finding any problem in accepting the suggestion that there was in these islands some sort of belief in a Mother Goddess towards the end of the Neolithic.<sup>13</sup> The evidence, admittedly still quite flimsy, consists of a set of fragmentary clay figurines and one stone torso found in a hut at Skorba.<sup>14</sup> The contents of the hut suggest a religious purpose and the figurines could quite possibly have an equally religious meaning. And since the female sexual attributes on them are emphasized, it is quite feasible that the message imparted by the figurines is one of exaltation of female fertility, by extension to encompass fertility of the land and the domestic animal stock on which the whole Neolithic subsistence depended. It should be kept in mind, however, that these figurines were accompanied by very odd cow tarsal bones which had been smoothed at one end to allow them to stand erect.<sup>15</sup> The same archaeologist, who found no difficulty in interpreting the figurines as representations of Mother Goddesses, saw phallic symbols in these bones.<sup>16</sup> In view of this, I wonder whether we are justified in affirming the predominance of a deity of one particular gender, and whether we should not be speaking already of complementary opposition.<sup>17</sup>

### Temple Period (late Neolithic)

The Ġgantija temples are often associated with a legend having a woman, a female giant, as its protagonist. The legend is part of the Maltese islands' oral literature and has been published in various versions.<sup>18</sup> According to most versions, the giantess ate nothing but broad beans and honey and bore a child from a man of the common people. With the child hanging from her shoulder, she built a temple of huge stones and taught the people to worship in it.

11 *Museum Annual Report* 1969:5-6; 1970: 6.

12 A. Bonanno, 'The prehistory and protohistory of the Maltese islands. Current problems and perspectives', in *X Jornades d'Estudis Històrics Locals, La Prehistòria de les Illes de la Mediterrània Occidental*, ed. G. Rosselló Bordoy, Palma de Mallorca 1992, 222, fig. 4.

13 A. Bonanno, 'Contextual significance of ritual evidence in Malta', in *Ritual, Rites and Religion in Prehistory*, IIIrd Deia International Conference of Prehistory, ed. W.H. Waldren, J.A. Ensenyat and R.C. Kennard, Oxford 1995, 136-137.

14 D. H Trump., *Skorba*, London 1966, 33-34, fig. 30, pl. xxvi-xxvii.

15 *Ibid.*, 34, fig. 30g, pl.xxviii.

16 *Ibid.*, 34.

17 Hayden 1986; A. Bonanno, 'Maltese megalithic art. Fertility cult or sexual representation?', in *Collected Papers*, ed. R. Ellul Micallef & S. Fiorini, Malta 1992, 89.

18 M. Mifsud-Chircop, 'Folklore of Gozo - a description', in *Gozo the Roots of an Island*, ed. C. Cini, Malta 1990, 161-193; V. Veen, *Goddess, Giantess, Farmeress: Female Images of Malta*, Haarlem (Holland), 1994.

With respect to this legend, we have to make sure we put things in their proper perspective and use the right methodology for the right discipline. Folklore and ethnography are one thing, archaeology is quite another. Although it is part of the standard methodology of archaeology to make use of popular traditions and toponymy, such use has to take into consideration the origins of such traditions, and trace how far back, and how close they extend to the period in question. As far as I know, the legend itself has never been traced to beyond the twentieth century though it would be quite reasonable to presume it extends back another century or two. To stretch its origins beyond that without any hard evidence is, to put it mildly, very risky. As to the toponym of Ġgantija, I am led to believe that it is not traceable beyond the 19th century.<sup>19</sup> While the site name is found in Agius de Soldanis as *torri tal gianti* (Giants' Tower),<sup>20</sup> the site is known by a completely different name in Abela (*El Eeyun*),<sup>21</sup> in spite of his connecting the megalithic temples with a mythical race of giants.<sup>22</sup> In conclusion, the legend of the female giant cannot be projected back by as many as 5000 years in the past to affirm the belief in a Great Mother turned giantess among our prehistoric ancestors. If anything, it may reflect the reaction of the local population to the impressive size of this construction at the time of the inception of the legend.

In appearance the 'Ġebbla ta' Sansuna', a large, flat, unworked coralline limestone slab leaning on one smaller stone on the other side of Xaghra, if it is indeed an archaeological feature (that is, manipulated by humans to form a structure), could be a dolmen. As such, it would fall in the following age. But it could also be the only surviving element of another megalithic temple; this can possibly be ascertained only by an archaeological excavation. Even in this case, one cannot fail to observe the feminization of the name of the Biblical strong man Sansun (Samson) in associating this enormous block of stone with a giantess, probably the same one of the Ġgantija lore.

