

## Archaeoacoustic Analysis of Xaghra Hypogeum, Gozo, Malta

Paolo Debertolis<sup>1</sup>, Nina Earl<sup>2</sup> & Natalia Tarabella<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

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Archaeoacoustics offers a new way to interpret anthropological questions pertaining to ancient architecture and populations. Studies conducted at a number of ancient sites throughout Europe and Asia, have found the presence of natural phenomena capable of influencing the human brain. Earlier studies show that ancient populations most likely through use of empirical methods chose the location of their ceremonial sites for this reason. In Xaghra Hypogeum a stone circle located on the island of Gozo, Malta, infrasounds and audible low frequencies capable of affecting the brain were discovered. The caves and surrounding stones act like a musical box amplifying the natural sounds present and it is possible the natural caves could have been modified to enhance this aspect. Similar natural characteristics were also discovered at other archaeological sites in Europe and Asia, including Epidauros in Greece and Göbekli Tepe in Turkey. This is the third and final article on results of our researches in Malta e Gozo islands (Mediterranean Sea) from archaeoacoustic point of view.

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**Keywords:** Archaeoacoustics, low vibrations, Gozo, Malta, Epidauros, Göbekli Tepe.

### Introduction

Starting from the premise that past ages were not devoid of noise or spent in silence, the human voice amplified through singing or chanting along with sounds produced by musical instruments, remained the highest expression of culture for a long period during the Neolithic Age. Several civilizations made use of natural sound phenomena to create impressive rites, with some ancient structures modeled in such a way as to direct sonic vibrations capable of influencing the mind towards a particular state of consciousness (Debertolis, Tirelli & Monti, 2014; Debortolis, Coimbra & Eneix, 2015; Debortolis & Gullà 2015). Archaeo-acoustics, a complementary discipline of archeology and anthropology, is an emerging scientific field which investigates such sound characteristics. This method helps to inform our understanding of the specific properties archaeological sites have and why certain sites were considered sacred.

Using modern digital recording techniques, it is possible to record inaudible sound frequency bands such as ultrasound or infrasound. In previous investigations Super Brain Research Group demonstrated the existence of a relationship between frequencies present at some Neolithic temples and associated brain activity (Debertolis et al. 2012 - 2016). This area of research began in the nineties most notably with the work of Jahn, Devereux & Ibison (1996). Frequencies reproduced under laboratory conditions confirmed their influence on the brain, in some cases directly effecting the human body without the subject being aware of the associated mechanical vibrations (Cook, Pajot & Leuchter, 2008; Jahn, Devereux & Ibison, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Medical Sciences, University of Trieste, Aggregate Professor of Dental Archaeology, president of Super Brain Research Group (SBRG), a research organization on Archaeoacoustics and Archaeoastronomy, Italy.

<sup>2</sup>Super Brain Research Group (SBRG), London, UK.

<sup>3</sup>Super Brain Research Group (SBRG), Florence, Italy.

Since 2010 SB Research Group has studied sites in Europe and Asia (England, Italy, Portugal, Malta, Turkey and Greece, Bosnia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Slovakia) publishing our conclusions.<sup>4</sup> After analysis of approximately thirty ancient sites SBRG's working hypothesis that some archaeological sites feature measurable natural audio phenomena that enhance their mystical properties has been validated. Recordings taken at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, Tarxien Temples in Malta, Alatri Acropolis in Italy, Felix Romuliana Palace in Serbia and Epidauros in Greece show all these sites are located over natural sources capable of influencing the brain such as low frequencies or magnetic fields.

