

A sketch book by Filippo Vassallo

Anton Bugeja

A sketch book by Filippo Vassallo is a primary source for late nineteenth-century documentation of archaeological sites in the Maltese Islands. Other than revealing the documentation process behind the first plan of St Paul's Catacombs (Malta), the extensive use of surveying and the attention for detail make the sketch book an important witness to the evolving contemporary Maltese recording of archaeological finds. It also throws light on how A. A. Caruana's 1898 book on Maltese ancient burial sites was put together.

Keywords: sketch book; St Paul's Catacombs; F. Vassallo; A. A. Caruana; burial sites; documentation; Maltese Islands

His ability coupled with his long experience [...] his good will and zeal displayed in the discharge of his duties – and his general education, are what can be desired in an efficient public officer.

NAM, CSG01-13493/1887, Galizia/Hely
Hutchinson 12.12.1887

Biographical note

Although Filippo Vassallo's (Fig. 1) qualities were well recognised in his lifetime (see quotation above), there remains scope for a better appreciation of his work related to Maltese archaeology. A reassessment of the contents of a sketch book, preserved at the National Museum of Archaeology (NMA), helps to achieve this goal even though this sketch book was extensively used by Buhagiar (1986), referred to by other authors (Bugeja 2008; Cardona 2008, 53) and a short biography on Vassallo's artistic work published recently (Ganado and Espinosa Rodriguez 2018, 547-48).

Born on 30 December 1831, son of Cesare Vassallo and Geatana née Bugeja, Filippo's interest in antiquities was undoubtedly influenced by his father's work. Indeed, Cesare as Librarian of the Malta Public Library for over forty years (1839-1880) continued the Librarian's legacy of interest in archaeology by writing about the subject (Vassallo 1871, 1876). Cesare also occasionally took the young Filippo with him during explorations introducing him to the subject (Borg 1996, 216). On the other hand, Filippo's artistic talent developed by studying art at the Lyceum and pursuing studies under the painter Giovanni Schranz. Although he graduated as a Doctor of Laws from the University of Malta in 1856, Filippo never practised law and pursued a career in the Public Works Department (Ganado and Espinosa Rodriguez 2018, 547). Appointed temporary draughtsman in the Department of Land Revenue and Public Works on 1 December 1865, he was promoted Draughtsman No. 1 on 1



Figure 1: Filippo Vassallo (on right with top hat) at Haġar Qim c.1895 (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta).

December 1872, and remained in this post on 7 June 1880 when this department became the Public Works Department (NAM, CSG45, 4, 597).

Filippo Vassallo's contribution to archaeology mainly came through collaboration with Antonio Annetto Caruana, Cesare's successor at the Malta Public Library in 1880. The discovery of a Roman domus (Rabat, Malta) with outstanding mosaics and the commissioning of a report on the state of local archaeological remains by the Colonial Office in London, placed archaeology firmly within the agenda of the local government (Bugeja 2004). In the ensuing years Caruana published a few short reports on finds for which he often sought the services of personnel at the Public Works Department to illustrate his texts. Indeed, plans and mosaic reproductions by the Superintendent of Public Works Galizia, were used to accompany an account of the Roman domus (Caruana 1881). Vassallo, already involved in documenting archaeological finds by 1882 (Bugeja 2004, 62-66), provided plans of tombs for burial sites later discovered at Ghajnsielem and Tal-Liebru (Caruana 1884a, 1884b) as well as drawings of Haġar Qim based on the surveys of Francesco Wettinger (Caruana 1886, 3).

By 1885, Caruana appears to have moved away from issuing reports on individual tombs and instead gathered information for a

comparative survey of such sites (NAM, CSG01-4284/1885). With Caruana as Librarian to the Malta Public Library, and Filippo made Assistant Librarian in 1888, a closer cooperation between the two men was possible. This led to Filippo's documentation of archaeological finds, which were included in the sketch book under examination and used for Caruana's (1898) monograph on ancient tombs.

