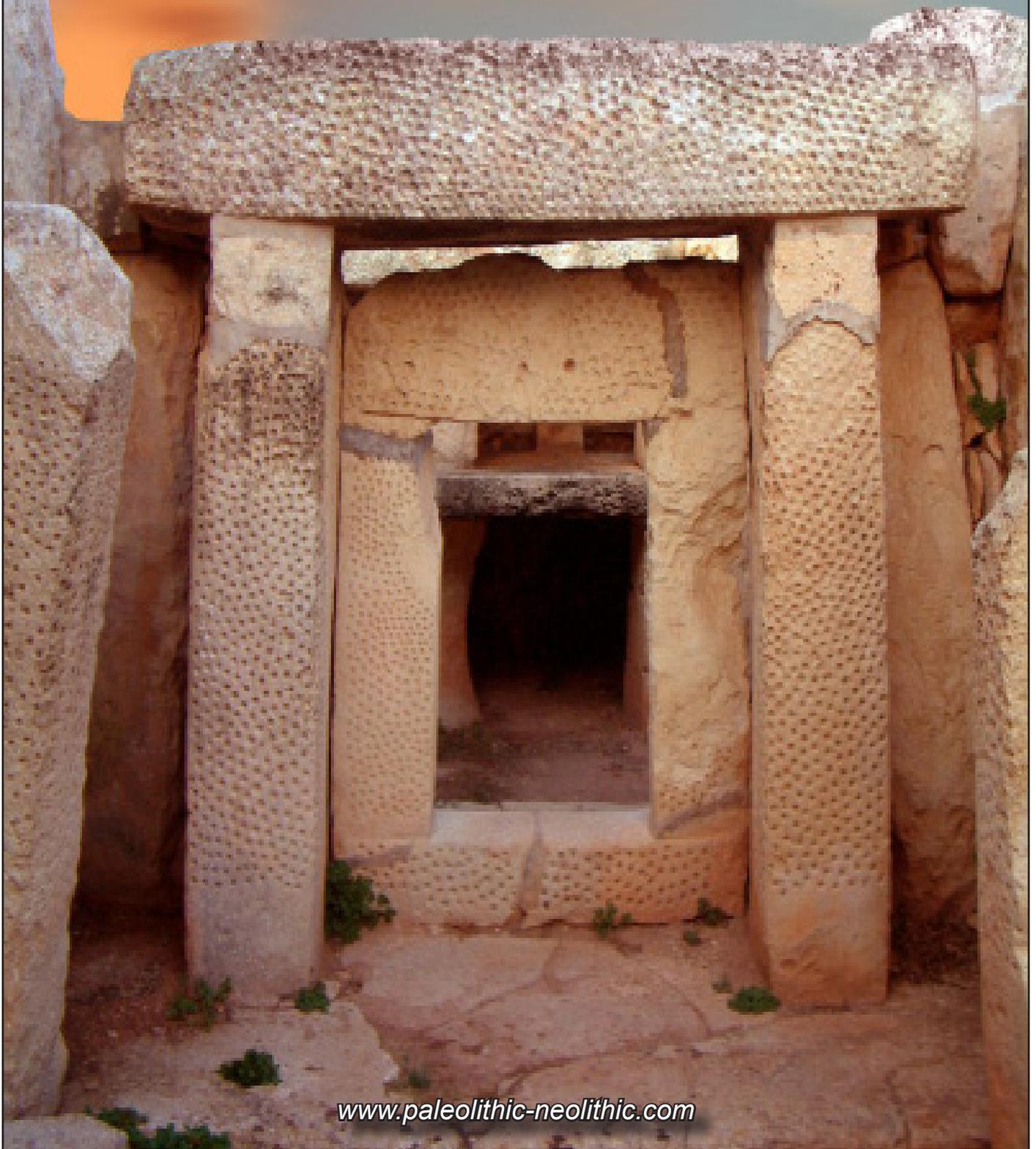


# Megalithic Malta

## Many Temple Complexes





On the islands of the western Mediterranean traces of early settlements have also been found. But Malta with its numerous megalithic temple complexes is a very special if not a unique case. This small archipelago has two islands and measures only three hundred square kilometers. Thus, it is much smaller than the other islands like Sardinia, Corsica or the Balears. Next to the main island Malta temples have been erected by paleolithic settlers also on the smaller Gozo island.