As far as physical archaeological remains are concerned, it is to be observed, with some regret that, in contrast with the abundance of figurative art objects produced by contemporary sites in Malta (such as Tarxien, Mnajdra and Haġar Qim), very little has been extracted from Ġgantija and other temple sites in Gozo that could contribute to the theme under discussion. Two globigerina limestone heads must have been intended for insertion in the hollowed necks of statuettes of the usual

19 It does not figure in G. Wettinger, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, Malta 2000.

20 G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis. *Il Gozo Antico-Moderno, Sacro-Profano*, National Library of Malta Ms 145 (dated 1746), f. 53.

21 G. F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta, Isola nel Mare Siciliano, con le sue Antichità ed altre Notizie*, Malta 1647, 119.

22 Abela 1647, 145-148. See A. Bonanno, 'Research on Prehistoric and Roman Gozo: past, present and future', in *Focus on Gozo*, ed. J. Farrugia & L. Briguglio, Malta 1996, 41-57. By his comment that groups of large stones at Ta Goliat (another Biblical giant?) and Dahlet Korrot 'could not have been raised if not by giants' hands', Agius de Soldanis (f. 53) is more probably attaching himself to the giants of Abela than to the giantess of the legend.



Tarxien/Haġar Qim type of about half life-size which, however, have not survived.<sup>23</sup> Their facial features do not reveal their gender, nor does the 'bobbed' hair style. We are left with little to say, save that Ġgantija was not lacking in such stone statuary. If, on the other hand, we were in search of the equivalent of conical stones in which many historians of religion and pre-historians would readily see phallic symbols (or, simply, 'betyls'), we do find one from the south temple, now kept in the Gozo Museum of Archaeology.<sup>24</sup> A much more obvious one was discovered, of all places, inside the underground cemetery of Xaġhra.

As for other anthropomorphic representations, all that remains to mention are the two figures applied in relief to a pot surface. One, cross-shaped with outstretched arms, has no sex,<sup>25</sup> while the other shown in three-quarter view could be, possibly but not certainly, female.<sup>26</sup>

The situation has changed quite radically with the excavation of the Xaġhra Stone Circle in 1987-1994.<sup>27</sup> This site has produced quite a rich array of figurative material of high artistic value and great iconographic interest. Of these, the statue-stele found at the entrance of one of the two chambers of the Żebbuġ phase tomb, which is almost identical to another found in similar circumstances at Żebbuġ, Malta, does not contribute much to the gender question since it only shows, and barely so, the stylized facial features. The context of the find suggests, if anything, a spirit or deity connected with death. Whether god, goddess, guardian spirit or companion it is not possible to say.<sup>28</sup> The bone pendants brought to light in great numbers from the same tombs are hardly anthropomorphic, if at all, and consequently entirely genderless.<sup>29</sup> They are more likely to have been personal possessions carried around the neck in lifetime and buried with their owners, of either sex, at the point of death.<sup>30</sup>

More relevant to our theme are a dozen or so clay seated figurines, about 10 cms high with enormous, rounded thighs and buttocks and relatively small, flat upper torsos (see Fig. 1). They were found scattered in a wide but shallow pit containing loosely deposited human bones immediately to the west of the central area of the cemetery. As they came out of the ground, they were spontaneously labelled 'mother goddesses'.<sup>31</sup> On further reflection, and on comparison with similar finds in similar,

23 Evans 1971, 184, pl. 62, 1-6.

24 *Ibid.*, 184, pl. 62, 7.

25 *Ibid.*, 184, pl. 61, 18.

26 *Ibid.*, 184, pl. 61, 12.

27 For a comprehensive report on the excavation of this site see C. Malone, S. Stoddart, A. Bonanno and D. Trump (ed.), *Mortuary Customs in Prehistoric Malta: excavations at the Brochtorff Circle at Xaġhra (1987-94)*, Cambridge 2009.

28 C. Malone, A. Bonanno, T. Gouder, S. Stoddart & D. Trump, 'Mortuary ritual of 4th millennium BC Malta: the Żebbuġ period chambered tomb from the Brochtorff Circle at Xaġhra (Gozo)', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 61, 1995, 316-323, fig. 17.