The sketch book

The handwritten manuscript under study (Vassallo c.1888-1895), referred here as the 'sketch book' as done by Buhagiar (1986), is preserved in the reserve collection of the NMA. Originally thread bound, its pages are today mostly loose, unpaginated and without an outer cover, making it difficult to ascertain the original sequence of pages. It contains about 89 pages of light grey-coloured paper (32 cm by 21.5 cm), with the occasional folded sheet (43 cm by 33 cm) inserted. Most pages have sketches and notes written in pencil, some have plans fixed to them while a few are blank. Two signed letters written by Vassallo addressed to Caruana are also included; these letters help identify Vassallo's calligraphy and thus assign the sketch book and other works to him.

St Paul's Catacombs

Many pages in the sketch book are related to the surveying of St Paul's catacombs for which Vassallo is well-known (Buhagiar 1986, 49-69) (Fig. 2). A plan of the Abbatija tad-Dejr catacombs, a burial site with a regular plan, was already made in the seventeenth century (Abela 1647, 48) and other smaller sites were planned in the following century (Houel 1787, 4, pl. 263). In contrast, the size, darkness and complexity of St Paul's Catacombs provided quite a challenge for surveying, a feat that was only first tackled successfully by Vassallo in the late nineteenth century. The sketch book was crucial for this process and is the best document available on how this was achieved.

It is clear that the complex was surveyed in parts as some plans are dated. For most of the tombs the general shape and arrangement was sketched, the length and breadth often recorded,

