

THE STUDY OF THE MALTESE PALEOCHRISTIAN CATACOMBS

MARIO BUHAGIAR

The first known account of the Maltese Paleochristian catacombs occurs in a Description of Malta written about 1610 by the Maltese galley surgeon Marc Antonio Axiac. Axiac did not suspect a Christian origin but he recognised them as burial places. His account is as follows:

There are in this island, besides the ruins of ancient buildings, very large grottoes and underground caverns with cells and various apartments of remarkable shape dug with skill and (containing) exits and entrances through which from one grotto you enter another; and you find some which in this way extend for half a mile and more. Some inquisitive persons have concluded that in ancient times people lived in them either because of earthquakes, which were frequent and big, or because the art of building had not yet been discovered. These have not considered that these grottoes are clearly burial-places and dug for no other purpose, even though they are so beautiful and embellished with many works, for one notices that in most of them there is the pit cut in the same rock where a human corpse might rest and other small holes made for infants, in which up to the present day bones and human skulls are to be seen. Moreover some of them (are) covered with stone-slabs and contain vases, plates and clay oil-lamps of various shapes according to the customs of the ancient. One is right in assuming that the inhabitants of those times believed firmly, as pagans, in the opinion of Pythagoras regarding the transmigration of the soul ... (1)

A much more detailed and valuable account of the Rabat and Marsa catacombs, based on a personal investigation, appeared in 1647 in Giovanni Francesco Abela's *Della Descrittione di Malta*. A scholar and a diplomat who was Vice-Chancellor of the Order of St John, Abela (1582—1635) counted among his friends Antonio Bosio (c.1576—1629), the great explorer of the Roman catacombs, who may have been born in Malta of a Maltese mother. Abela calls him "nostro Antonio Bosio" (2) and cites the authority of his *Roma*

1. M.A. Axiac, *Relazione della nuova e grandissima Divotione introdotta nella sta Grotta di San Paolo nell'Isola di Malta con una breve raccolta delle notande et antichità di detta isola* (copies in [N]ational [L]ibrary of [M]alta mss, 515, 631).
2. Abela's account of the catacombs appears on pp.36-55 of his book in *Libro I, Notitia Quarta* which carries the title *Delle Sepulture, o Cimiteri*. The reference to Antonio Bosio (c.1576-1629) is on p.43.

Sotteranea (3) but the extent of his influence has yet to be investigated. Abela distinguished between Pagan and Christian hypogea and noted their graves, iconography and inscriptions. He over estimated their size and complexity and sometimes reached wrong conclusions but is otherwise full of careful observations which constitute an important source of information about their appearance in the 17th century. An impulse to visit the catacombs had by now been given. At St Paul's Catacombs visitors were shown round by guides carrying tapers. (4) Abela himself sometimes conducted tours for friends or guests of the Order. These included, in 1637, the great scholar Lukas Holste or Holstenius (5) and, at an earlier period, about 1620, Georg'o Gaulteri or Gaulterus whom he took to Marsa where he had discovered a hypogeum with a Greek inscription. Gaulteri's laconic account (6) contains probably the first printed reference to Maltese catacombs.

Many visitors were, however, casual ones who plundered the catacombs in search of supposed treasure. Sometimes this was done with government approval as happened in 1530 when Luca Darmania and Antonio Callus received a licence to look for gold and silver! (7) The catacombs are not specifically mentioned but they probably did not escape the pillage. When the rock was suitable the catacombs were, moreover, quarried by kiln owners for making lime. Others were re-cut as rock-houses or animal-pens or converted into water cisterns. Finds were dispersed though some were rescued by Abela for his Cabinet of Antiquities. His collection included several oil-lamps with Christian symbols and other items of tomb furniture as well as inscriptions such as

3. Bosio's classic work, edited by G. Severani da S. Severano was published posthumously in Rome in 1632. A later edition appeared in 1650.
4. Abela, p.42 ...*si passeggia con lume acceso e la scorta di persone pratiche del luogo.*
5. Abela, p.67; cf. R. Almagià, *L'opera geografica di Luca Holstenio*. Vatican 1942. p.21 and n.2
6. G. Gaulterius, *Siciliae et adjacentium insularum et Bruttiorum antiquae tabulae cum animadversionibus Georgii Gaultheri*, Messina 1624, p.51: "Valletta, Civitas nova, XIV hinc stadii juxta Magnum Portum nuncupatum Marsa in antro multis sepulcris exciso. Cum Jo. Fran. Habela Serenissimo Principi Ant. de Paulo Auditore ad antram exhibi, sed ob loci tenebras literae non exploratae, nec amplius redeundum fuit triremibus nocte solventibus. Vidit ipse insularum historiam scripturus..."; cf. also Abela, p.52 The inscription, discovered and published by Abela (p.52) came from a site known as *il Gzira* at Marsa and reads (in the translation kindly supplied by Dr Joyce Reynolds of Newnham College, Cambridge): *Burial place purchased from Zosimetis and Anicetos*. Gaulterius published it in his *Antiq. tabulae* (tab. 240) and it has, besides, been published many times including: M.A. Boldetti, *Osservazioni sopra i cimiterij de' Santi martiri ed antichi cristiani di Roma* 1720, p.633; *Corp. inscr. graec* IV n.9450 and Kaibel, *Inscr. graec.* n. 603.
7. References given by R. Valentini in *Archivium Melitense*, IX, p.175.