Any severe and artificial extreme sound imposed on the sonic environment has a profoundly destabilizing effect on the individual, indeed infrasound has been used in the context of wars in the area of acoustic weapons (Debertolis & Bisconti, 2013) and 18Hz for example, can be used to keep subjects awake for the purposes of torture. In contrast however, natural low frequencies with their absence of high pressure can have a positive health influence. Such frequencies have an influence on brain cells without passing through the acoustic organ, which means they can also have an influence on people with hearing loss. Indeed, some people perceive very low-frequency sounds as a sensation rather than a sound (Debertolis & Bisconti, 2013). Infrasounds may also induce states of awe or fear and given they are not consciously perceived, it may make give rise to feeling that a strange or supernatural event is being experienced (Tandy & Lawrence, 1998). In light of this, is possible to hypothesize that ancient populations considered places where a lot of natural low vibrations are present, to be "sacred" (Debertolis & Bisconti, 2013) and used to enhance ancient rites and rituals (Debertolis et al., 2012 – 2016). Archaeoacoustical analysis provides a method to demonstrate knowledge of acoustic phenomena in the past, a technique undertaken at the compound of Ggantija, Malta (Debertolis, Coimbra & Eneix, 2015; Debertolis, Earl & Zivić, 2016). This formed part of a wider study at some of Malta's Neolithic temples, where good results were also obtained at the Xaghra Stone Circle on Gozo.

### **Xaghra Stone Circle and the site of Ggantija**

Together with Hal-Saflieni Hypogeum, Xaghra Hypogeum is regarded as one of the most important archaeological hypogea in Malta (Tagliaferro, 2007). It is an underground structure adapted from a natural coralline limestone cave surrounded by stone blocks arranged in a circle. The site managed by Heritage Malta, was partially excavated between 1987 to 1994, with the remains listed on the National Inventory of the Cultural Property of the Maltese Islands. Due to the fragility of its megaliths which are liable to collapse, only a small portion of the site was excavated. Much remains unstudied and currently lies buried under sandbags and soil to protect it.

A few decades ago, archaeologists believed Malta and Gozo began to be inhabited during the Bronze Age around 2,300 B.C. Radiocarbon dating however has pushed this to circa 5,000 BC, with the construction of the Maltese temples at around 3,600 BC, making the temples one of the oldest structures on Earth) after the ancient complex of Göbekli Tepe (ca. 9500 BC, Şanlıurfa – Turkey). From pottery and stone decorations, archaeologists were able to establish the site had several phases, of relevance to this research are the Ggantija Phase, 3600-3000 BC and the Tarxien Phase, 3000-2400 BC (Serio, Hoskin & Ventura, 1992). The Xaghra Hypogeum located only a short distance from the more widely known South-East facing Ggantija Temple complex belongs to these periods.

The Ggantija Temple was the first Maltese structure of both structures to be cleared from debris during excavations led by Col. John Otto Bayer in 1827. Unfortunately, after his excavations, the soil and remains were abandoned and the site of Xaghra Hypogeum was filled in, until the government acquired the site in the 1930s. The complex of Xaghra Hypogeum (once known as The Brochtorff Circle, from the name of the artist that initially depicted it in 1788) was rediscovered in the 1960s and brought to light between 1987 and 1994 by a joint team from the University of Malta, the Maltese Museums Department and the University of Cambridge. These last excavations revealed a funerary complex consisting a maze of underground caves and spaces for burial and ritual, some of which dated to the Zebbug Phase (between 4100 and 3800 BC) (Tagliaferro, 2007). During the excavation, archaeologists discovered about 220,000 human bones belonging to between 450 and 800 individuals. Furthermore, these dead bodies were brought to the site and ritually dismembered. But what is impressive is that these dismembered body parts were then carved up and collected in separate sites on the basis of the different anatomical characteristics (skulls, femurs, etc.) (Grima, 2010).

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4 Note. Super Brain Research Group (SBRG) is an international and interdisciplinary non-profit organization of researchers from Italy, Finland, U.K., Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia, researching on archaeoacoustic and anthropological properties of ancient sites and temples throughout Europe and Asia ([www.sbresearchgoup.eu](http://www.sbresearchgoup.eu)).

