

THE TARXIEN SHIP GRAFFITI REVISITED

Joseph Muscat

In Malta, as elsewhere, the study of graffiti has been ignored for far too long. The pioneers of Maltese archaeology did not give maritime subjects the same degree of attention given to other fields of study.

Little effort is required to pinpoint localities where ship graffiti are incised as they are found in several places in the Maltese Islands which cover an area of just 314 sq. km.¹ The recurrent symbols of ships are found in all sites where graffiti were scratched. The preponderance of ship representations testify to the extent of maritime activity exercised since the earliest presence of man on the Maltese Islands.²

It will be observed that the graffiti under review were discovered in a sacred place.³ This confirms the theory that these and similar graffiti qualify as manifestations of *ex-voto* practices.⁴ One can thus trace in religious sites a certain degree of continuity in classical times of *ex-voto* offerings. This commenced at the Tarxien temples and was continued well into the 6th Century AD in other sacred places such as tombs and catacombs.⁵

Near the entrance of the western apse of the south or third Tarxien temple stand two orthostats forming the right-hand side of the passage. These two upright stone blocks are incised with a number of ship graffiti which are extremely important because of their numbers. Additionally, they are most likely the earliest examples in the Mediterranean.⁶

It should be noted that the graffiti are primitive representations of ships and one should never be tempted to read into such incisions beyond what is indicated

1. J. Muscat, 'Maltese Ship Graffiti' in *Medieval Ships and the Birth of Technological Societies*, vol.II, Malta 1991, 325.
2. J. Cassar and J. Muscat, *Report on the Graffiti found in the Old Prisons of the Gozo Citadel*, Museums Department Malta 1989, part II, 7; see also J. Muscat and J. Cassar, 'The Gozo Prisons Graffiti' in *Melita Historica*, vol.XI, no.3, 1994, 241-273; R. Parker and M. Rubinstein, *Malta's Ancient Temples and Ruts*, London 1988, 6.
3. Past and contemporary academic circles accept the notion that such Maltese megalithic structures as those found at Tarxien were temples. In future, further investigations might attach other connotations to such places. Information kindly provided by Tony Pace.
4. L. Basch, *Le Musee imaginaire de la marine antique*, Athens 1987, 395; Muscat, 'Maltese Ship Graffiti', 323.
5. For *ex-voto* objects in ancient Malta see G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue antichità ed altre notizie*, Malta 1647, 22, 201; Abela-Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, Malta 1772, 11; L. Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, London 1805, 7; Muscat, 'Maltese Ship Graffiti', 324, 325.
6. D. Woolner, 'Graffiti of Ships at Tarxien Malta' in *Antiquity*, vol.XXXI, 1957, 60.

by the simple, light scratchings.⁷ They were first studied by Woolner in 1957. (Fig. 1) At that period the graffiti might have been in a better state of preservation than in 1970 when, for the first time they attracted my attention without my being aware of the publication by Woolner. I was never able at that time to trace all the graffiti as indicated by Woolner and today there are serious difficulties in any attempt at deciphering the principal ones. Woolner agrees that weathering had already affected many graffiti⁸ and although the stone itself is in a reasonable state of preservation, yet a great number of incisions as proposed in the 1957 publication have now faded away and can hardly be deciphered.

Woolner proposed that the ship graffiti were produced by different methods such as 'pounding, chipping and scratching'.⁹ But surely a graffiti was incised by a sharp point which could have included various elements of bone or hard wood. If other methods are employed the end product cannot be termed a graffiti. Unfortunately Woolner was not aware of the existence of other graffiti in Malta besides those found at Tarxien. The trend of scratching graffiti continued into the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. These include the ship graffiti discovered at Hal Far, Tas-Silg temples and St Paul's and at Tad-Dejr catacombs at Rabat.¹⁰

One can observe at this stage that the great number of graffiti incised on the two stone slabs, now barely visible, were not intended to serve as decorations. They can hardly be seen from a distance.¹¹ One is tempted to treat the two stone slabs as if they were two notice boards or votive stele, specifically erected for the benefit of those ancient mariners to incise on them either as an expression of gratitude or as an insurance against the perils at sea. The superimpositions on many ship representations might be explained by the lack of space available on the two slabs. Such superimpositions were not practised elsewhere. In later 16th century graffiti sites, each graffiti can be clearly seen incised on its own as if the 'donors' respected each other's act of faith. It had been suggested that such superimpositions were an accepted phenomenon.¹² This, however, does not apply to Maltese ship graffiti found in other sites.