29 *Ibid.*, 333-335, fig. 25.

30 Bonanno 1996, 55.

31 The gender of these and the other anthropomorphic representations from the Xaġhra Hypogeum are discussed *in extenso* in C. Malone, 'God or goddess', in Goodison & Morris 1998, 148-163.

prehistoric funerary contexts,<sup>32</sup> these figurines could be anything from toys buried with their young owners, companions or concubines meant to serve the needs of the deceased in the after-life – of course, whether one or the other depended on the gender of the deceased – or, indeed, a divinity. In the latter case, the sex, if it could be determined, would certainly throw light on the validity of the Mother Goddess theory and the consequent matriarchal social structure.

I'm told by medical colleagues that, although the sex attributes are not apparent in these and the other corpulent figures typical of this period, it is a characteristic of female obesity to accumulate fat in the lower body without, necessarily, a corresponding accumulation in the upper half. Such selective obesity can result from overfeeding. Assuming that this physical condition is reproduced in these figurines, we still have to guess what message they are intended to impart.

Although 'fertility' or 'fecundity' is traditionally said to be the manifest meaning of these figures, I am informed by the same medical colleagues that this type of obesity is far from being conducive to fertility; on the contrary, it actually hinders fertility. Having thus discounted the fertility symbolism, what remains for us to conclude is that the message imparted by the exaggerated corpulence is the ostentation of available abundance and consumption of food. As it has been suggested elsewhere,<sup>33</sup> however, this same ostentation might be prompted by the very absence or scarcity of it, at least among the subordinated and deprived strata of society. Why it has to be woman only to be depicted with ostentatious obesity is hard to understand.

In this respect, another piece of sculpture brought to light from the central area of the Xaghra Hypogeum might possibly hold the key to the solution of this problem: a globigerina limestone statuette showing two figures of the standard corpulent type seated side by side on a sort of couch (see Fig. 2). It is hard to conceive of two versions of the same female personage depicted twice over in the same group.<sup>34</sup> I am more inclined to accept the portrayal of a male and a female in complementary opposition, but without any explicit reference to their gender. This view is further strengthened by the third figure in the group, the miniature version of the two held on the lap of one of the figures, most probably a child, depicted with exactly the same proportions. If we accepted this reading, we would have indeed the assertion of the mother role of woman in this society (possibly even that of a 'mother goddess'), but we would have it at par with that of the father role, for which no one has ever suggested the figure of a 'father god'. Neither shall I, except in the context of complementary opposition.

32 In particular in prehistoric Egypt.

33 C. Malone, A. Bonanno, T. Gouder, S. Stoddart & D. Trump, 'The death cults of prehistoric Malta', *Scientific American* 269, 6, 1993, 83.

34 Gimbutas interprets such double figures as representing the duality of the goddess.

**Fig. 1:** Four different specimens of a score of clay figurines from the Xaghra Hypogeum, each representing a seated figure with extremely inflated lower body and a disproportionately smaller upper body, and without any indication of gender. (Picture by courtesy of Daniel Cilia)



**Fig. 2:** Statuette in globigerina limestone from the Xaghra Hypogeum, showing two figures of the typical Tarxien phase type seated on a very elaborate couch. One of the figures holds a small cup on her lap while the other holds a miniature replica of the same typology. Male, female or symbols of fatherhood, motherhood and childhood? (Picture by courtesy of Daniel Cilia)

A statuette of the Tarxien type, of about half life-size, was discovered in various fragments scattered widely, with a concentration over the burial pit immediately to the west of the central area of the funerary complex. It is presumed that it was originally displayed in a prominent position in the central area. Its presence here recalls the question of the connection of this characteristic figure with rites of death, as opposed to those of life celebrated in the temples close by.<sup>35</sup> But until we solve the

<sup>35</sup> See A. Bonanno, 'Rituals of life and rituals of death', in *Malta before History*, ed. D. Cilia, Malta 2004, 271-287.

question whether these figures represent ancestors or rulers, whether male or female, rather than divinities,<sup>36</sup> this fragmentary statuette is not likely to contribute to the theme under discussion. Nor is it likely that any such contribution can be made by the eerie group of plank-like figurines in soft limestone brought to light in the same central area of the cemetery. The absolute negation of body forms is intentional. Whether they portray individuals or represent spiritual forces, they are conceived as genderless, this time even more emphatically. The three smaller figurines found with the same group contribute even less to this discussion. If anything, one of them would emphasize the male presence, if we were to see in it a human-headed phallic symbol.<sup>37</sup>

