

About the Malta episode 'Sirius Rising' of Graham Hancock's Netflix film *Ancient Apocalypse*

by

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This article is an analysis and critique of the Malta episode 'Sirius Rising' in season one of Graham Hancock's Netflix film series *Ancient Apocalypse*. It is an unusual article in the sense that it is a critique of a production in which I myself and my work took part. Ahead of the release of the film I had no opportunity to view it in order to see what use had been made of my work. I was surprised to find that it had been fitted into a framework that was incompatible with it. In order to make my own position clear and to distance myself from views that I do not share, I am left with no other option than to publish a detailed response to this Malta episode.

My interest as a researcher has thus far concentrated on the debate about Malta's ancient temples, and my book *Sirius, the Star of the Maltese Temples*, which appeared in 2018, is my contribution to the archaeoastronomical aspect of the debate. Having lived and worked in Malta for the best part of the 1990s, I had been able to follow closely, on-the-spot so to speak, the publications and newspaper articles about the exciting new discoveries that had come to light during those years. These concerned the archaeoastronomical research by Paul Micallef, Chris Agius and Frank Ventura and, not least, the work of Anton Mifsud on evidence for Palaeolithic human presence in the islands, a topic which was then, and still is, controversial in Malta.

In 2002 Graham Hancock's book *Underworld* came out, in which he devoted a long chapter of a hundred pages to Malta. It told of his mission to verify claims about an underwater temple near Malta's coast. This had turned out to be unsuccessful, but it had taken him on to an exciting new trail. More or less filling the gap of the missing underwater temple, he brought all the ground-breaking work of the just mentioned authors to the

attention of a world-wide public. Even today this chapter about Malta is in my opinion one of the best reports on the discoveries and hotly debated issues surrounding Malta's prehistory at the end of the last century. To get a feel of the central themes, I would still encourage reading it, even if only for the interviews with Malta's leading archaeologists in the field, who seemed to be in a relaxed and unusually frank mood at the time. Hancock's Malta chapter let a refreshing breeze into a closed box of ingrained views and routine clichés. It was on this chapter that my trust in him was based.

My main focus being Malta, I knew of his other work and had read his best-known books, but I hadn't put his research under scrutiny. Like so many I thought it was a fascinating and much needed alternative to the dominant conventional narrative.

In October 2020 I happened to be in Gozo for a few weeks and I received an email from Graham asking me for a pdf of my book, which I immediately sent him. The same day he emailed me again inviting me to be interviewed for a film about Malta. He and the film crew would be arriving in Malta in four days' time. I consented wholeheartedly, and after the company had arrived a meeting was held at their hotel near Valletta. Present were Hancock, his wife Santha, and the director and producer of the film company.

The get-together was most cordial. We talked about my work and they informed me in general terms about their plans to film ancient sites all around the world, with Malta being the start of the project. About a week later the recording session with me was held at the Mnajdra site, lasting nearly an hour. Graham interviewed me, quite comprehensively, about the whole subject matter of the astronomical part of my book and its repercussions for the dating of the temples. We were both pleased with the way the interview had gone.

Two years later, as scheduled, the film was released. Because no one had thought it necessary to inform me I only learned about it a week later from a friend. The sole communication I had had from Hancock had been a telephone call six months previously. He had rung to ask me a question – a question which really took me by surprise.

It was – Did I consider it possible that the Maltese temples could have been built a full precession cycle earlier? Since this would have placed them somewhere between 40,000 and 14,000 years BC, my answer was a clear and resolute 'No'. My book is from start

to finish based on solid research and mathematically verifiable evidence for Mesolithic and Neolithic dates for the temples – dates which had been put forward a century earlier by a committed and brave Italian archaeologist who stood outside the circle of those who insisted that there were no human inhabitants in Malta before 5,400 BC, and who vilified him posthumously for his temerity in deviating from their views. Things have not changed greatly to this day, and Hancock in his book aptly describes them as a ‘self-protecting old boys’ network closing ranks’.

But he had read my work, which corroborates the Italian’s dates. So it was therefore a little bizarre that he should even think of the Palaeolithic – the Ice Age – seemingly just playing around with precession cycles. This was not just far off the mark; it would amount to riding roughshod over the core of my work. Hancock knew this and he accepted my assurances equably enough.

