Clearly the builders saw some significance in their alignments, though unrelated to the movements of the heavenly bodies. Whatever the reason for their choice, it is quite impossible for us now to discover what that significance was.


### 3.1 An Untroubled Sleep

She sleeps, serene, pleased by her own exaggerated sensuality, exaggerated by *our* aesthetic canons, of course, to the extent that many call her by the rather disrespectful name of “the Fat Lady.”

No one knows if the sculptor who carved her was inspired by his own beloved or was simply following an established model of an idealized female form. I lean toward the first hypothesis, because the sculpture is a masterpiece, the infusion of a creative soul into 12 centimeters of statuette. This little gem, today at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta, on the island of Malta, was unearthed in one of the world’s most singular and enigmatic places, the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni. It dates back to the island’s prehistory, specifically to the thousand-year span (c. 3500 to 2500 BC) referred to as the Temple Period, during which this small and arid Mediterranean archipelago, composed of Malta, the nearby Gozo, and tiny Comino, all devoid of the natural resources most commonly used at the time (such as flint), its terrain battered by the wind and thus difficult to farm, was home to a magnificent and enigmatic civilization of megalithic builders, one that by 3400 BC was already mature enough to have built one of the greatest architectural marvels of all human history, the Ggantja temple.

Malta’s prehistory begins, if we stick with established dates, quite late by comparison to other civilizations in the same geographical area (Trump 1991, 2002). Although it may sound strange, or even unbelievable, Malta appears not to have been colonized until 5200 BC (there have been attempts to challenge this curious doctrine on the basis of the discovery of human
teeth in a island’s cave called Ghar Dalam, which may very well be of Neanderthal origin, but they have met with vehement objections). The story line is supposed to go like this: between 5200 and c. 3500 BC, Malta develops a “normal” civilization that produces “normal” pottery (akin to those of the contemporary Sicilian cultures with which there was undoubtedly contact), with an economy based on farming, fishing, and the construction of buildings in brick or small stones (about which we know very little since only one site, Skorba, has heretofore been studied in any depth).

Then, suddenly, as if the island’s inhabitants had awakened from an epic sleep, there is a veritable explosion of building activity characterized by the use of giant megaliths in constructions of unprecedented refinement and complexity. The megalithic phase lasts little more than a millennium and ends as abruptly as it began, sometime around 2500 BC. Why, no one knows. It certainly was not the result of an invasion, which would be the easiest explanation. Rather, it was as though the society simply came to a halt, for no apparent reason, like Pompeii minus the volcano. Stratigraphy reveals a thin layer of sterile sand corresponding to the end of the Temple Period, further

Figure 3.1: A map of Malta and Gozo with the archaeological sites cited in the text.