Two very enigmatic objects also found in this area of the Xaghra Hypogeum are very small clay pendants, barely 3cms in height. The ambiguity arises from the very stylized form, because it can be interpreted as representing two very different things: either a bull's head with short horns or a female torso with raised arms. In the former case, the bucranium form could, alternatively, be read, or misread, as a representation of an uterus, of the Goddess' uterus even.<sup>38</sup> In the latter case, it all depends whether in the V-shaped incision at the lower end one should see an overt attempt to suggest the female pubis or simply a separation of the legs from the torso. As such it finds an uncanny parallelism in a clay figurine from prehistoric Egypt, normally labelled the 'dancer'.<sup>39</sup> Any relevance of this amulet to the female role in the society of the temple age has to take all this in consideration.

So much for the figurative art at the Xaghra Circle. There is, however, another element in the archaeology of this site that could throw more significant and revealing light on the role of women in the society of the temple builders. The evidence comes from the patterns of distribution of human remains in the collective cemetery which are emerging from the study of hundreds of thousands of human bone fragments extracted from it during the archaeological excavations.<sup>40</sup>

The cemetery consists of a system of natural, interconnected caves separated by simple structures (trilithons or screens) made of carefully dressed globigerina limestone.<sup>41</sup> These formed marked, separate units within the complex. One area in particular, apparently the most central one and the one with immediate access to the outside, seems to have been reserved mostly for the deposition of the bodies of women and children, thus emphasizing the obvious intimate biological relationship between the offspring and their mother. Next to it was a ritual area, a sort of 'chapel'

36 E. Anati, 'The question of fertility cults', in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. A. Bonanno, Amsterdam 1986, 2-15.

37 A. Bonanno, *Malta an Archaeological Paradise*, Malta 1997, 46, fig.8 on p.50.

38 See Gimbutas 1982; but cf. Hayden 1986.

39 F.A. Hassan, 'The earliest goddess of Egypt', in Goodison and Morris 1998, 106, fig. 46.

40 Malone et al. 2009, 319-330.

41 On the architecture and spatial distribution of the Xaghra Hypogeum see *Ibid.*, 109-205.



or 'shrine' where the ceremonies prior to deposition took place, as suggested by the large stone bowl in its centre and the rich array of figurative art objects found in it.<sup>42</sup>

In the same area, the articulated skeleton of an elderly lady (one of less than a dozen in the whole cemetery) was discovered lying directly on the ground, underneath layers of other loosely scattered human bones. The lady was laid to rest with a unique head-dress of 30 cowry shells. Both the headdress and the intact primary deposition of the skeleton suggest a special status enjoyed by this woman in her lifetime and at the point of death. In life, she could have enjoyed a leading position in her society accruing from her longevity, her wisdom, or simply from her self-assertion. At death, she is likely to have remained in the collective memory as an ancestor to be remembered and revered.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, the articulated skeleton found lying at the bottom of a pit situated on one side of the entrance threshold to the site belonged to a mature male, and the heaps of bones stacked on top of it were equally from male bodies.<sup>44</sup> This male-dominated pit, and its probable ancestral meaning, counterbalances that of the previous situation.

This balance between the two genders apparent in the identifiable patterning of funerary deposition goes some way to confirming the view, that is derived from a similar balance in the artistic iconography, that the social structure of the Temple Culture was characterized by a precocious equality of sexes based on the complementary role of the two sexes.

### Bronze Age

The Bronze Age of the Maltese islands belongs, in the sequence established by the Mother Goddess theory, to that age when the Goddess-worshipping cultures were replaced or subdued by the male-dominated Indo-Europeans with their male-dominated pantheon. Malta's archaeological record in no way confirms this view, except that the new settlers were more warlike and more concerned with their security than ever before. As a matter of fact, the only sexually differentiated anthropomorphic figurines found at the Tarxien Cemetery, whether 'idols' or something else, are female; the others are genderless. The Gozitan archaeological record, however, does not make us any wiser in this respect.<sup>45</sup>

---

42 *Ibid.*, 140-155.

43 *Ibid.*, 145.

44 *Ibid.*, 116-117.