Now the reason I bring this up is that at the time I didn’t understand why such a strange question should have arisen at all. I do now. The film itself reveals it.

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Here is the story as it unfolds in Hancock’s words. I will mainly summarise it. In particular in this Malta episode it is clear that every scene, every word, has been carefully weighed, therefore I will add verbatim quotes where appropriate.

Right at the start we are into the middle of things. The timeline of Malta’s temple period is shown as it is represented by conventional archaeology. And straightaway the camera focuses on Ġgantija, the largest megalithic temple on the islands, and according to this official narrative the first to be built. Hancock, his voice full of wonderment and disbelief, says: “They woke up one morning and started building *this*.” An aerial view, followed by a ground level close-up of Ġgantija is shown. Walking into the temple and looking up at its high, towering walls, he adds: “Hundreds of megaliths, some weighing up to 50 tons”. And: “There are no written sources telling us when Ġgantija was built and no reliable carbon

dates. So how old is this giant temple really? And does it provide evidence for a lost civilisation that flourished long before any kind of civilisation is supposed to have begun?"

The observation that there are no written sources is perfectly correct. These temples are prehistoric; no written text about them exists. So the question that follows, "How old is this temple?", is legitimate. But why this exclusive focus on Ġgantija? Doesn't the same apply to all the temples? Could Ġgantija have been chosen to concentrate on because it is the most impressive, while the remains of the others are far more modest in scale? Could it be that he wants us to visualise only a massive ancient temple to be far older than the official date assigned to it? And doesn't his rhetorical question: "... does it provide evidence for a lost civilisation ...?" effectively put the desired, affirmative answer into our heads while at the same time suggesting that it belongs to a 'lost' civilisation? So right at the start, without any proof being presented, we have through suggestive, carefully chosen words, been led to believe that Ġgantija is not only much older than archaeologists say it is, but that it 'provides evidence' for a lost civilisation.

Lost? Why? And what does Hancock mean by 'provides evidence'? Are we supposed to think just that Ġgantija strongly reminds us of it, or rather, that Ġgantija itself is actually a remnant of this 'lost' civilisation?

Archaeologists, his story continues, claim that it was built around 5,600 years ago because artefacts were found close to it that resemble objects found in other 'much simpler' sites of that date. He goes on to observe that Ġgantija may have been built earlier, while the objects were left by a people who came much later. This is a valid observation, but would it not hold for the other temples too? And why haven't we seen any of these in the film so far? He will inform us about these later, after his main point about Ġgantija has been hammered home and the impression has been solidly fixed in our minds that in Malta we find evidence for a lost civilisation.

We will be told later that there are 'nineteen' of these structures in Malta, though in reality more than sixty have been recorded, nearly half of which are to some degree still extant. And while he is not explicit at this point in the film about whether the others were built before or after Ġgantija, he seems to be inclined to agree with 'the archaeologists' that Ġgantija was the oldest. Only two of the other temples will eventually be shown, but at this

stage none of them seems to be relevant to the story except for making a cursory reference to their existence. It will soon be clear why.

Ġgantija is the most impressive megalithic structure of all in Malta. The remnants of the others, although many have their own charm, are less imposing. Of some of them no more than a few stones are left. Hancock doesn't show these. Instead, the camera remains focused on Ġgantija, with a drone hovering above it for long aerial footage, while from the ground extensive close-ups of the whole complex, inside and out, are shown. Even a fanciful reconstruction, a roofless model purposely made for the film, is repeatedly shown, with thunder and lightning added for additional effect. Clearly, Ġgantija alone is Hancock's flagship. Why?

It doesn't take long before he lets the cat out of the bag. "Think about it," he says, "Could these *farmers*, who archaeologists tell us never built anything bigger than a sheep shack, really have achieved all this?" And he continues: "When you look at a structure like Ġgantija, you would expect to see evidence for the build-up skills necessary to create that structure. That culture doesn't just know how to move 20 or 30-ton megaliths without learning how to do it. I see no evidence for the development of those techniques."

