



Pots and communities of practice in Late Neolithic Malta: A study of decoration and motor skills

Isabelle Vella Gregory¹

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Downing Street, University of Cambridge, UK



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ABSTRACT

The study of the motor actions and identification of the tools used in creating surface decoration in Late Neolithic Malta shows interactions between different communities of potters and other groups. Continuing the use of attribute analyses from the megalithic site of Kordin III, this paper identifies new ranges of motor actions from the megalithic complexes at Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra, highlighting differences between geographically discrete communities. The results offer a statistically nuanced sample of ceramics, identify distinct assemblages beyond traditional typologies and investigates décor in its social context. A detailed breakdown of the results is given for each phase at each site. Comparisons are then drawn between the sites of Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra and Kordin III, highlighting a number of divergences and convergences. This reveals previously unknown aspects of community membership, particularly in the realm of technological choices.

1. Introduction

The main attributes of pottery have a long history of informing archaeology. This paper shows how a study of the motor skills used in creating surface decoration in Late Neolithic Malta provides insight into communities of practice. Specifically, it shows interactions between communities of potters and intra-communal differences in a context of carefully crafted uniformity. The ceramic repertoire from the Maltese Islands has been investigated in various ways, mostly focusing on creating sequences and elucidating chronology and connections with neighbouring countries. However, recent approaches show the importance of moving away from rigid typologies. Attribute analyses have been used widely in archaeology (Brass et al., 2018; Haour et al., 2010; MacDonald, 2011), although full application in Maltese archaeology remains in its infancy. Previous research by the author has defined assemblages via a statistically nuanced sample (Vella Gregory, 2017a). This paper is the result of analysing a larger sample, enabling an investigation of the role of decoration in its broader social context.

Decoration on ceramics has been approached in different ways. Braun (1991) considers decoration as non-essential manufacture characteristics, whereas Gell (1998) recognizes that it is a component of social technology, essential to the social functionality of objects. Braun, in the tradition of Rye (1981) views decoration as a non-essential manufactured characteristic beyond what is needed for a pot to work as a physical tool, noting that it demands extra time and effort. The

approach by Rye and Braun is very prevalent in approaches to pottery typologies in the Neolithic of the Maltese Islands, where decoration is seen as a specific kind of stylistic variation useful for creating sequences and groups. While useful, this approach has resulted in a static view of Maltese ceramics. Recent research has taken into account attribute analyses, wherein decoration is seen in terms of tools and motor actions (Vella Gregory, 2017a). The discussion is based on previous research from the site of Kordin III and a larger sample from the sites of Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra (Fig. 1).

2. Materials and methods

The Late Neolithic of the Maltese Islands is primarily known via megalithic complexes created between 3600 and 2500 BCE (Table 1). Located in proximity of agricultural plains and water sources (Grima, 2005), these complexes have often been referred to as temples. They were built and sustained over a period of 1100 years and are best described as multi-functional aggregation sites. A series of apses, enclosed spaces and open spaces were used for various activities, as noted by the presence of a wide range of figurines, decorated stone friezes, burnt animal remains, stone tools (including discards) and large quantities of ceramics, which were not produced on site. Cemeteries are rock complexes that range from smaller caves to elaborate stone hypogea. Settlement traces remain poorly known in the archaeological record.

The established ceramic sequence is based on finds from

E-mail address: iv219@cam.ac.uk.

¹ 39, Howard Close, Cambridge CB5 8QU.