In addition, the excavation revealed different archaeological finds that included two important examples of Malta's fine art: a group of nine limestone figurines called "shaman' sticks" and a couple of twin figurines depicting the Mother Goddess sitting down, one holding a baby, the other a container (Tagliaferro, 2007). The entrance to Xaghra Hypogeum is indicated by several megalithic blocks, with the entire site surrounded by a boundary wall made from stone blocks (ca. 120 meters circumference). Into the underground space there was a central hall enclosed by an altar and divided internally by large stone slabs. These caves were prone to collapse, and the structure became so weak that megaliths were used in an attempt to stabilize the roof. The structure finally collapsed at some point before 2000 BC. During the Bronze Age, the site was probably used for non-funerary domestic purposes, and the land was exploited for agricultural use until the 20th century (Grima, 2010).

### Materials and Methods

Equipment for the sound recordings consisted of two types of dynamic high-end microphones extended in the ultrasound field, with a digital portable recorder (Tascam DR-680 of TEAC Group, whose maximum sampling rate was 192KHz), results were controlled with other digital recorders (Tascam DR-100 and Marantz PMD661) with less technical characteristics. Professional studio microphones with a wide dynamic range and a flat response at different frequencies (Sennheiser MKH 8020, response Frequency 10Hz - 60.000Hz) with shielded cables (Mogami Gold Edition XLR) and gold-plated connectors (Fig. 3) were also used.

**Fig. 1: Sound recording equipment & set-up at Tarxien Temple, Malta**



Before recording a spectrum analyzer (Spectran NF-3010 (Fig. 2) from the German factory Aaronia AG) was used to search for any electromagnetic phenomena which could have an influence on the results. Additionally, a computer analysis was carried out using a sensor connected to the recorder (Demiurg Laboratories, Zagreb).

**Fig. 2: Spectran NF-3010 from the German factory Aaronia AG.**



This method was used to identify noise interference at all archaeological sites. If any interference is found however, recordings need to be cleaned in the audio studio.

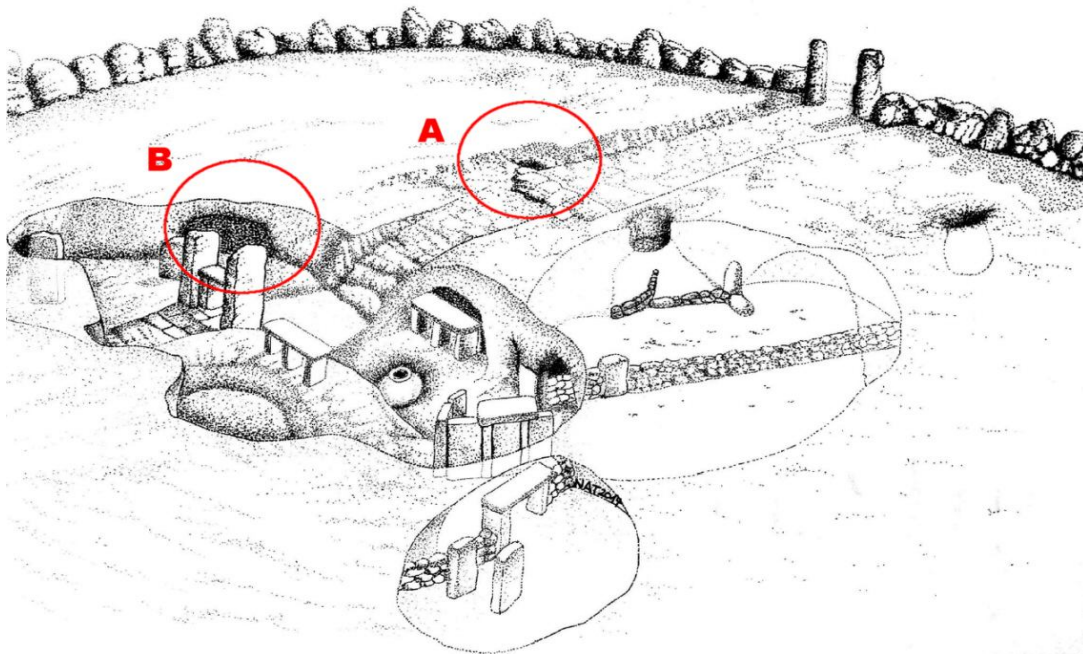
**Fig. 3: Demiurg Laboratories (Zagreb) 300ohm Sensor, which transforms electromagnetic impulses into electrical impulses via the digital recorder.**



Praat program version 4.2.1 from the University of Toronto and Audacity open-source program version 2.1.2 for Windows and Linux were used to analyse the audio recordings.

