Soundscapes of the Maltese Temple Culture

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The sensational 'Temple Culture' of later prehistoric Malta, dated to between around 3400 and 2500 BC, is best known for its above-ground megalithic 'temples' and underground rock-cut 'hypogea' (e.g. Trump 2004; Skeates 2010). These monuments were laboriously constructed by prosperous agricultural communities, based in relatively ephemeral villages, who used them to celebrate increasingly elaborate religious and social rituals of life and death. The sound of such rituals has long been speculated on. For example, J.G. Vance, who supervised the first excavations at the temple of Ħaġar Qim between 1839 and 1840, imagined 'a mysterious and barbarous ceremony' in which 'the voices of a devoted people were fervently engaged in extolling the praises of those deities through whose medium they supposed that the government of the world was conducted.' (Vance 1842: 230, 236). Since the late 1990s, a variety of scholars – ranging from goddess pilgrims to social archaeologists – has begun to give more thought to the acoustic and, indeed, multi-sensory ritual experiences of moving through and encountering the architectural spaces of the temples and hypogea. For example, the Californian singer/songwriter, Jennifer Berezan, who regards music as a source of spiritual renewal, has drawn attention to the acoustic properties of the Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum. To her, 'It was obvious that the people who built it had an incredible understanding of acoustics and of the value and power of sound for healing' (Berezan 2000). She therefore recorded the title track to her album entitled 'ReTurning' in the resonant 'Oracle Chamber' of Ħal Saflieni (Figure 1). In it, Berezan repeatedly chants, 'returning, returning, returning to the mother of us all', with direct reference to her belief in the Mother Goddess. Such beliefs are often refuted by social archaeologists. They have, nevertheless,

also speculated that 'the drama of the ceremonies was intensified by music or chanting' (Scarre 1998: 80), and on the 'acoustic resonance in the temples' (Stoddart 2002: 182). These lines of thought tie in with the contemporary development of the archaeology of sound (or 'archaeoacoustics'), which has evolved out of an initial interest in the history of music into a current concern with the definition of 'soundscapes': complex, culturally-constrained, acoustic environments associated with particular people and places (e.g. Scarre & Lawson 2006). Applying this approach to Temple Period Malta, we can, then, begin to discriminate at least two different soundscapes with reference to two contrasting (but related) kinds of place excavated by archaeologists: dwelling places; and monuments. It is worth adding that we currently have no primary archaeological evidence of musical instruments in prehistoric Malta, although many different sounds can be inferred from other aspects of the archaeological record.

Clearly-defined houses and habitation deposits of this period have been excavated at just three sites (Skorba, Għajnsielem and Taċ-Ċawla), although over 20 more settlement sites are indicated by the presence of Temple Period pottery in surface scatters and cave deposits (Figure 2). We can broadly imagine the complex blend of sounds made by the farming communities who worked and rested in an around these places: the noise of familiar living things and of routine activities at different times of the day, in different seasons, and on different occasions. For example, we can imagine: the voices of children, women and men; the scratching and scraping of hoes, grindstones and other tools; the crackle of fires in the hearths; the barking of dogs and the bleating of domestic sheep and goats; and so on. More specifically, we can also imagine some novel sounds associated with the dwelling places of the Temple Period compared to those of the preceding Neolithic. For example, mud brick was used to a greater extent in the houses of this period, perhaps as a consequence of a growing shortage of timber on the Maltese islands. As a consequence, novel contrasts of sound may

have been created within and between houses with smoothed and sealed mud-brick walls, particularly compared to traditional, more permeable, wattle-and-daub house walls. Likewise, contrasts of audibility might have been created by the growing distinction between inner and outer space indicated by the elaboration of the entrance to the 'Hut of the Querns' at Skorba and by the slightly wider range of house sizes found in the Temple Period. There are also signs of greater industry in the Temple Period houses, particularly on their better constructed and maintained floors, into which plastered features were sunk and on which heavy stone equipment rested, perhaps all intended for the larger-scale processing of plant foods – cultivated cereals in particular. The impetus for this development might have come not only from the need to feed a growing population, but also from greater demands for surplus food to provision the conspicuous building and use of the temples. As a consequence, a greater volume of sound may have been experienced in these places, at least during the lead-up to special occasions. Ultimately, all these sounds, both old and new, would have contributed to the Maltese islanders' evolving sense of home that they associated with their dwelling places.

But communication through sound would especially have come to the fore during dramatic ritual performances inside and outside the more resonant and controlled spaces of the stone-walled temples and hypogea. The remains of some 30 temples have been identified across the Maltese islands. They usually comprise one or more D-shaped buildings, bounded by a megalithic wall and a concave façade, and containing a series of courts, apses and a terminal chamber, all symmetrically arranged along a central passage. 'Altar' blocks, decorative friezes, sculptures, figurines and other special artefacts are indicative of religious rituals, while the large quantities of grindstones, domestic animal bones and pottery sherds deposited in them are suggestive of repeated sacrifice and feasting. The three rock-cut hypogea (Ħal Saflieni, Santa Luċija and the Xagħra Circle) also have monumental entrances and elaborate architectural plans, and were clearly related (spatially and symbolically) to the

above-ground temples, but were used primarily for mortuary rituals, as indicated by the substantial quantities of human remains deposited in them, together with animal bones, pottery vessels, and a range of other ritually significant objects. The temples and hypogea are unlikely to have been intentionally constructed with acoustic properties in mind. Nevertheless, a high premium is likely to have been attached to the right sounds and words (e.g. music, rhetoric, echoes) made and heard at the right times by the right people, by instruments, or by perceived spiritual forces. These ritual sounds could have intensified the drama of the ceremonies, whilst serving as agents in their control. More specifically, different spaces and architectural features of the temples could have afforded different acoustic (and other sensory) experiences (Tilley 2004). People remaining outside the temple façades would have heard little or nothing of what went on inside the temples, with their thick stone shells and narrow doorways (probably fitted with wooden doors) (Figure 3). By contrast, sounds would have been amplified in the enclosed central courts of the temples. By contrast again, ritual access to sounds and meanings expressed in the innermost doorways, apses and recesses of the temples would have been restricted to only a few. The small 'oracle chambers', situated behind apses in the Mnajdra and Tarxien temples, are of particular interest (Figure 4). They were hollowed out of intra-mural rubble and fitted with a restricted cut-out 'porthole', which controlled communication between any people situated in the concealed chamber and in the apse. It is unclear precisely what passed through these small holes, but meaningful sounds are certainly a possibility.

Over time, the aural culture of the Maltese islands was transformed through the establishment of new blends of traditional and novel sounds. Nevertheless, the Temple Culture of Malta stands out as a particularly rich and complex soundscape.

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