

## Radiocarbon dating the henge

I sent a piece of animal bone off for radiocarbon dating before I went off for my holiday in Malta. The bone is part of the leg of a juvenile pig, placed on the bottom of the outer ditch of the henge before silting began. A radiocarbon date from it ought to give us some idea about when the ditch was last open (it doesn't tell us about when the ditch was dug, as it could have been cleaned out many times over the centuries the henge was in use). As the only pottery from the ditch was of middle Neolithic type, I am hoping that the radiocarbon date will confirm a date before 2800 BC.

## Comparing the Norton henge with Maltese megalithic temples



Excavating the animal bones in the base of the henge outer ditch



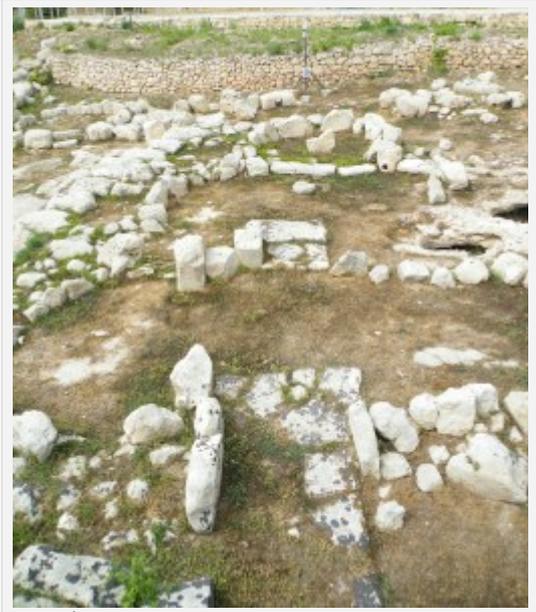
Sir Themistocles (Temi) Zammit (1864-1935), in a bronze by Victor Diacono in the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta

Malta is well known for its Neolithic temples, which include some of the oldest stone structures in the world (only Göbekli Tepe, in south-eastern Turkey, is older: even the pyramids of Egypt are not as old). I visited one of the most famous, at Tarxien (pronounced "Tar-sheen"), for the fifth time while away. It was discovered when a farmer turned up large pieces of stone when ploughing a field early in the twentieth century. Sir Themistocles ("Temi") Zammit, the island's principal archaeologist at that time, spent several years excavating the monument and his work there turned up some of the best-known images of prehistoric Europe: spiral decorations, images in low relief of bulls and the lower part of a colossal statue of a very fat person wearing a skirt or kilt (usually assumed to be a woman, for no very good reason).

Although the earliest temple at Tarxien dates from the earliest phase of massive temple building (known as the Ġgantija Phase, after a temple complex on Gozo), the style reached its peak with a later Neolithic seven-roomed structure built to its west. This is more-or-less contemporary with the henge at Stapleton's Field, dating from around 3100 to 2500 BC: our henge site was probably built around the same time as the earliest of the temples at Tarxien and was perhaps abandoned around the same time as the latest. Both were constructed by Neolithic farming communities and it is instructive to realise that in both places, the work required was enormous and would have put a real strain on agricultural productivity.

## Being prehistoric

It is often tempting to think of prehistoric peoples as "primitive". This is an attitude that goes back to the beginning of archaeology, when wealthy Victorian gentlemen who saw themselves as the pinnacle of civilisation viewed people in Africa, Asia and the Americas as "savages". They compared the societies of these people with what they could discover about the European past and saw many similarities. Of course, there are parallels to be drawn between ancient societies and those that ethnographers study today, but we should not be so quick to make ill-considered value judgements.



The Ġgantija phase temple at Tarxien, c 3100 BC



The so-called "Fat Lady" of Tarxien (actually a reproduction: the original is in the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta)

The people who built the Tarxien temples and Stapleton's Field henge were as intelligent and sophisticated as we are. Their lives were as rich and full of joy, conflict, love and pain as our own. The differences between us are largely those of technology and the scale of our societies. The globalised world of the past century or so depends on a range of technologies that make the movement of heavy objects so much easier and the communication of ideas so much faster than they were in the Neolithic. Neolithic farmers lived in dispersed communities; coming together for seasonal

## Update on Stapleton's Field Henge

meetings at places like Tarxien or Stapleton's Field was their main means of communication, of learning new ideas, and was probably an occasion for employing a lot of muscle power. These people were not constrained by the sorts of deadlines we have: like the builders of a medieval cathedral, they were content to spend decades, even centuries, building their monuments.

This is an important lesson from prehistory. The technology of Neolithic farmers may have been primitive in comparison with ours, but we can still be awe-struck in front of their achievements. As an archaeologist who has shifted untold tonnes of soil over the years, I am well aware just how much effort was put in by the people who excavated the outer ditch of the Stapleton's Field henge to a depth of 1.5 metres and a width of 5 m using only antler picks and cattle shoulder-blade shovels.

I am hoping to be able to reveal the date of the pig bone from the henge around the end of May.



The outer ditch of Stapleton's Field henge

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