The possibility that the Tarxien graffiti are the earliest ones to be found in the Mediterranean area has been noted.¹³ The Temple Culture in Malta goes back to of

7. Muscat and Cassar, Report on Graffiti, part II, 1.

8. Woolner, 64.

9. *Ibid.*, 61.

10. Muscat, *Maltese Ship Graffiti*, 329, 331 and for other graffiti dating from the 16th century see *id.*, 331 *et seq.*

11. Parker and Rubenstein, *Malta's Ancient Temples*, 6; Muscat and Cassar, *Report on Graffiti*, part II, 2.

12. Woolner, 61.

13. Basch, *Le Musee*, 395.

3000 B.C., if not earlier.¹⁴ However, this does not necessarily mean that the execution of the graffiti could be attributed to that period. Most probably the graffiti were incised during the last phase of the Temple Culture around 1600 B.C.¹⁵ Similar Egyptian graffiti were executed at least a thousand years after those of Tarxien.¹⁶

Different types of ships were incised by different people, testifying that Malta was affected by various influences through the ages. Starting from the second millennium B.C. one can trace or infer that the Cycladic, Minoan, Mycenaean, Greek and Egyptian influences were imposed on the Maltese way of life.¹⁷ One cannot exclude the possibility that visiting sailors from those cultures left their marks at Tarxien when forced to call at Malta, thus establishing the Island as a religious pilgrim site in antiquity. By 1800-1600 B.C Malta was under Eastern Mediterranean influences as regards ship building and the Mycenaeans, followed by the Phoenicians¹⁸ were instrumental in improving shipbuilding and the art of navigation.

The interpretation of the Tarxien graffiti presents various difficulties. Different scholars interpret such rudimentary representations differently. One can compare and contrast the drawings by Woolner and others (Figs. 2,3,4) to realise the various aspects of the personal interpretations that goes into the study of these graffiti.¹⁹ A photograph of the slabs²⁰ gives the objective and visual aspects of the ancient boats with various points of contrast especially on Stone B which shows few discernable hull drawings as compared with the eighteen suggested by Woolner. A recent attempt to decipher the Tarxien graffiti produced less ship representations, especially on Stone B, on which items of dubious origin were suggested.²¹

Woolner's drawings nos. 2,5,7,9 and 10 on Stone A (Fig. 5) are interesting but her interpretation of the representations on Stone B (Fig.6) creates problems when

14. Parker and Rubenstein, *Malta's Ancient Temples*, 23, but see also A., Bonanno, 'A Socio-economic Approach to Maltese Prehistory, The Temple Builders', in *Malta Studies of its Heritage and History*, Malta 1986, 18.

15. D. Evans, *Malta*, London 1963, 116; D.H., Trump, *Malta: An Archaeological Guide*, London 1972, 69.

16. Parker and Rubenstein, *Malta's Ancient Temples*, 7.

17. Evans, *Malta*, 71, 72 for the various influences affecting Malta; Basch, *Le Musee*, 373 shows a series of graffiti with certain affinities to those at Tarxien especially 376, no. 32 and 377 no.40.

18. Malta was on the Phoenician routes, see S. Moscati, *The Phoenicians*, Milan 1988, 47 but it is almost impossible to trace Phoenician boat building influences on Maltese small crafts. A.F. Tilley was too optimistic in his theories regarding the Maltese dghajsa, see J. Muscat, 'The Dghajsa-In Memoriam' in *Mariner's Mirror*, vol.LXXVII, no.4, November, 1991, 404, note 1; J. Muscat, *The Dghajsa and other Traditional Maltese Boats*, Malta 1999, 28,29

19. Woolner, Figs. 1,2,3; A.F. Anati and E. Anati, *Missione a Malta*, Brescia 1988, fig 4 left out the graffiti incised on the edge and back of Stone B; Parker and Rubenstein, *Malta's Ancient Temples*, Fig. 4 shows three ship designs only.