45 A couple of fragments of probably disk idols with geometric incised patterns, like the ones from the Tarxien Cemetery, were found in the upper layers at the Xaghra Circle: Malone et al. 2009, 312-313, fig. 10.70.

### Phoenician-Punic Period

The archaeological repertoire of the Phoenician-Punic period for Gozo is virtually limited to rock-cut tombs and their contents.<sup>46</sup> The most notable exceptions are the rock-cut sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija and an important Punic inscription of the second (or third) century BC.

It seems that the question of gender has never been posed in connection with the burials of this period discovered in Gozo, because the excavators have never tried to identify the sex of the skeletons. Had they done so, we would have at least known whether the jewellery found with them was worn by men or by women, or both. This would have enabled us, possibly, to extract some inferences on the status of women among the inhabitants of the island in this period, and on their customs. Indeed, we are informed that Egyptian amulets, such as those reputedly found at Tal-Horob, near Xewkija, are in general usually found in women's and children's tombs, and in votive deposits in temples of goddesses.<sup>47</sup> These amulets were used for magical purposes as they were supposed to promote fertility and protect children. Among these amulets, some represented female divinities, such as Mut, Bastet (inscribed with the words '...Bastet, the Mistress of Bubastis'), Thot and Thoreris.<sup>48</sup> Even Bes, however, belongs to the sphere of female fertility and the apotropaic udjat-eye was worn as a protection against dangers of every kind and, as such, was particularly beneficial to women and children.<sup>49</sup>

The excavations of the Ras il-Wardija sanctuary in the 1960s have not revealed anything that might throw light on the subject.<sup>50</sup> The symbol carved in relief on the face of one of the niches inside the rock-cut chamber (now sadly missing) has been identified as the sign of Tanit, the latter being the Punic equivalent of Juno Caelestis in the Punic world. In actual fact, judging from photographs of it taken before it was removed, it appears more like a crucifix than the sign of Tanit.<sup>51</sup> In spite of this, an Italian scholar has suggested that the sanctuary was also a centre for sacred prostitution.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, a recent reconstruction of the site as a Mithraeum,<sup>53</sup> attractive as it may be, is equally untenable because the estimated span of life of the sanctuary, based on the excavated ceramic evidence, is far too early

46 A. Bonanno, 'The archaeology of Gozo: from prehistoric to Arab times', in *Gozo. The Roots of an Island*, ed. C. Cini, Malta 1990, 31-34.

47 G. Hölbl, *Ägyptisches Kulturgut auf Malta und Gozo*, Vienna 1989, 39-76. There seem to be serious grounds to doubt the reported provenance of these amulets from Tal-Horob since the Museum Report describing the discovery of a 'Roman wall' does not mention the amulets at all: *Museum Annual Report 1950-51*, 18; see A. Frendo, Review of Hölbl 1989, *Orientalia*, 60, 4, 1991, 387-9.

48 Hölbl 1989, 180-4.

49 G. Hölbl, 'Egyptian fertility magic within Phoenician and Punic culture', in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. A. Bonanno, Amsterdam 1986, 197-205.

50 Various authors, *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta 1963-66*, Rome 1964-67.

51 *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta 1965*, fig. 83.3; Bonanno 2005, 89.

52 P. Mingazzini, 'Sulla natura e sullo scopo del santuario punico di Ras el Wardija sull'isola di Gozo presso Malta', *Rivista di Studi Fenici* 4, 1976, 159-166.

53 C. Sagona, *Looking for Mithra in Malta*, Leuven 2009, 36-43.

for a Mithraic presence.<sup>54</sup> Apart from being highly debatable, for the purpose of the present exercise, the two hypotheses neutralize each other because, while they both originate from the east, one is female (Tanit) and the other male (Mithras).

In the Punic inscription carrying a decree that refers twice unequivocally to the people of Gozo, while the names of the ruling magistrate (Arish) and the sacrificial priest (Ba'alshillek) show most clearly that civil and religious power was in the hands of men, the name of one female divinity (Ashtart) among the two surviving ones implies the high status enjoyed by this female deity, the Phoenician goddess of love, among the pantheon worshipped in Malta at the time.<sup>55</sup>

### Roman Period

For the Roman period Gozo is hardly ever mentioned in the literary texts; all the literary references alluding to both islands imply a total disregard for women and the impression one gets is that women had little say in civil authority in Gozo, very much in the same way as in the rest of the Roman world. All the persons named in a position of authority or substance are men.