It is a strange remark, talking about time to get the 'build-up skills', in the light of the outcome of my work, which features later in the film, which shows that all the other temples were built before Ġgantija over a period of several thousand years. And only thereafter is reference made to the other temples, while the impression is created that they were all like Ġgantija. He goes on: "And here's the thing, Ġgantija isn't Malta's only megalithic temple. archaeologists have uncovered nineteen such structures with the oldest, so we are told, being Ġgantija itself. For such tiny islands that's a lot of temples, requiring a lot of manpower, too much. Which forces me to question: Who really built Ġgantija? And when?" "Does it make sense," he continues, "that people with a very simple material culture could have been responsible for creating the largest, most magnificent, most complex structure on Malta?" When framed in this way, just about everybody who watched this film will have agreed, in awe. And the stage was set for Malta to become a showcase of one of the most fanciful stories of our past ever devised. More of this later. But let us summarise what has been suggested so far:

1. Ġgantija is *far* older than the date given to it by archaeologists.
2. Prehistoric farmers could not have built such a temple.
3. Only a different, much older and more advanced civilisation could have done that.
4. Ġgantija is the evidence of this.

Hardly six minutes of the film have passed, and through selective footage and artful language viewers have been seduced into thinking that this is not only exciting, but convincing. All the rest of this thirty-minute episode can now be comfortably used to put some flesh on this bare framework. For this Hancock holds some good material in reserve. To make it fit the story, all he needs to do is take from it what he can use and leave out the rest. Three persons and their work were chosen for this procedure: archaeologist and senior curator of prehistoric sites Dr Katya Stroud; researcher and medical doctor, Dr Anton Mifsud; and myself. Dr Stroud's dissatisfaction with this procedure was made public in a review of the episode in the *Times of Malta* immediately after the film's appearance. She said that she had been quoted out of context. But I needed more time to digest all its implications.

Back to the film, Hancock proceeds to illustrate his point by making use of a popular tradition, the source and antiquity of which are unclear. Malta's 'ancient lore', we learn, 'has a story to tell about who was responsible for building the Ġgantija temple.' It must have come as a surprise to everyone, myself included, who trusted in the absolute solidity of Graham Hancock's work, that he now produces a section of film which presents us with an amalgam of fact, legend and myth without the slightest attempt to make a distinction between them. This supposed 'ancient lore' that he has come across is a piece of popular Gozitan folklore. It tells how a giantess by the name of Sansuna built the Ġgantija temples, and Hancock summarises one of its versions. But does this story have the very ancient roots that he purports it has and which he so badly needs in order to insinuate the existence of a global advanced ancient civilisation? After having made it clear that he doesn't believe that giants literally roamed the earth, he claims that these stories are memories of a society that had 'great skills'. And he links this to what he describes as an 'eerily similar' story in Mexico, which, according to him connects to 'a great flood in prehistory'. We simultaneously hear ominous thunderstorm sounds and we see cartoon pictures of water washing over land and

people. And he concludes: “Could legends of giant builders encode memories of some other, more advanced and more ancient culture?”

After we have come back down to earth and done a bit of research, we come up with some sobering facts. To start with, the Maltese who live in the islands today are *not the descendants* of the Stone Age temple builders. Far from it. According to Malta’s highly respected historian, the late professor Godfrey Wettinger, the Maltese islands were entirely *desolate and uninhabited* after AD 870. It was only resettled more than a century later by a community of Arabs from Sicily. The Maltese language has indeed Arabic roots. No lore, no legend nor any other story told by the present Maltese relating to features in these islands can by definition be older than that Medieval repopulation event.¹

The name Sansuna is Maltese and is the female form of Samson. The Maltese settlers of the Middle Ages who *stumbled upon* these ancient megalithic ruins associated them with the oldest human race they could think of, the giants mentioned in the Bible. This ‘ancient lore’ as Hancock dubbed it, can have no older than a medieval provenance. And there goes the whole basis of a link to his ‘ancient, high civilisation’ and the claimed folk memory of it.