#### ***Numerous Temple Complexes***

Gozo measures only seven and fourteen kilometers in width and length. Nevertheless, six megalithic temple complexes were built here. Looking at Malta's size of thirteen by twenty eight kilometers our ancestors erected twenty two temple compounds here. But how many people lived here during the stone age? Experts estimate that both islands had a maximum of 16,000 inhabitants. But why did they need so many temples? Or did already an early pilgrimage by seafarers exist? The numerous oracle niches plus the permanent extensions of temples to growing complexes might be a proof for this assumption.

#### ***Malta Geology***

How could inhabitants survive on these arid and fruitless islands at that time? During this early period the islands were far more fertile and forested. And the sea level was about one hundred meters lower and subsequently the islands were much larger. The supply with water which today presents a huge problem

was during that period secured through ample rains. The highest mountains are only two hundred meters high and different to Corsica and Sardinia no permanent flowing rivers existed. In addition, Malta has no silex deposits so all necessary stone tools had to be imported via sea trade.

#### ***Geographical Position***

Malta is situated about eighty kilometers south of Sicily. Therefore, experts believe it has been colonized by members of the Stentinello culture. Today only half a million people live on both islands. Various smaller islands are not inhabited. The distance to the African continent is only two hundred kilometers.

#### ***Early Settlement***

Archaeologists assume that the builders of these astonishing temple complexes and rock tombs arrived on the island about 8,000 years ago. Possibly they came via Sicily as well as the eastern Mediterranean like Crete where the necessary technology for megalithic complexes was already known.

#### ***Early Seafarers***

There was only one way to settle on Malta. These first settlers must have been experienced seafarers which on their trading expeditions in the Mediterranean discovered Malta. These traders must have collected enough wealth to be able to erect these large temple compounds. In this way they imported the necessary raw materials which were not found on the island including all tools and later jewelry.

### ***Stentinello Culture***

This early culture from Sicily was known for its decorated pottery items. The ceramic ware was painted tricolor with lines, spirals and zick zack ornaments. Some of these designs were also used on temple walls. The imprint technique via stamping into the wet clay was also used that early in Sicily. Their huts were round or oval which might explain the unique oval form of temple buildings on Malta.

### ***Sudden Construction Stop***

All temple building activities stopped suddenly about 4,500 years ago. Experts assume that inhabitants abandoned the islands as climatic conditions changed and brought about droughts. A move to different parts of the island was not possible due to its small size and similar geography. Traces of any attack and war activities could not be found to explain the sudden decline.

### ***Later New Settlers***

The island was rediscovered by new settlers from a different culture during the bronze age. Therefore, this period started later on Malta. Experts could also not prove any discoveries of bronze items during the early settlement phase when bronze was already common in the eastern Mediterranean.

### ***First Temples***

The first large temples were built about 6,000 years ago. New research suggests that much earlier small shrines and single chamber temples were erected often on the same site. These first religious activities might have taken place already 8,000 years ago about the time first settlers arrived on the island.

Therefore, it is not surprising that archaeologists discovered so-called arch temples next to the large temple complexes. Unfortunately, of these first chambers often only the foundations do exist today.

### ***Building Development***

Experts established that the temple building activity during paleolithic times developed slowly. A sudden rapid development of larger temple compounds can only be explained with the immigration of highly skilled builders. But why did they come to such a small island? And in addition, these two small islands had only lime stone as building material to offer.

### ***Regular Temple Restructuring***

Before we investigate the various temple building phases, we want to look at the typology or chronology of development of these unique and impressive temple building activi-





ties on Malta. What made the inhabitants erect so many and so large religious buildings? And how did this development happen? Have the previous smaller temples been overbuilt and the lime stone blocks reused? A reuse of stone blocks has certainly happened, but not any overbuilding as it was common in the Near East. The best proof are the arch temples situated directly next to the new structures which were regularly rebuilt and extended.

#### *Temple Typology*

The development of the temple compounds can be best seen by their growing size and complexity of their layouts. This explains also their chronology of building activities. It begins with the smaller temples of Xemxija, Ta Hagra and Skorba. Thereon followed the greater temple sites of Ggantija, Mnajdra and Tarxien. Please look at the layout pictures which show this in detail.

#### *Zebbug Phase*

Archaeologists divided the temple development in Malta into various phases and named them after their locations. The first step falls into a period about 6,100 to 5,800 years ago. Inhabitants dug primitive grave chambers and erected small single cell temples. It is possible that during this time new settlers from Sardinia and the eastern Mediterranean arrived on Malta

and brought about changes.