On the other hand, Gozo is blest with a substantial number of inscriptions, comparatively much more than Malta, which do throw light on the social status of some women. The first one of these, in Latin, is dedicated to Iulia Augusta and shows clearly that the Gozitan community had a special reverence for the wife of Augustus, the first emperor (27 BC-AD 14) and mother of the then reigning emperor, Tiberius (AD 14-37).<sup>56</sup> Her portrait statue, which probably stood on the inscribed base, still survives, albeit headless.<sup>57</sup> The Gozitans venerated this imperial lady after her death in the guise of Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture. To officiate to her cult, a priesthood was set up in many parts of the empire, and the dedicator of the statue and inscription, a certain Lutatia, professed to be a member of such a priesthood. Her husband was also a high priest (*flamen*). The fact that Lutatia made the dedication on her own accord, and her husband is mentioned as an adjunct in spite of his high standing, means a lot. It means that, occasionally, some women could assert themselves and rise to prominent positions, even in such a predominantly patriarchal society as the Roman one.

54 Its life-span in the Hellenistic age was established already in the initial *Missione* reports (*Missione* 1966: 93-94, 103-104). Admittedly this does not exclude a later re-use and adaptation for some other purpose. In fact, among the ceramic material fragments of Italian *terra sigillata*, a Camulodunum 184 amphora (1st c. AD) and one fragment of African *terra sigillata D* were identified. See B. Bruno, *L'Arcipelago Maltese in Età Romana e Bizantina: attività economiche e scambi al centro del Mediterraneo*, Bari 2004, 42, n. 29.

55 *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, 1, 132. M. Heltzer, 'The inscription CIS, 1, 132 from Gozo and the political structure of the island in the Punic period', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 3, 2, 1993, 198-204.

56 *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. X, 7501; A. Bonanno, Roman Malta. *The Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands*, Rome 1992, 31, pl. 19.

57 Bonanno 1992, 31, pl. 33.

Another imperial lady, Iulia Domna, the Syrian wife of Emperor Septimius Severus (AD 193-211) is commemorated in another Latin inscription found near the church of St. George in Rabat. Iulia Domna is acclaimed as *Mater Castrorum*, 'Mother of the Military Camp'.<sup>58</sup> The motherly attribute of the empress is quite consonant with her sustained efforts to maintain peace in the empire and harmony between her two sons and heirs to the imperial throne. But the reference to the military camp on an island such as Gozo, hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest frontiers of the empire, such as the limes of North Africa, where such military camps were concentrated, is very odd and *prima facie* out of place, unless Malta or Gozo served as a stop-over station for soldiers on their way from Italy to serve on some military camp in Tripolitania. This inscription too was probably the base of a statue of the Empress which has gone lost. G. Agius de Soldanis had a head of a statue of her in his collection, but the statue had been discovered in 1748 in the locality known as Xaqqufiet.<sup>59</sup>

Three pieces of sculpture of a small scale preserved in the Gozo Museum of Archaeology, a female head with a hair-style typical of Aphrodite, the bust of a nude female torso and the lower half of a female draped torso, are probably fragments of household statuettes. They are indicative of the existence of the cult of female divinities in individual households.

With regard to the determination of the gender of the occupiers of Roman tombs we have the same problem as with those of the Phoenician-Punic period. Their sex is generally not recorded. Therefore, while we cannot infer much from the available information on the status and role of women, whether members of the rich, high-standing families or of the lower strata of Roman society in Gozo, we can at least say that female divinities, as well as female members of the imperial family, were the object of worship and respect of the general population of Gozo. The fact that at least one woman was an officially recognized priestess of the imperial cult may be taken to mean that, in some ways, Gozitan life reflected closely that of the Roman metropolis where special female priesthoods, like that of the Vestal Virgins, were held in high esteem among the people.

### Conclusion

Regretfully, the above is all the information on the status and role of women in Gozo in antiquity that, I think, can be extracted from the available written and archaeological data. The situation is far from satisfactory. It is extremely unlikely that any further information might be coming our way from written sources, unless some unheard-of text with references to Gozo is discovered on papyrus. Archaeology, however, can still conceal pleasant surprises; but we have to be constantly on our guard not to allow any such data to escape us through the destruction of our archaeological resource.

58 *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 7502; Bonanno 1992, 32.

59 Bonanno 1992, 32.