Archaeoacoustic measurements at Xaghra Hypogeum were carried out at two locations: 1) a deep well on the side of the walkway leading to a stone staircase that leads to the central hall of the hypogeum; 2) a collapsed cave that overlooks the main hall of the Hypogeum (**A** and **B** respectively in figure 4). The microphones were lowered from the surface in a spot sheltered from the wind and suspended above the wells (suspending in this way avoids ground friction which can generate spurious noises affecting the recordings). Several recordings were made with a long pause in between. Once the microphones were in position, prerecording tests were conducted by clapping to determine if the microphones were affected by any environmental noise (Fig. 8).

**Fig. 4: Graphical reconstruction of Xaghra Hypogeum showing the locations where the microphones were placed (A & B).**





Similar recordings were carried out at Ggantija Temple at a number of locations. Instruments such as bells and drum were also used in an attempt to stimulate the resonance from the structure.

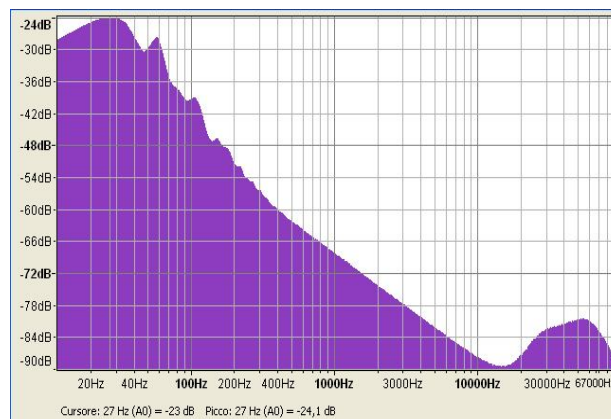
**Fig. 5: Placement of microphones above the well by the walkway leading to the hypogeum (position A, Figure 4).**

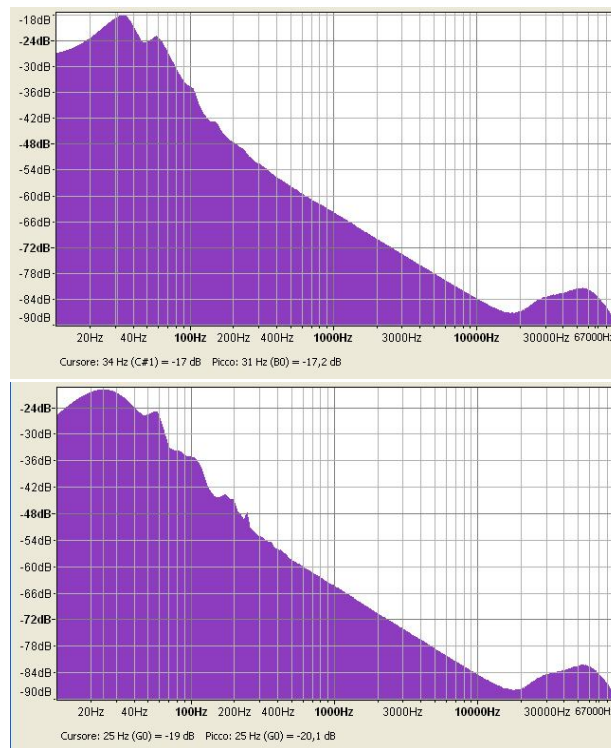


## Results

After thorough testing at Ggantija the only frequencies found were in the form of noise pollution from a nearby access road, it was devoid of underground frequencies. At nearby Xaghra Hypogeum however, extremely powerful natural frequencies were found. These are comparable to what was found at Tarxien temples, but with a slightly longer high frequency range with a small amount of oscillation. They have a broad peak of between 25Hz and 34Hz with a volume between -17db and -23db (audible). The frequency peak at Xaghra Hypogeum falls within the infrasound frequency range extending into the audible band at 40Hz. Such frequencies are perceptible to an attentive ear, or for those more sensitive they can be felt by the vibratory sensors of the body (Meissner mechano-receptors). Previous research at other archaeological sites found such vibrations are perceived by people who are sensitive as unspecified energy from the ground, with a clear effect on the human body and in particular brain activity.