the one painted on the sealing-slab of a tomb which he got from a hypogeum in the St Paul's parish church area at Rabat. (8)

A second edition of Abela's work edited by Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar was published in two volumes between 1772 and 1780 (9). Ciantar enlarged on Abela's references and included hypogea, inscriptions and other material that had come to light since Abela's death. Often underestimated Ciantar was in fact a man of great erudition who deserves credit for recording much that would otherwise have been lost. (10) It was he who first described the Bingemma Hypogea. (11) In Ciantar's old age, Jean Houel, engraver to Louis XVI of France, stopped at Malta on a tour of Mediterranean islands and subsequently, in 1787, published his impressions and engravings in volume four of his *Voyage pittoresque des iles de Sicilie, de Malte et de Lipari*. Houel, like most of his generation, was fascinated by picturesque ruins and his primary interest were the great megalithic temples but he also found time to explore Bingemma and sketch the plans of three of its hypogea. (12)

Accounts of the catacombs appear in several general works published between the 18th century and the last decades of the 19th. Usually they add little new and are therefore of negligible interest. The most important are, perhaps, Onorato Bres's *Malta antica illustrata co' monumenti e colla storia* published in Rome in 1816 and G.P. Badger's *Description of Malta and Gozo* which first appeared in 1838 and ran into six editions. In 1838, a hypogeum at Abbatija tad-Dejr was investigated and a brief account published in the *Malta Government Gazette* of 23rd May. (13) The catacombs also attracted the attention of several pseudo-scholars such as the Rev. Moses Margoliuth who considered they belonged "to the early giants who peopled this spot" and

8. Abela, p.53, This latin inscription has also been published several times including *Corp. inscr. lat.*, X, n. 7499.
9. G. A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata ovvero Descrittione di Malta*, Malta 1772-1780. Ciantar went blind before the publication of vol. I; vol. II was published posthumously.
10. Sites mentioned for the first time in Ciantar vol. I include (besides the Bingemma hypogea): a hypogeum at Wied il-Gonna, Marsa (p.199); probable tomb-caves at Mellieha (p.198); a hypogeum in St Agatha Street, Rabat (p.145); the Domesticus' tomb on the site of St Joseph Oratory at the Church of S. Maria di Gesù, Rabat (pp. 530-531); a probable hypogeum in the Greek's Gate area outside Mdina (p.196); a hypogeum at Hal Pilatu, Rabat (p.195); the Salina hypogea at St Paul's Bay (p.196); a possible hypogeum between Żebbuġ and Siggiewi (p.197).
11. Ciantar, pp. 239-243.
12. Houel, IV, pp. 111-112.
13. The account on p.207 records the discovery of a painted inscription subsequently included in *Corp. inscr. lat* (X, n.7498). The first proper survey of this hypogeum was, nonetheless, that of 30th May 1898 by Filippo Vassallo whose measured drawings were published by A.A. Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Ceme-*

who, in 1847, spent a "tedious day's work" at Bingemma "opening a tomb that had never been touched" (14) or Bishop Errington who suggested, correctly, that the Maghlaq hypogea represented "a far more recent period than would be represented by the builders of Mnaidra and Hhagiar-Kim". (15)

Bishop Errington was a friend of A. Leith Adams who, in his *Notes of a Naturalist in the Nile Valley and Malta* (Edinburgh 1870) showed great interest in the catacombs which, however, he completely misunderstood. His greatest contribution was the exploration of the Maghlaq hypogea, limits of Qrendi and Siġġiewi. A promising but short-lived initiative was the foundation in 1866 of an Archaeological Society. (16) Its vice-president, Mr A Wright, surveyed in 1874 a hypogeum at Jesuits' Hill, Marsa, which was being turned into a reservoir. (17) This hypogeum was also investigated by Cesare Vassallo, Librarian and Keeper of Antiquities at the Malta Library (18) who discovered also two badly mutilated hypogea at Mistra, limits of Mellieha. (19) His book on Maltese ancient monuments and his guide to the Library Museum (20) had a great influence on his successor A.A. Caruana.