#### *Mgarr Phase*

The erection of temples really started during the Mgarr period which lasted until 5,600 years ago. During this two hundred year period the temples of Ta Hagra, Skorba and Kordin were built. The cave tombs near the coastal town of Xemxija fall into this time as well. Please remember that most temples were extended during various later periods as they have been in ritual use for a long time. Some were used for over two thousand years until the end of the temple building period 4,500 years ago.

#### *Ggantija Phase*

This period lasted for six hundred years until 3,000 years ago. During this time the famous temples of Ggantija and Mnajdra were erected which are described in more detail further on. As they were used and extended over a long time, we name here the main use and building phases only.

#### *Saflieni Phase*

In this period falls the construction of first underground tomb chamber systems the so-called hypogeum. This phase is also known for the famous five apse temple of Hagar Qim which is described in more detail below.





### *Tarxien Phase*

The last phase was the eight hundred years lasting Tarxien period. Thereafter all temple building activities stopped and the island was abandoned. The important Tarxien temple giving this period its name is a large complex with four and six apses which we again describe in more detail further on.

### *Alternative Ceramic Chronology*

Some experts also distinguish the development phases using ceramic items found. The Ghar Dalam period is named after a two hundred meter deep cave which was used as living quarters. This period lasted from 7,000 to 6,500 years ago. Thereafter followed for one hundred years the greyish Skorba pottery ware and for another three hundred years the reddish Skorba ceramic production.

### *Bronze & Iron Age*

We have already mentioned that during this period new settlers arrived on the islands. The bronze age started here therefore later than elsewhere. This immigration did not take place in one single step but in waves between 4,500 and 3,500 years ago. During this time the cemetery near Tarxien and the Tal Qadi temple were erected. The Borg in

Nadur period named after a bronze age village lasted until 2,700 years ago. The following Bahrija phase continued only for another two hundred years.

### *Enormous Temple Size*

After this overview we come back to the beginnings of temple building. What surprises visitors most is the sheer size of this paleolithic temple complexes. The builders at first did not yet know how to construct roofs with long wooden beams to erect larger halls. To reach the necessary internal size for larger gatherings they constructed various smaller rooms with vaulted ceilings. Like this, the unique temple layouts were created with various double apses in kidney form erected in line.

### *Small Temple Models?*

Archaeologists were surprised to excavate small stone models of temples. This might be proof that their builders had a well thought of plan. Or were these models created for another reason? Did they represent a religious idol and were manufactured and sold to pilgrims? Possibly they served as lucky idol or for fertility rituals at home. Experts believe they certainly did not serve as builder models.



### No Common Temple Orientation

Surprising is that the temple entrances have no common orientation as it was the norm at all other religious sites in the Mediterranean region. Most temples are oriented more or less southwards. But the angle differs to thirty degrees on both sides. That is too much for a strict religious based layout concept. Most entrances were erected as trilith with two hewn stone pillars left and right topped by a massive stone lintel. Some of these stone blocks have a weight of between twenty to fifty tons. That needs in depth building skills to install them.

### Intriguing Temple Layout

After the trilith entrance two to three oval chambers in form of a double kidney followed with a niche for the central altar at the top end. Only priests and clan leaders were allowed inside. Here they prayed to the statues of their gods and fertility idols. The walls were plastered and painted in ochre earth colors. The floor was stamped and covered with flag stones. Later floors were done in screed which were colored in reddish or ochre tones.

### Huge Tarxien Temple

This complex consists of three connected temples erected behind each other. Tarxien belongs to the five really large temple compounds on the Malta islands close to the town with the same name. Like with many temples on Malta it began around 5,600 years ago with an arch temple with three small cells. Three hundred years later the first large temple building was erected next to it. And another hundred fifty years later further temple structures with the typical Malta double kidney form apses were added.

### Numerous Restructures

The last building in this row was the first temple structure erected after the arch temple. In front of it lies the third temple which was built hundred fifty years later. The next temple extension is even larger and its layout consists of three symmetrical apses. Finally, the last temple was constructed in front of it which can be well seen in the layout pictures.

### Rich Temple Decorations

The temples have been richly decorated with reliefs of animal depictions like bulls and wild boars, spiral designs and other sym-



bols. Part of the furnishings were various statues, shrines, altars, oracle niches and holes in the wall for sacrifices of the public which were not allowed to enter the temple. These sacrifices contained many goods such as figurines, ceramic vessels filled with liquids and food as well as jewelry for the gods. But the most impressive discovery is a huge and over three meter high statue of a mother goddess of which unfortunately only the lower half was found in situ.