**Fig. 6: The extraordinary low frequency peak present in all recordings made at Xaghra Hypogeum.**





## Discussion

In both locations where the microphones were placed (about twenty meters apart), the same low vibrational frequency signature as an engine in motion was detected. There were no factories or man made activity capable of generating such a noise of this frequency in the neighbouring vicinity that we were aware of. The pre-recording tests conducted by clapping found the microphones were placed deep enough as to be scarcely affected by the external noise environment.

Underground streams were another unlikely source due to the scarcity of this natural element in the Archipelago of Malta. SBRG found similar low frequencies at Tarxien Temple, Malta and the temple of Cybele at the archaeological site of Felix Romuliana, Serbia (Debertolis & Zivić, 2015). One plausible theory as to their origin is due to the frictional movement between the African and Eurasian tectonic plates located close to the archipelago of Malta (Serpelloni et al., 2007) discussed in a previous paper on Malta temples (Debertolis, Earl & Zivić, 2016).

**Fig. 7: One of the caves at the hypogeum.**



If the hypogeum or stone circle was covered at any time, such a structure would have acted to intensify any natural frequencies present, in a similar way to how a sound box of a musical instrument works. Such vibrations

would have a definite effect on the emotional sphere of those involved in any religious rites or ceremonies thereby enhancing the natural space (Debertolis & Zivić, 2015).

**Fig. 8: Prerecording tests to determine if the microphones were affected by external environmental noise.**



**Fig. 9: The Sound Frequencies Detected Were Similar At Both Locations (Position A&B, Figure 4).**



**Fig. 10: Ggantija Temples.**



The research also aimed to establish if there was any resonance phenomena inside the apses by playing musical instruments. However the presence of metal scaffolding designed to support the huge stones meant this was not possible, as they would act as interference by the reflecting the sound waves.



**Fig. 11: The presence of scaffolding inhibited any attempt to verify the presence of a resonance phenomena stimulated by musical instruments (eg. drums or percussion bells).**

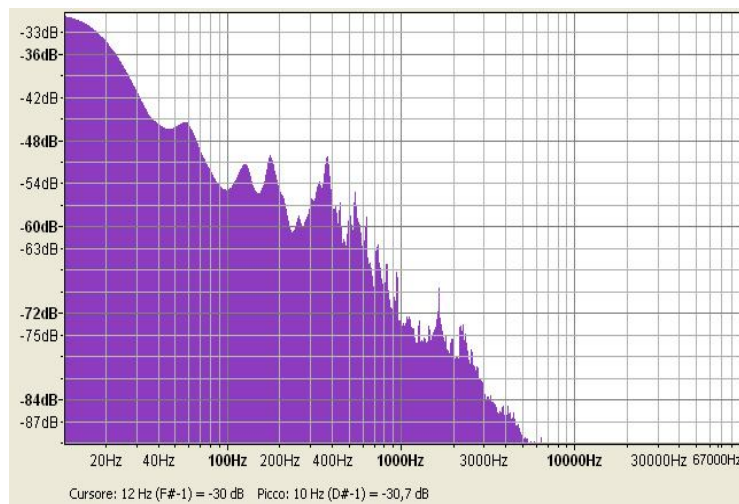


Equally the areas without props have undergone alterations over the millennia, so as to alter their original form of a domed roof making it virtually impossible to conduct an adequate assessment of its sound resonance.