Caruana was extremely active. His first contact with a catacomb was in 1860 when together with Capt. Strickland R.N. he climbed down a well in a cattle-pen to explore the Tal-Mintna hypogea at Mqabba (21). Between 1871 and 1899 he investigated scores of tombs and small catacombs besides many other antiquities producing rather confusing but adequately illustrated reports which culminated in 1898 in *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta*. This was followed a year later by *Ancient Pottery from the Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of*

teries in the Islands of Malta, Malta 1898, p.93, pl.XXIV. Caruana publishes a second inscription but makes no reference to the one noted in 1838.

14. M. Margoliuth, *A Pilgrimage to the Land of My Fathers*, vol. 1, London 1850, p.224.
15. A. Leith Adams, *Notes of a Naturalist in the Nile Valley and Malta*, Edinburgh 1870, p.253.
16. G. Cassar Pullicino, "Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences (1866-68)", *Melita Historica*, vol. 1 n.2 (1953), pp.122-124.
17. Wright's report and plans are reproduced in E. Becker, *Malta Sotteranea — Studien zur altchristlichen und jüdischen sepulchralkunst*, Strassburg 1913, pp.64-65 and pls. I-II.
18. C. Vassallo, *Dei Monumenti Antichi del Gruppo di Malta — Cenni Storici: Periodo Fenicio ed Egizio seconda edizione riveduta ed accresciuta*, Malta 1876, p.59.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
20. C. Vassallo, *Guida al Museo ovvero i Monumenti di antichità Maltese conservati nel Museo della Pubblica Bibliotheca*, Malta 1871.
21. A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of the Islands of Malta*, Malta 1882, p.109. Capt. (Walter) Strickland was Lord Gerald Strickland's father.

Malta in which the reputed tomb-pottery in the Library Museum is reported unsystematically usually without any reference to its provenance (22). His most important achievement was the cleaning and surveying of St Paul Catacombs in 1894 (23). He was lucky to have as his assistant Dr Filippo Vassallo who was a fine draughtsman and drew most of the plans which Caruana reproduced often without proper acknowledgement. Vassallo's sketch book at the Museum of Archaeology is an important source of information (24).

Caruana did not contribute much to advance interpretation of the catacombs many of which were regarded as Phoenician, Greek, or even Egyptian. At about the same time, the Rev Giovanni Gatt Said, rector of St Paul's Grotto, Rabat, fabricated pious myths about St Paul Catacombs which, nonetheless, contain some useful information (25). A letter of his asking for advice about an inscription he discovered survives among the De Rossi papers at the Vatican (26). A more critical spirit made itself felt in the writings of the German Albert Mayr who made several visits to Malta between the closing years of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th to investigate the islands' antiquities. His monograph *Die altchristlichen Begräbnisstätten auf Malta* published in 1901 (27) is a landmark in the study of Maltese paleo-Christian antiquities. It paved the way for the survey in 1911 of Erich Becker

22. Caruana's other writings include (besides *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries*, *op.cit.*): *Recent Discoveries at Notabile — A Memoir* (1881); *Hypogeum tal-Liebru at Hal Safi, Malta, explored in October 1884* (1884); *Notice of a Tomb Cave at Ghajn Sielem, Gozo, discovered in June 1884* (1884); *Discovery of a Phoenician Stele — Report to H.E. the Governor concerning an inscription found at Rabato, Notabile* (1885); *Recent Discovery of Tomb Caves at Rabato, Notabile in January 1890 on the road tal-Virtù* (1890); *Frammento Critico della Storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romana e Bizantina, Musulmana e Normanna-Aragonese delle Isole di Malta* (1899); *The Crypt of St Agatha in Hal Bajtada District, Malta* (1899).
23. Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries*, *op.cit.*, pp.101-117.
24. [N]ational [M]useum of [A]rchaeology [V]alletta, Sketch book of Filippo Vassallo covering the period c.1890-1896.
25. *La Grotta di San Paolo Malta — Considerazioni archaeologico-criticke* (1863); *Risposta del Sacerdote Giovanni Gatt Said alla Dissertazione Anticritica del Rmo. Canco. Dr. Vincenzo Paolo Galea sulla Primitiva Chiesa Vescovile in Malta* (1868). of more immediate interest is the *Appendice intorno ad un Monumento recentemente scoperto nelle catacombe* published in A. Ferris, *Storia Ecclesiastica di Malta raccontata in compendio* (1877), pp. 91-95.
26. N.M.A.V., Letter from A. Ferrua to Dr. J.G. Baldacchino, dated Rome 2nd June 1949, on inscriptions in St Paul Catacombs and St Agatha Catacombs.
27. Mayr's other publications on related subjects include: "Zur Geschichte der älteren christlichen Kirche von Malta", in *Historisches Jahrbuch* XVII, 3 (1896); *Aus den phönikischen Nekropolen von Malta* (paper read at the Royal Bavarian Academy of Science on 3rd June 1905 — English translation at N.M.A.V.)