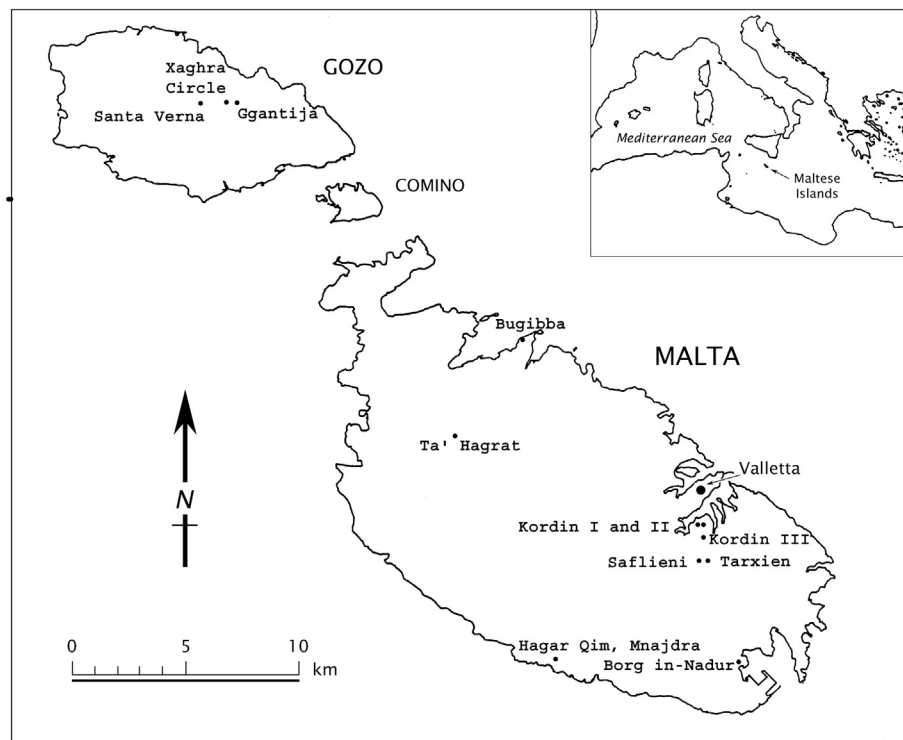


Fig. 1. Map of the Maltese Islands showing the main Neolithic aggregation sites mentioned in the text (Outline map courtesy of Nicholas Vella).

Table 1
The chronology of the Maltese Neolithic.

	Phase	Dates, BC	Main events
Early Neolithic	Ghar Dalam	5000–4500	Initial settlement from Sicily, farming communities
	Grey Skorba	4500–4400	Small villages
	Red Skorba	4400–4100	First traces of communal rituals, clay figurines of the human form
Middle Neolithic	Żebbuġ	4100–3800	Considered start of Temple Period. No 'temples'. Beginning of collective burials.
	Mġarr	3800–3600	Poorly known phase.
Late Neolithic	Ġgantija	3600–3000	Beginning of 'temple' building – megalithic complexes across islands, extensive ceramic and figurine repertoire
	Saflieni	3300–3000	Transitional phase, overlapping.
	Tarxien	3000–2500	Apex and eventual decline of 'temples'. Restriction of access in these sites

aggregation sites, hypogea and the few known domestic structures. Previous application of attribute analysis on the Maltese Islands (Vella Gregory, 2017a) provided a clear picture of which aspects of pottery changed and which stayed stable over time. Furthermore, it demonstrated that while society at large invested heavily in terms of maintaining collective identity and megalithic sites, other modes of technology were also very important. The production of ceramics is far more diverse than that expressed by functional approaches to decoration. This paper analyzes a larger sample and examines the results in light of the persistence of shared meaning and tradition within a community.

The author has traced all the surviving sherds from the sites of Hagar Qim and Mnajdra and re-examined them. The surviving sherds were catalogued by J.D. Evans. He does not specify which excavations these came from, but he does note which sherds come from his test excavations. In the 19th and early 20th centuries it was not uncommon, both in Malta and elsewhere, to not retain all materials. Furthermore, one of the limitations of archival archaeology is that it is not uncommon to have an incomplete history of documentation. However, there is a statistical consistency across the not inconsiderable surviving sample. Similar approaches have been used to great effect both in the Maltese Islands (Tanasi and Vella, 2011) and elsewhere (Brass, 2016). Published calibrated radiocarbon dates are based on organic specimens from corresponding layers from other temple sites. The pottery was re-

evaluated to adequately document intra- and inter-assemblage variability. Data was captured using standardised parameters:

1. Museum object number
2. Type of sherd under description
3. Type of rim
4. Description of decor tools
5. Description of the decor and its location on sherd
6. Maximum thickness
7. Minimum thinness
8. Internal diameter
9. Fabric and temper
10. The presence or absence of burnishing and/or a slip

The phases (see Table 1) correspond to the established chronology. Individual phases are named after a type-site. The Late Neolithic is a catch-all category for sherds which could not be conclusively assigned to either the Ġgantija, Saflieni or Tarxien phases. The Bronze Age is likewise for the Tarxien Cemetery and later phases. Rims thicker than 0.6 cm were classified as thick rims, whereas those under 0.5 cm in thickness were classified as thin.

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