### *Hypogeum Burials*

Near this temple complex the rather large hypogeum of Hal Saflieni is situated. Here over 7,000 burials were placed in tomb cells located in a complex tunnel system. Hypogeum is an underground mausoleum structure with many horizontal funeral shafts. Experts assume a close connection with the temple complex. Possibly there were not enough caves for the growing number of inhabitants. Therefore, artificial caves were dug into the soft lime stone. The builders may have used the underground quarries for temple building material later on for funeral purposes.



### *Hagar Qim Temple*

This is another huge complex with various temples which have been built near the village of Qrendi between 5,600 and 4,500 years ago. The compound consists of an arch temple and the north and south temples. The first has the typical double kidney form layout with two side niches and a larger head niche with the main altar and divine statue. This part was used over six hundred years. The north temple

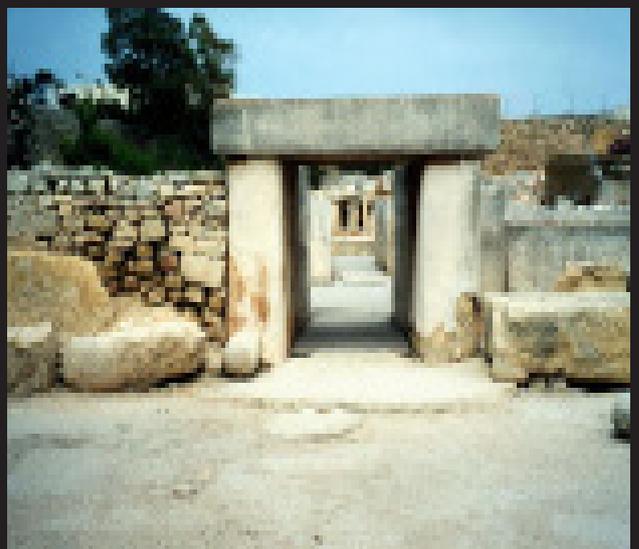




is smaller than the south complex. The latter is very similar but without the side niches. But the discovery of the immense statue of the mother goddess also called the Malta venus made it so famous.

#### *South Temple Complex*

It appears that the use of the north temple was given up about 5,000 years ago. The than newly constructed south temple is in so far special that it has not got one but six entrances. Fortunately, it is the best preserved. Its builders surrounded it with a protective wall making it a real temple compound. They also added three rooms around the main temple hall. These chambers were added on the outside and could be entered separately. Archaeologists assume that these prayer rooms were open to the public which at the time was not the practice else where.



### *Main Temple*

The main temple consists of two double kidney formed chambers with opposite lying entrances. This construction detail is unique to Malta same as the double kidney form layout. Again, the furnishings consisted of relief decorated walls, stone altars, oracle niches and sacrifice corners. The latter are a special temple feature in Malta. Because the public was not allowed inside the temples and therefore sacrifices were not placed on altars but handed through holes in the temple walls. Experts believe that priests or temple servants received those sacrifices behind the wall in the holy temple area. Interestingly these holes in the wall were protected on the outside with small side walls creating niches.

### *Various Large Monolith*

In the outside area a large six by three meter monolith weighing over twenty tons was found. And at the north wall another five meter high monolith was erected. To protect this temple complex from the elements it was recently covered by a huge textile tent like roof structure.

### *Mnajdra Temple*

This is another of the great temple complexes on Malta. For protection this site as well is covered by a wide spanning textile roof structure. The temple was built on a plateau on the southwestern coast near the town of Qrendi. The complex consists of three parts. The rather ruined arch temple was used for four hundred years starting about 5,600 years ago. The main and south temples were being built next to each other about 5,150 years ago and were surrounded by a wall. These compound walls are as well special to Malta. At first the main temple was connected with the south area and had a skillfully hewn trilith entrance which was a typical feature in Malta temples. The inner walls consisted of soft lime stone and were possibly covered with plates as many drill holes lined their surfaces. The exterior walls were built out of harder coral lime stone which was very porous. They were difficult to be hewn into precise building blocks as can be seen from the pictures.

### *Skorba Temple*

Unfortunately, this temple complex near the village of Mgarr on Malta is not very well pre-



served. The few stone blocks left do not really are an indication of its former size and importance. Often the ancient temple ruins lie close to modern villages. The Ta Hagart temple is situated only a kilometer away. But Skorba is one of the oldest ritual complexes and its construction already began 7,000 years ago during the early Ghar Dalam period.