whose *Malta Sotteranea — Studien zur Altchristlichen und Jüdischen Sepulchralkunst* is still in many respects a standard work (28). Becker examined all the presumed Christian and Jewish hypogea and made a brilliant attempt to assess their plans, tombs, agape-tables, inscriptions and decoration.

Other hypogea meanwhile continued being noted and occasionally surveyed. In the closing years of the 19th century Fr Manwel Magri S.J. photographed the Bistra hypogea (29) and investigated those at Tal-Għammariet and Misrah Ghonoq, Mosta, but did not publish a report (30). In 1903 the Museum of Antiquities was separated from the Public Library and re-organised as an autonomous department under a board of management (31). Its curator and first director was Professor Themistocles Zammit who dominated the Maltese archaeological scene until his death in 1955. Zammit, who was knighted in 1930, was a man of many parts. He was a brilliant doctor who discovered the cause of Brucellosis or Undulant Fever, a distinguished historian, a prolific short story writer and Rector of Malta University, besides Director of Museum. His greatest claim to fame is, however, as an archaeologist. By inclination he was a prehistorian but this did not prevent him from taking a scholarly interest in Punic, Classical and Paleochristian antiquities. His notebooks at the National Museum of Archaeology are indispensable to the study of rock-tombs and catacombs (32). His friendship with Becker whom he accompanied on his survey of the catacombs in 1911 (33) broadened his perspective of Malta's Paleochristian remains which he did his utmost to preserve often against great odds.

A man who did not always see eye to eye with Zammit was P.F. Bellanti who sat on the Museum's Board of Management. (34) Bellanti was highly in-

28. Published Strassburg 1913.
29. Photograph in Becker, *op.cit.*, pl. XVIII
30. Magri's original plans are apparently lost but they are known through copies by P.F. Bellanti according to whom Fr. Magri discovered and surveyed the two hypogea in 1885. Cf. N.M.A.V., Archaeological field-notes of P.F. Bellanti c.1918-1922, ff.30, 48 and *Studies in Maltese History*. Malta 1924, p.70.
31. [M]useum [A]nnual [R]eport 1903-1904 (published as a *Supplement to the Malta Government Gazette* no.4747, Thursday 25th August 1904).
32. N.M.A.V., Archaeological field-notes of T. Zammit, (1904-1930), various volumes in different formats. Zammit's publications on the subject include (besides his many M.A.R. reports): *The St Paul's Catacombs and other Rock-cut Tombs in Malta* (1923), "The Maltese Rock-cut Tombs of a Late Pre-Christian Type", *Bulletin of the Museum* (Malta), vol. 1 n.III (nov. 1931), pp. 101-131; "An Early Christian Rock-Tomb on the Hal Resqun Bridle Road at Gudja", *Bulletin of the Museum* (Malta), vol. 1 n.V Feb. 1935), pp.189-195.
33. See. for example, Becker, *op.cit.*, pp. 13, 27, 68.
34. M.A.R. 1910-11. In 1909-10, in the absence of T. Zammit, he was for some time acting Curator (M.A.R. 1909-10), p.5.

telligent but he lacked Zammit's academic preparation. He had a distinguished career as a civil servant, and apparently, only turned to archaeology upon his retirement, devoting himself, almost exclusively, to the study of rock-tombs. Despite his old age he explored tombs and catacombs with tenacious determination keeping a painstaking record of his observations. He had a good library of reference works on the catacombs of Rome and Carthage and with their help he attempted an analysis of the evolution of Maltese tomb-architecture. He also studied oil lamps and inscriptions some of which he sent to Grossi Gondi and other epigraphists to decipher. One of his manuscripts with very fine sketches (he was the son of the artist Michele Bellanti) and detailed notes is at the Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. (35) Most of it was in preparation for a book which he published in 1924 under the name of *Studies in Maltese History*. (36)