**Fig. 12: Alterations or deterioration of the temples structures have meant that no resonance could be detected.**



**Fig. 13: Recording plot from Ggantija Temple, where unlike Xaghra Hypogeum, nothing unusual was detected. The peaks in the middle of the curve are simple ambient noise.**





A base line to serve as a reference for the recordings in these temples was established, from a nearby hill in front of Ggantija, where there are still prehistoric settlements. Microphones were lowered through the entrance of a prehistoric well dug into the rock that is now dry. The track recorded was devoid of any frequencies from underground, confirming the uniqueness the Xaghra Hypogeum recordings.

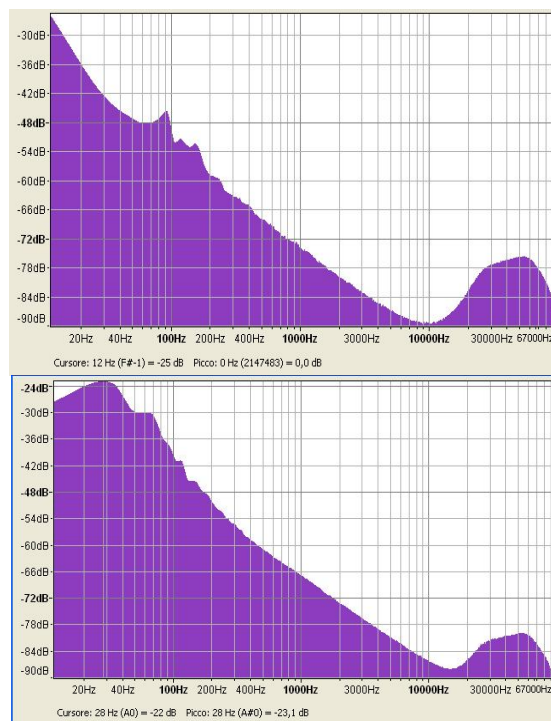
**Fig. 14: The hill facing Ggantija Temple, where the base line recording was taken.**



**Fig. 15: The dry well where the microphones were placed.**



**Fig. 16: Above: the recordings made in the well show nothing significant. Below: the sound curve from inside Xaghra Hypogeum showing a powerful vibration with a top peak of 28Hz.**



How did ancient megalithic civilizations become aware of the vibrations present in the area around Xaghra Hypogeum? Given that some of the frequencies present lie within the audible spectrum, it's plausible they could have been heard by placing an ear to the ground and therefore through the transmission of vibrations via bone conduction. It is plausible that these vibrations, close to the rhythm of brain wave frequency, created a sense of exaltation and mysticism in those present. When it was intact, it must have acted as a sound box for someone engaged in prayer or meditation.

So we can suppose that probably the people staying in this site felt themselves enveloped in the sounds of the womb of the Mother Goddess, considering the great number of votive statues of this goddess found in this site, and in touch with the depths of the planet.

**Fig. 17: Some of Mother Goddess' votive objects found during the excavations of Xaghra Hypogeum (Heritage Malta – Ggantija Museum).**



Results from Xaghra are similar to those found at other sites SBRG had the opportunity to examine, especially those featuring baths: Epidaurus in Greece and Göbekli Tepe in Turkey. At Epidaurus in Greece for example, the bathing area would be a place where ancients would cleanse in the natural waters for health and healing benefits. Epidaurus was the site of Asclepius, god of medicine and healing. Asclepius grew up to be a famous healer and soon became a renowned physician to the point to become able to resurrect the dead (I. Liritzis, E. Bousoulegka et al., 2017). Indeed, throughout the classical period, taking the waters was a popular treatment for many ailments. The Greeks who enjoyed bathing in natural water resources, considered bathing areas to be sacred places and which were usually dedicated to a number of deities (Jackson, 1990; A. van Tubergen, S. van der Linden, 2002).

Similarly in Lasko, North Slovenia, ancient Roman baths (Debertolis & Gullà, 2016) were sunk into the ground like at Epidaurus. We have to consider that inside the water the vibration have the best transmission to the human body. In the same way the vibration penetrate the body without passing through the acoustic organ. The area containing bath complex is generally identified as the "Akoai", mentioned by the ancient traveler Pausanias. The building is connected with the fountains on its southern side. The water comes from the springs of Mount Kynortion. The bath building occupies an area of approximately 650 mq2 and consists of four parallel wings.