### ***Skorba History***

This temple was used for thousands of years from the beginning until the end of the temple building period about 4,500 years ago when inhabitants left the island. The three part complex is separated in a west and east temple. Excavations showed that this complex was various times rebuilt and extended. This is actually true for all temples on Malta and Gozo. Possibly this temple compound was much larger as so far known. The layout has the typical double kidney form.

### ***Skorba Settlement***

It could be proven that the ancient Skorba village was built right next to the temple complex or even the temple was situated right in its center. What was built first the temple or the settlement? This question has not yet been answered by archaeologists. The huts had an oval form and were erected with mud bricks. Therefore, excavators could distinguish the stone temple from the mud brick living quarters.

### ***Skorba Temple Finds***

Next to remains of an altar and decorations a female figure has been discovered. This points towards a fertility cult being practiced here. It is no surprise as besides the famous Malta venus additional female statues and figurines have been found at other temples. A connection to rituals with regards to successful fishing trips could not be proven.

### ***Ggantija Temple***

This temple is situated on the island of Gozo near the village of Xaghra and belongs to the oldest ritual sites. With two areas it is one of the five large temple compounds on the islands. On the smaller Gozo island alone six



temples were erected. As most large temple complexes Ggantija is also surrounded by wall which today still reaches a height of six meters. This shows its purpose to protect the holy site from public views.

### ***Roofed Temple***

6,100 years ago, the first part in form of a three leafed clover leaf was built and used for over one thousand years. Five hundred years later an additional large chamber with two oval apses was erected in front. During this time also the second area was constructed. Small models of this temple show that it was built with a vaulted roof on top. This might also be the case for the mid-sized temple next to it.

### ***Temple Network***

This complex lies on a hill hundred meter high near the Ghar ta Ghejzen cave. And only one kilometer away is situated Santa Verna another temple. It is not yet known if and how this high density of temples worked together. Why did all temples had so many chambers and niches? And why was a second temple erected right next to the first and used contemporary? Did so many gods exist in the divine pantheon of Malte to be cherished and adorned? Or was Malta an important pilgrimage site for seafarers from far?

### ***Tal Qadi Temple***

This is a small temple on Malta near the village of Naxxar. It has two apses possibly even four. It was erected about 6,000 years ago. At this site the famous star map was discovered. Experts assume that the found part of a broken piece of stone painted with stars and lines is just that a piece of the first astronomical map. Was Malta more than a

pilgrimage site?

### *Many Open Questions*

Many of these questions and various others have not really been answered yet. With the start of early scripts 5,000 years ago some questions could be solved. But this was already towards the end of the Malta temple building period. And the abandonment of the island thereafter did not help further.

### *Limited Building Material*

The crude looking building blocks should not deceive anyone that the temple builders were excellent craftsmen. Unfortunately, they really did not have many choices of building materials because the islands consist primarily of hard coral lime stone.

### *Intriguing Ruts*

Many questions do raise the strange ruts which still can be seen at over hundred fifty places across Malta as well as Gozo. Scientists are certain they are pre-historic traces. Often, they are over hundred meters long some even over a kilometer. They are parallel double tracks roughly a meter apart and on average forty centimeters deep. The network of lines with junctions, crossings and curves is really surprising.

### *Transport Traces?*

These ruts are situated near the temples of Tarxien, Skorba, Tal Qadi, Hagar Qim and Manjdra. Possibly they were only created during the bronze age between 4,300 to 3,000 years ago? Because they are directed towards various settlements from this period. Experts do not yet have any idea of their use nor exact date of creation. Were they traces of sledges to transport building blocks for temple constructions? In this context no hoof traces of possible pull animals were found to prove this thesis.

### *Water Channels?*

Recently the idea of irrigation channels is being investigated. This possibility is also not conclusive. Why were parallel lines necessary for this purpose? Curves and junctions might fit this idea but what about crossings? To make this idea work traces to lower blocking and directional gates are missing. Also questionable is the gradient in some places with lines going up and

down again. So are multiple ruts situated on a plateau which look more like a tailor sewing pattern.

### *Conclusion*

Malta with its many huge temple complexes erected in such early times falls out of the paleolithic building frame work. If we look at Goebekli Tepe in Anatolia as first temple building site in human history then we recognize these huge megalithic circles were erected 4,000 years earlier compared to Malta. So, the island is not a religious starting point like Anatolia certainly is. But it is a kind of an incubator for deep routed religious beliefs with a wide pantheon and large family of numerous gods. And therefore, it could well have been an important place of pilgrimage for seafarers in the Mediterranean.

### *Picture Credits*

We thank all institutions, museums and photographers for making available some of their pictures and graphs.