The next scene takes us to the southeast of Malta and into the cave of Għar Dalam, which is famous for its palaeolithic animal remains, dating to a time during the Ice Age when Malta was connected to Sicily by a land bridge. The finds include three ancient human, much disputed teeth, that won’t go away, owing to Anton Mifsud’s excellent and courageous work. It is delightful to see Mifsud being interviewed at this location. His work has been crucial in bringing back to the forefront this evidence for Neanderthal human habitation in Malta during the Ice Age.

Mifsud had gone to great pains to prove that these very ancient humans lived in Malta. This was his focus. No more no less. Watching this part of the film, it is sad to see

¹ a) Malta uninhabited after 870 AD: Article by Prof. G. Wettinger, see

<https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/malta-in-the-high-middle-ages/>

b) Appraisal of Wettinger’s work in *MaltaToday*:

https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/53245/historian_godfrey_wettinger_dead_at_85

c) Wettinger vindicated:

https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/comment/blogs/54769/wettinger_has_been_vindicated_but_why_do_historians_still_disagree

how this brave man's work was made to serve as proof for something quite different. He had never made any suggestion connecting this evidence of ancient human presence with the existence of a 'civilisation' of that period. But Hancock did, using Mifsud's work to suit his own narrative. It is interesting to see how this is done. Here is a fragment of dialogue in the cave between the two:

Mifsud: "This is evidence of human activity during the Ice Age."

Hancock: "What does it do to the story of Malta?"

Mifsud: "It pushes back these dates, way back, far, far back. Another chapter has to be introduced."

We now see pictures of teeth from Għar Dalam, immediately followed by footage of Ġgantija. While these are shown, Hancock's voice is heard saying: "It proves that the land bridge was used by ancient humans. And it is possible that another Ice Age culture could have left their mark here, too. In my view the evidence for a far older civilisation here in Malta is compelling."

To recapitulate in brief what has happened to this point: In order to use the teeth as evidence for an *Ice Age civilisation* Hancock needed to show the Ġgantija temple, and he had elevated the temple to that same status by using a legend. Clearly aware that this is a bit flimsy, he adds: " ... it doesn't just hinge on a couple of teeth." And we are off to the cart ruts.

The next scenes show beautiful aerial and close-up views of the largest area of Malta's ancient cart ruts near the Dingli Cliffs. How old these are has remained a matter of guesswork to this day. Without more ado Hancock links them to the temple period. Although I don't think that this is impossible, the claim needs substantiation, because it deviates from the mainstream view. They could very well have been tracks that were made in the soil by devices used to draw stones to the temple sites. I won't get into a discussion about it. Some ruts certainly do pass or end near several of the temples. But if we want to draw a conclusion about their antiquity from their association with the temples, we need to know the age of the temples. Hancock turns this around. By trying to show evidence for an Ice Age date for the ruts, following this association he would have proved that same date for the temples. For this to work, we need to be absolutely sure that the ruts and the temples are associated, which we are not. And secondly,

Hancock's method of dating the ruts to that very ancient period must be sound, which it is not. He proceeds as follows.

The film takes us to the water's edge near Birżebbuġa, where a short pair of ruts run into the sea. This is presented to us as evidence for a great antiquity of these ruts. And certainly they were imprinted in the rocks in this location when sea levels were several metres lower. But for any man-made feature under water to be *incontrovertible proof* of having been made during the Ice Age, which is more than 12,000 years ago, sea levels must have been minimally 40 metres lower than they are now. So while Hancock is right in pointing out that there is a canal and also a pair of ruts under water off the north coast of Malta, they are not nearly at a sufficient depth to constitute proof of an Ice Age date.²

With this, his last attempt to show evidence of a lost Ice Age civilisation in Malta falls through. Yet the vast majority of the viewers will have been swept along by his words and pictures and have accepted his vision.

With an Ice Age date for this civilisation now nicely sorted, the stage is set for the next step. Hancock's civilisation needs to be 'complex' and 'intelligent'. And this is where my work comes in. His introduction goes like this: "The reason I believe that a deeper, ancient intelligence lies behind these temples on Malta is that they are far more complex than they at first appear." The astronomical aspect of the temples will now be used to underscore this 'deeper intelligence', and the camera drone flies high above the Mnajdra temples on the south coast of Malta.