20. Thanks to JoAnn Cassar who kindly photographed the Tarxien orthostats in May 1992.

21. Anati and Anati, *Missione*, Fig. 3.

Woolner's drawings nos. 2,5,7,9 and 10 on Stone A (Fig. 5) are interesting but her interpretation of the representations on Stone B (Fig.6) creates problems when compared with that proposed by Anati and Anati who also studied the Tarxien graffiti. The recent photograph of Stone B shows further discrepancies between the findings of the Anati's and Woolner. The space between figs. 19 and 20 as proposed by Woolner is occupied by a quadrilateral figure with a top curved side as shown in the photograph and interpreted correctly by the Anati's together with the three 'arches' at the top of the stone block. The remarks by Woolner referring to more representations on the edge of Stone B (Fig. 7) and its back can be accepted, provided one bears in mind that although they were visible in 1957, they cannot be deciphered today.²²

The Maltese type of building stone, known as globigerina limestone, was an excellent medium for the incision of graffiti. The stone blocks of Tarxien are of an inferior type of local stone because they contain quite a few fossils. One can notice the deleterious effect of time and the negligence of man on the stone which luckily has not yet reached the graffiti. These can now be seen at a level of one metre from the ground although most probably the stone blocks were originally taller and consequently some graffiti disappeared in the course of time. The local stone is quite soft when cut from a quarry but tends to harden after a few years when exposed to years when exposed to weather. The top hard crust of the globigerina stone, a few millimetres deep preserved the graffiti for a long time. The present greyish patina noticed on the stone blocks is, amongst other causes, the result of air pollution.²³

It seems that Woolner went too far in proposing several types of implements used for the incision of the graffiti which could have easily been executed by any hard point, be it a piece of bone or a shark's tooth. Reference to single, double and many pointed instruments which could produce broad, fine, sharp or coarse incisions might give the impression that early man had at his disposal a great variety of tools to choose from.

It seems that the graffiti on Stone A (Fig.8) were incised slightly inclined upwards at the bows although sometimes it is difficult to decide about the fore and aft section of a particular boat representation. One should not attach too much importance to such a notion or propose a futile interpretation, but the fact remains that the main, clearly visible ship graffiti on Stone A are slanting upwards in sharp contrast with other level incisions on Stone B.(Fig.9)

22. Woolner, Fig. 3.

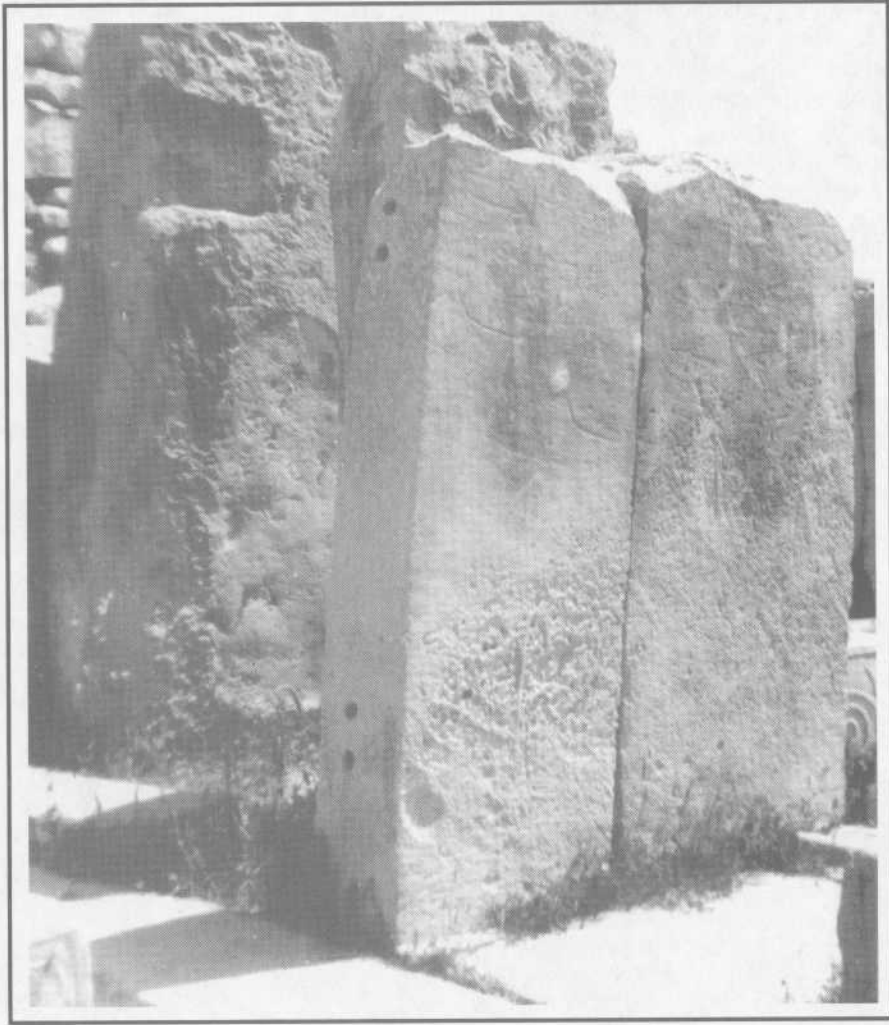
23. For more information about the most common causes of Maltese stone deterioration see Muscat and Cassar, *Report on Graffiti*, part I, 2 et seq; see also Muscat, *Maltese Ship Graffiti*, vol.II, 326, 327.