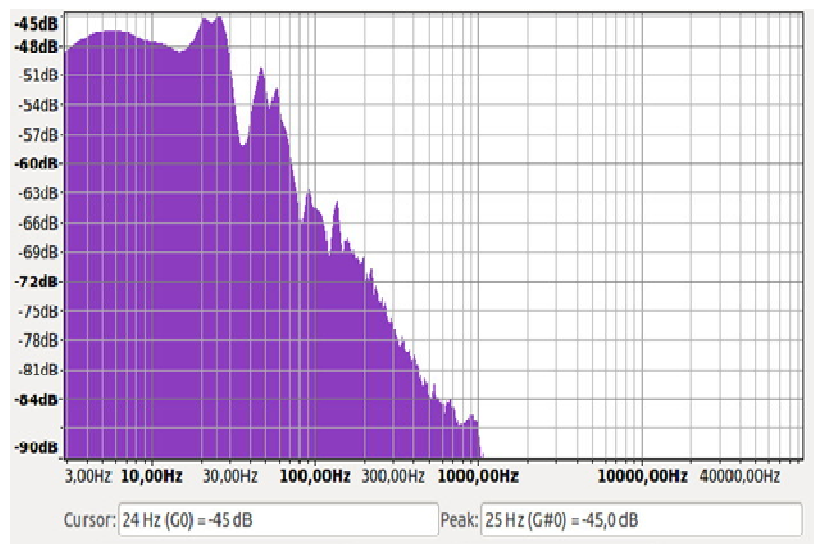


**Fig. 18: One of the baths in Epidauros where recordings were taken.**



Now the source of sacred water is nonexistent, but the baths are present like in the past. With the same equipment used in Malta we recorded an interesting peak of frequency around 23-25Hz at -45db similar to that in Gozo at Xaghra Circle, but certainly less powerful. Probably because we took the records in the air and not in an expired water source.

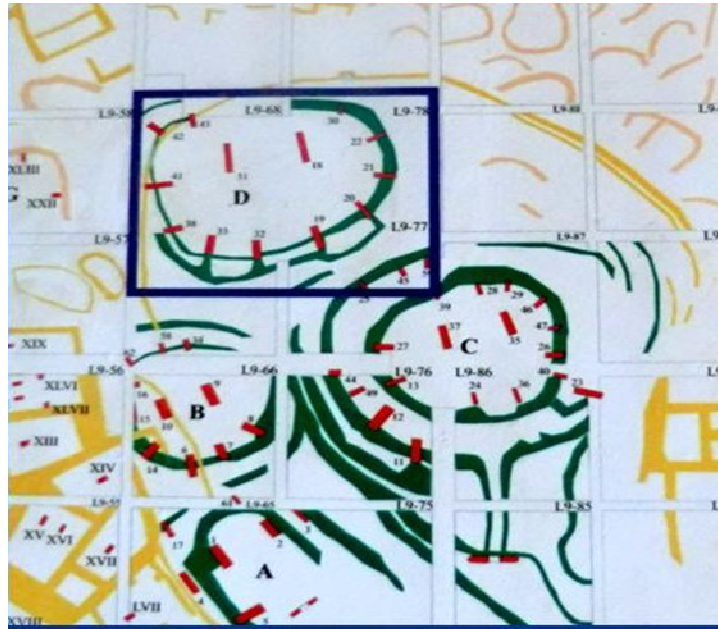
**Fig. 19: The plot of the records taken in the bath area in Epidauros.**



For what regards the famous ancient site of Göbekli Tepe in South East Anatolia, the most ancient recognized sacred site all over the world, we have to be very grateful to the discoverer of the site, Klaus Schmidt, with whom we had an agreement for this research. We had the possibility to record the sound in the Enclosure D near the pillar n.18 which was close to limestone floor.