Two important sites explored in the 1930's were Tal-Bistra, outside Mosta, and Salina, near St Paul's Bay. The first was investigated by C.G. Zammit, Sir Themistocles's son, who published an adequate report in the *Bulletin of the Museum*. (37) Salina was not so fortunate. Capt Louis Upton Way who directed most of the work produced no report except for a very popular article in the *Times of Malta*. (38) World War II brought about a disruption of archaeological work and most sites were abandoned and became derelict. Several hypogea were certainly broken into during the digging of air-raid shelters but no record was kept and finds were dispersed. Between 1947—1948 Dun Ġwann Farrugia published several brief articles in the *Sunday Times of Malta* giving notice of antiquities he discovered during walks in the countryside. (39) Other finds mostly chance ones were recorded in the *Museum Annual Reports*. The corpus of sites had in fact been substantially enlarged since the publication of Becker's book but despite the good deal of activity little progress had in fact been made in the interpretation of the evidence. A very important step forward was the study of Padre Antonio Ferrua, "Le Catacombe di Malta" which appeared in *Civiltà Cattolica* (3rd Sept. 1949). (40) Ferrua made a brief but brilliant analysis of the known data and proposed new dates and a fresh

35. See note 30 *supra*.

36. He is also the author of *Malta Kadima*, Malta 1913.

37. C.G. Zammit, "The Tal-Bistra Catacombs", *Bulletin of the Museum* (Malta), vol. 1 n.V (Feb. 1935), pp.165-189.

38. L.J. Upton Way, "Catacombs near Salina Bay", *Times of Malta* 28/6/1937.

39. See, for example, "Hlantun Rock-Tombs" (3/11/1946), "Christian Catacomb Recently Discovered at Hal Far" (8/9/1946), "Hlantun Catacombs" (17/11/1946).

40. *Civiltà Cattolica*, iii quaderno 2381. In 1948 Ferrua was asked by the Director of the Valletta Museum to interpret two inscriptions recently discovered in Catacombs 13-14 in the SS. Paul/Agatha Group at Rabat, Cf. N.M.A.V. Letter of A. Ferrua to Dr. J.G. Baldacchino dated Rome 20th May 1948.

interpretation. Equally important was the contribution in 1970 of Giuseppe Agnello *Le Catacombe di Sicilia e di Malta e le loro caratteristiche strutturali* (41) which confirmed the suspected close analogies with Sicily.

No new survey was undertaken however and activity was confined to the investigation of chance finds. The most important were, perhaps, the two hypogea at taç-Ċaġħqi Secondary School at Rabat which were discovered in 1952 and preserved thanks to the personal initiative of C.G. Zammit who was, at the time, Curator of Archaeology at the Valetta Museum. (42) One of them contained an important neo-Punic inscription and was subsequently published in 1972 by Vincent Borg and Benedetto Rocco. (43) Their joint study showed how much might be learnt if other hypogea were similarly published. Vincent Borg, who holds the licentiate in Christian Archaeology from the Pontifical Institute for Sacred Archaeology, at Rome, and is an eminent scholar as well as Praeses of the Malta Faculty of Theology, followed it up in 1976 by an equally important report "Une île et ses hypogées de l'ère des premiers chrétiens: Malte" which appeared in *Les Dossiers de l'Archéologie* no. 19 (Nov.-Dec. 1976) in which he set out guidelines for future research in this field. In 1982, the present author submitted a thesis on the *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands* for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in the University of London. The body of the thesis is a survey consisting of a detailed description of all recorded Maltese rock-tombs and under-ground cemeteries dating from between the 3rd and 8th centuries A.D. and of the archaeological work that has been done on them. They include both Christian and Jewish hypogea as well as apparently pagan tombs. Each site is illustrated by a detailed plan and finds, where known, are catalogued. Inscriptions, paintings, carvings, agapetables and distinctive architectural features are also listed and discussed.

A very sorry demise, in the meantime, was that of the *Museum Annual Reports* which ceased publication in 1971. Since then no official record has been published of new archaeological discoveries.

41. *Atti del XV Congresso di Storia dell'Architettura*, Rome 1970, pp.213-235.
42. *M.A.R.* 1951-1952, pp. I-II. See also N.M.A.V. correspondence between Dr. J. G. Baldacchino and A. Ferrua (letters dated respectively: Malta 16th Feb. 1952; Rome 11th March 1952; Malta 26th March 1952; Malta 9th April 1952; Rome 22nd April 1952).
43. V. Borg and B. Rocco, "L'Ipogeo di Taç-Ċaġħqi a Malta", *Sicilia Archeologica-Rassegna periodica di studi, notizie e documentazioni a cura dell' E.P.T. di Trapani* (Anno V, nn. 18-19-20, Giugno-Settembre-Dicembre 1972) pp. 64-74.