Thus we have come to the climax of the Malta episode: the connection between the temples and the sky. The focus is first on Mnajdra South and its orientation to the

² The underwater cave, cart-ruts and canal off the north-west coast of Malta described in *Underworld* (pp. 439-443) are between 8 and 18 meters deep; not deep enough to serve as incontrovertible proof of an Ice Age date for these. And Hancock's remark (*Underworld* pp 444-445) about the situation off the coast on the other side of the island: "The particular implication of [the stealthy submergence of the north-east Maltese coast] is that sites in the north-east shown on the inundation maps to have been submerged by 10,600 years ago may not in fact have been submerged until much later, when Malta's tilt forced them under" is a speculation about a site the existence of which no one, including himself, has ever been able to prove.

equinoxes, before my work on the alignment of the other temples to Sirius is introduced. Mnajdra South was built to point to the equinoxes and it also keeps track of the solstices. The light effects inside the temple are described in lyrical words. And then, the temple's orientation towards the sun is used to put it on the global stage. As was done with Ġgantija in the Sansuna scene, Mnajdra too is linked to Cholula in Mexico, and Stonehenge is now added, three places wide apart both in time and in geographical location. Cholula was still fresh in the viewers' memory from the previous episode, while Stonehenge was famous enough to ring a bell in everybody's mind. They were evidently chosen to include megalithic places orientated towards the sun in both hemispheres of the globe so as to keep the idea of an ancient *global* civilisation alive in the viewer's mind.

Then my work is introduced. Its central theme, the precession of Sirius, is presented with clarity and is well illustrated. If this is so, what then could be wrong; so wrong that it required me to write this critique?

I take issue with the way my work has been made use of and was fitted into Hancock's narrative. In my book *Sirius, the Star of the Maltese Temples*, which formed the basis for this segment, I show that the axes of all the temples of which the azimuth had been measured are distributed on the compass rose in two distinct patterns. And that a statistical analysis showed that there must have been a single factor that was the cause of this. I also show that this factor was the precession of one star, Sirius, which had been observed over thousands of years. All of this was correctly presented in the film. So far so good.

But several important observations result from this discovery.

1. The temple building period in Malta according to the precession dates lasted from around 9,200 BC (11,200 years ago) until around 4,250 BC (6,250 years ago). Therefore, the start of this period, in the astronomical reckoning presented by me, goes much further back in time than the conventional dates put forward by archaeology. But these are definitely all dates *after* the Ice Age.

2. Ġgantija South, the largest temple, far from being the first, was the very *last* to be built. It was constructed only after the temple builders had gained thousands of years of experience. Moreover, Ġgantija's astronomical dating according to its Sirius orientation falls very close to the date asserted by archaeology. No Ice Age antiquity is claimed by any of us. On the contrary, in my book the largest Ġgantija temple is Neolithic and the *youngest* of them all.
3. The building sequence resulting from the astronomy of the temples shows that Ħaġar Qim North, the smallest, was the first to be built, and it culminated in Ġgantija South. Over a period of five thousand years the temples grew slowly and progressively in size as any successful and lasting, perfectly normal human undertaking would. Another example of this evolution of normal human skills is presented by the temples of ancient Egypt, which were likewise built over a timespan of millennia. The same goes for the early medieval churches of Europe that evolved into cathedrals, as well as, not to forget, the early cave churches in Malta that evolved into the imposing Mosta dome. No demi-gods, magicians or civilising heroes were needed for any of these. However unique the Maltese temples are, their building sequence following their orientation to Sirius shows that they are natural human accomplishments.

Hancock knew this, because he had read my book. In this segment of the film (at 25 – 26 min.) he indeed mentions the name of the oldest, Ħaġar Qim North, including its date of 11,000 years ago, and he inserts a short snippet in which he lets me talk about this sequence. I said: "They started very small and after millennia they ended up with the largest of all the temples, you could say the cathedral, which is Ġgantija." With this outcome there is no need for super intelligent master builders, magicians or itinerant hero's from abroad. The Stone Age people themselves did it. The core of my work runs counter to Hancock's argument, not just in respect of this episode but of the whole of the *Ancient Apocalypse*. So how did he get around this dichotomy?