We found a constant very low frequency at 20-22Hz (on the border of audible sound) of 42 to 46 db. Sometimes a peak of infrasound appeared around 14Hz swinging this constant frequency to 27Hz. We took 12 recordings in that site: eight in Enclosure D, two outside the site and two on the walkway. These vibrations were not present at other locations than the original site.

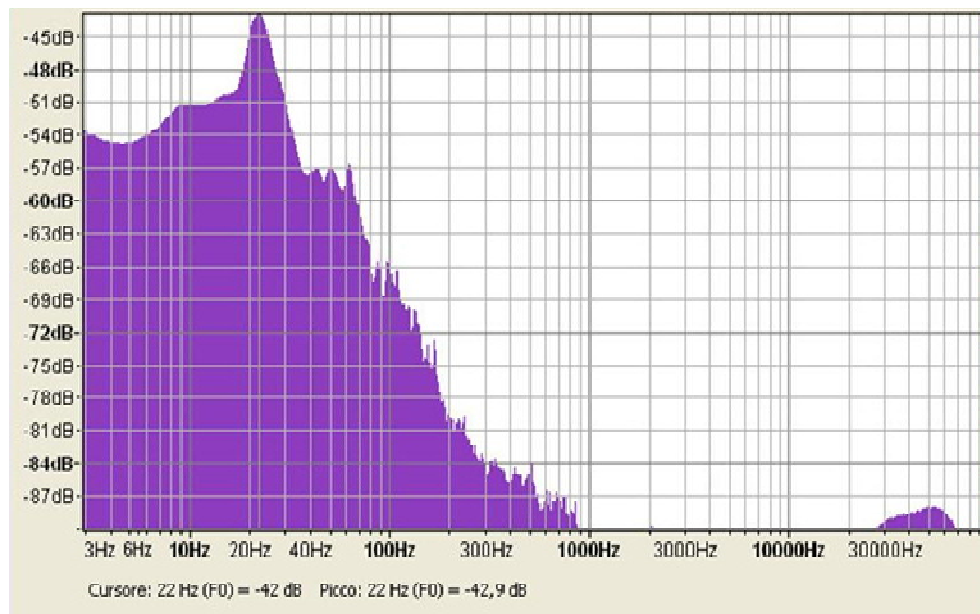
**Fig. 20: The Enclosure D of the more ancient area in Göbekli Tepe is highlighted by the blue line.**



**Fig. 21: We placed the microphones close to the limestone floor near the base of pillar n.18.**



**Fig. 22: The plot of the sound coming from underground in the enclosure D. There is an important peak at 22Hz at almost 43db of volume.**



## Conclusion

As we showed in our research the vibration we found at Xaghra Stone Circle are not strange when viewed within a panorama of other sacred sites across Europe and Asia. Two of the most famous ancient sites in the world have similar characteristics.

As we also wrote before, Archaeoacoustics provides a way to offer new interpretations on anthropological questions pertaining to ancient architecture and populations. After our investigation of the Ggantija compound we can confirm that the location where the site is based, has all the characteristics of an ancient sacred site of the remote past. The possibility to reach an altered state of mind by natural phenomena, existing in this location, acting on brain wave activity in particular conditions is very high. We can say that especially if the ancient people tried to reach it during rituals in underground cavities where vibrations had the maximum power. There are also various scientific papers which confirm the connection between brain activity and natural physical phenomena (Debertolis et al 2012 - 2016).

We can conclude the Xaghra Stone Circle was probably the most important nucleus of the ancient sacred location in Ggantija compound. The high number of vibrations perceived in an audible band suggest the idea that through these phenomena the ancient population was able to influence the perception of the human body to obtain different states of consciousness without the use of drugs or other chemical substances making their rituals very impressive. Our research demonstrates that archaeoacoustics with its effect on the human body, appears to be an interesting new method for reanalysing ancient sites in order to re-discover a forgotten method that effects the emotional sphere of human consciousness. Modern recording technology is now able to give greater clarity to the origin of many interesting phenomena, reaffirming the aura of legends that pervades some sacred places.

## Acknowledgment

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