For obvious reasons boats were not drawn to scale as each 'donor' decided on the size of his incision. One can also guess that when space was not available superimpositions occurred to the detriment of earlier graffiti. Stone A definitely shows the better ship graffiti when compared with those incised on Stone B. One may suggest that Block B was added when there was no space left on Block A.

Unfortunately, the Tarxien graffiti stone blocks have been left for far too long in the open air subjected to all weather conditions and consequently they are suffering from deterioration at a fast rate. While it is hoped that modern systems of deciphering²⁴ may throw further light on the graffiti, one may also hope that immediate preservative measures would ensure the integrity of the stone blocks since they display the earliest ship representations in Malta and the Mediterranean.

24. H., Cahingt, *Les Muirs Qui Parlent*, Chateau Musee de Dieppe, 1990, preface by Pierre Bazin.

Fig.1



The Tarxien Orthostats as photographed in 1957

Fig.4

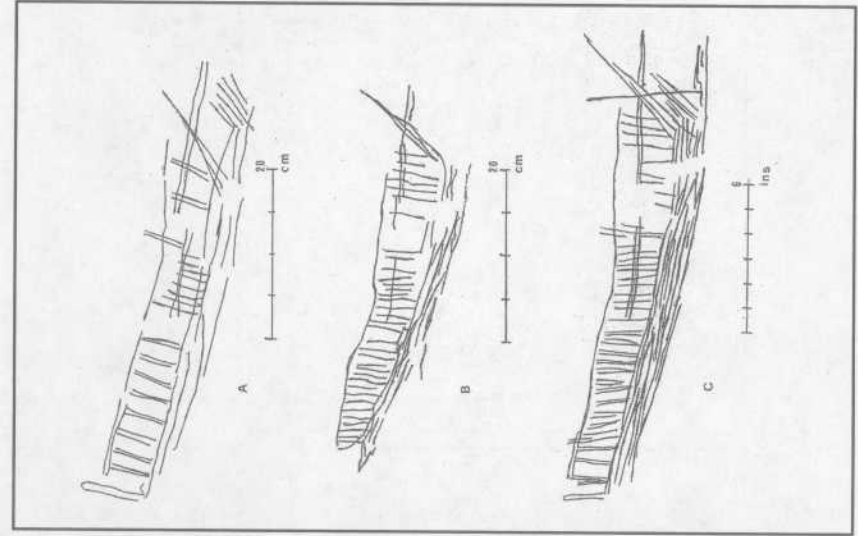


Fig.3

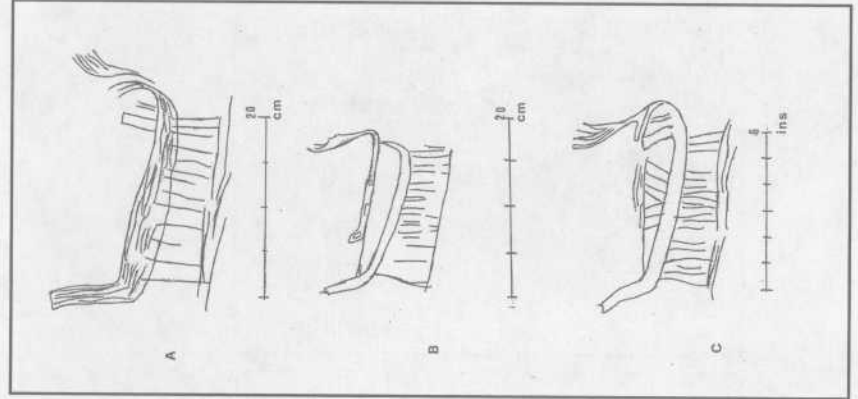
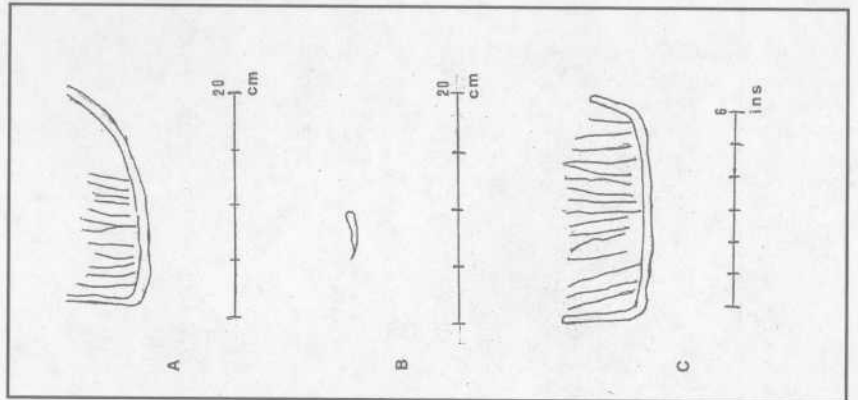


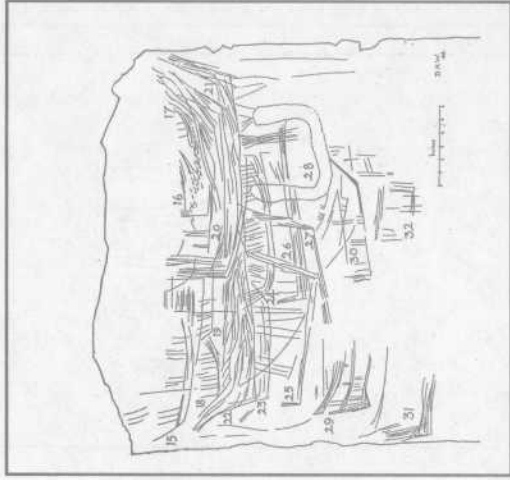
Fig.2



Different interpretations of the same graffiti

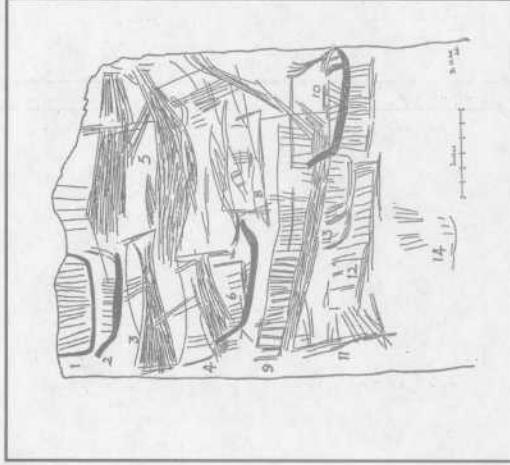
A Parker / Rubenstein B Anati/Anati C Woolner

Fig.5



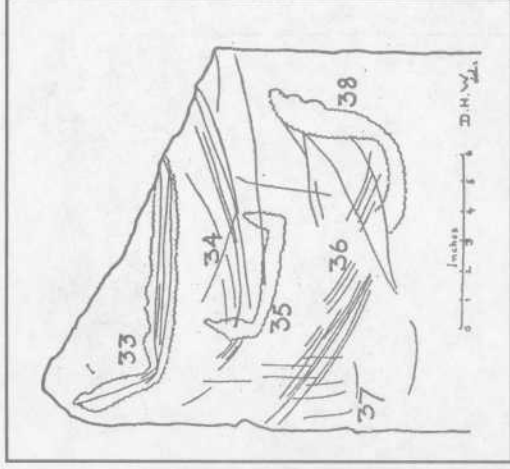
Woolner's interpretation of Stone A

Fig.6



Woolner's interpretation of Stone B

Fig.7



Woolner's interpretation of edge of Stone B

Fig. 8



Present state of conservation of Stone A

Fig. 9



Present state of conservation of Stone B