By diverting the viewers' attention and making them forget what just has been said. He covered it up. It goes like this: "But if Lenie is right, it means that Malta's megalithic project began thousands of years before those farmers from Sicily arrived on the islands and must have been the work of a culture with a vast knowledge of astronomy and advanced architectural skills." See how this is done?

But why did Hancock take a risk by including my work, if the non-Ice Age dates and the natural, humanly logical building sequence contradicted and potentially put into jeopardy a central point of the episode, of his whole project even? It seems reasonable to think that it must have been the attractiveness of including the star Sirius.

As will become clear, Sirius must have been a godsend, because it provided him with a link to Egypt. In ancient Egypt the star Sirius was famously represented by Isis, the great goddess since archaic times. Although the Egypt connection was clearly his aim, it is a bit strange that Hancock didn't make the link to Egypt via Sirius and the goddess Isis, which would have been obvious and straightforward. Instead, he departs on a laborious detour, apparently trying to deflect the focus from her towards her Egyptian male companion Osiris. The only problem is that in Malta's prehistory there is no male figure anywhere to be seen. From the way this episode ends we may deduce that this must have been an issue that, in Hancock's mind, needed a remedy. And a sort of postlude was added, in which he went to great lengths to conjure up that male element, like a *deus ex machina*, from a context in modern-day Malta.

This is how it goes:

The last scene of the Malta episode of *Ancient Apocalypse* takes us to Marsaxlokk, Malta's most advertised fishing village. Its colourfully painted fishing boats are its main attraction, and with its long promenade thronged with souvenir stalls it is on every tourist's list. But this is not the only reason why it is somewhat of an anti-climax that this location was chosen for the finale. We are served with yet another story, a myth.

Hancock went to Marsaxlokk because he was interested in the eyes painted on the prow of the boats. It is, he informs us, the 'eye of Horus'. But even a cursory search for pictures of the boats of Marsaxlokk on the internet reveals that they resemble an eye of a more natural appearance. They lack the distinctive markings underneath of the *wedjat* or *udjat*, as they were called in Egypt, and they altogether lack its symbolic characteristics. Moreover, the Eye of Horus refers to the left eye only, while the fishing boats in Marsaxlokk carry an eye on both sides of their prow.

If several decades ago, when I worked in tourism in Malta, one asked a local the meaning of these eyes, the answer would be: “They ward off evil from the sea.” Those were the days before mass tourism hit the shores of Malta, when the Maltese were still content with linking their traditions to a Phoenician past. Painting eyes on ships was an old Phoenician custom, which was also adopted by the ancient Greeks. Their famous warships, the triremes, were adorned with eyes, indeed to ward off evil spirits.

The name of the eyes on the boats in Marsaxlokk has in recent times received a facelift. Its cultural significance has been upgraded in accordance with current tourist tastes, and even the internet will tell you now that they are the ‘eyes of Osiris’ or, sporadically, ‘Horus’. Although this must have attracted Hancock, he obviously had to deal with the problem that no such thing as an eye of Osiris existed in ancient Egypt.

But he only needed to change it from Osiris to Horus to make it sound more historically authentic. Through the Egyptian myth of Horus, in his capacity of being the son of Isis *and* Osiris, the male partner was finally brought on the scene in Malta too.

But why was this construct needed? To tell us another myth, it appears. And this is, in Hancock’s own words, illustrated by cartoon-style drawings, how it goes: “In ancient times the wise god Osiris descended to Egypt to rule alongside his sister Isis. And the people were uncivilised and lawless. So Osiris brought them culture, established the rule of law, and taught them agriculture. Then he left Isis to rule Egypt while he travelled the earth, teaching people of other nations the same skills.”

It is never explicitly stated, but are we really to believe that an Osiris came to Malta in prehistory to teach the people how to build their temples? That they could not possibly have done this themselves? Everything in this episode is only hinted at, and made to linger in our minds by continuous repetition of suggestive words and pictures. But the effect is crystal clear.

I leave it to the reader to ponder what the moral of all this is.

Qala and Eibergen, October 2025