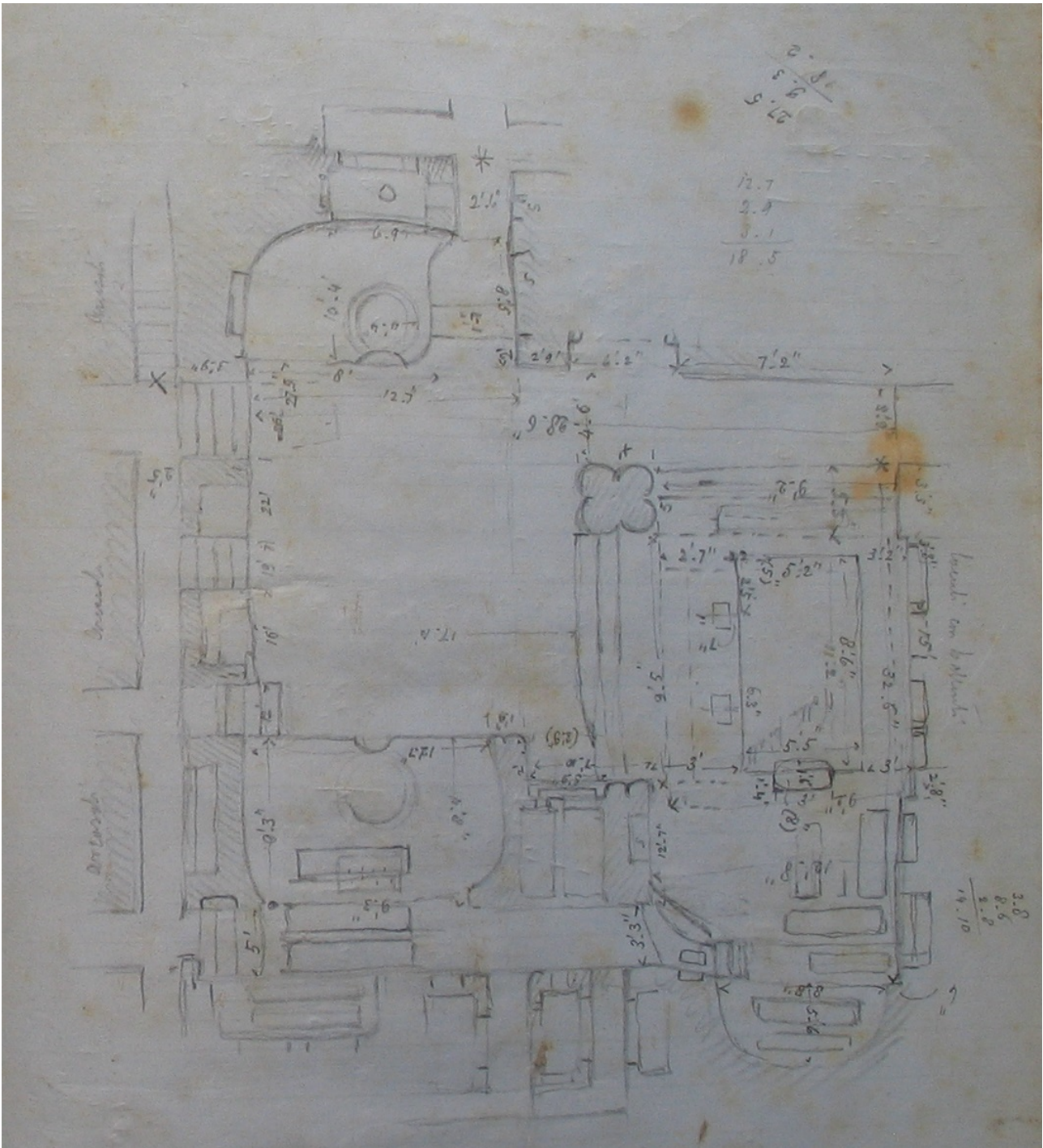


Figure 2: Two large halls at St Paul's Catacombs (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta).

and notes made of the shape of internal features. This method is also applied for larger spaces, but here the recording of diagonals for triangulation purposes is added. Individual areas were sometimes repeatedly drawn to improve accuracy based on the sketches and measurements taken. The end results are comparable with what has been achieved by a modern total station survey

with minor differences in recording of the orientation and size of tombs (*pers. comm.* David Cardona 22 February 2022).

For the irregular curvaceous passage between the main complex and a catacomb adjoining the nearby Rector's Garden, an open traverse survey (Hogg 2015, 188-99) was used with the length and axes of the different parts of the passage



Figure 3: A 'protractor' (a) linked to two sketches of a passage at St Paul's Catacombs (b, c) (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta) and (d) same area in Caruana 1898: pl. 1 opp. p. 103.

and the angles between them noted. A loose paper, showing a basic 'protractor' with marks every 9° and still preserved with the sketch book, was probably used for this, throwing light on the accuracy of surveying. The reason for choosing this angle eludes the present author as well as the surveyor and architects consulted. Once the axes of the passage were determined, further measurements and sketches were prepared showing width of the passage and layout (Fig. 3).

When space on the sketch done was insufficient, Vassallo used a different part of the page to improve his documentation. The same technique was used to show relationships between different parts or levels of the catacomb, allowing him to understand the site along the third dimension. Comparable to his work at St Paul's Catacomb was a detailed survey of the Crypt at St Agatha and Abbatija tad-Dejr, the latter with drawings of a decorated ceiling, an arcosolium and sections. All this reflects his earlier achievements evident in the publication of the burial site at Tal-Liebru for which Vassallo provided the plans (Caruana 1884b, pls 1-7).

Other sites – detailed recording

Vassallo's work fits within a general trend of recording burial sites in greater detail discernible in the second half of nineteenth century Malta. The publications by Swann (1866, 483-87) and Thurnam (1866, 488-99) were landmark studies for Maltese funerary archaeology as identifiable discovered items were listed, measured and sometimes drawn, with notes made on pottery ware, decoration and shape. Through a careful examination of the skeletal remains found,

conclusions on the manner of deposition of bodies and a minimum number of individuals was reached. Leading scholars were contacted to examine the skulls and site formation processes considered when explaining bone discolouration. Caruana's (1884a) later monograph on a tomb found at Ghajnsielem reflects these developments by providing an inventory of the bones, pottery and coins found. Furthermore, through the reproduction of plans and drawings by Galizia, Calleja and Vassallo himself, the positioning of the skeletons and pottery is also illustrated.

This attention to detail is also noticeable in Vassallo's sketch book. There is an interest in the location of the burial sites in relation to contemporary modern landmarks as well as the contents of the tombs. Thus for a tomb at Qala (Gozo), Vassallo indicated the position and distance from a named road, dimensions of the tomb and place within the tomb where a vase was found. Likewise for discoveries at Strada Vajringa (Rabat, Gozo) he gives the location in relation to door number and street. A measured plan and a section drawing of a tomb near Ta' Hlantun is accompanied by a list of the items found, and markings of the find spot of at least one of them. The difference in orientation of one of the skeletons with respect to another tomb within the chamber is also noted and sketched (Fig. 4). Similar lists or details are more comprehensive for a burial site at Hal Pilatu (Rabat, Malta), where the position of no less than eight finds and that of the skeletons is provided in Vassallo's sketch book (Fig. 5) which, unlike the articles by Swann and Thurnam,

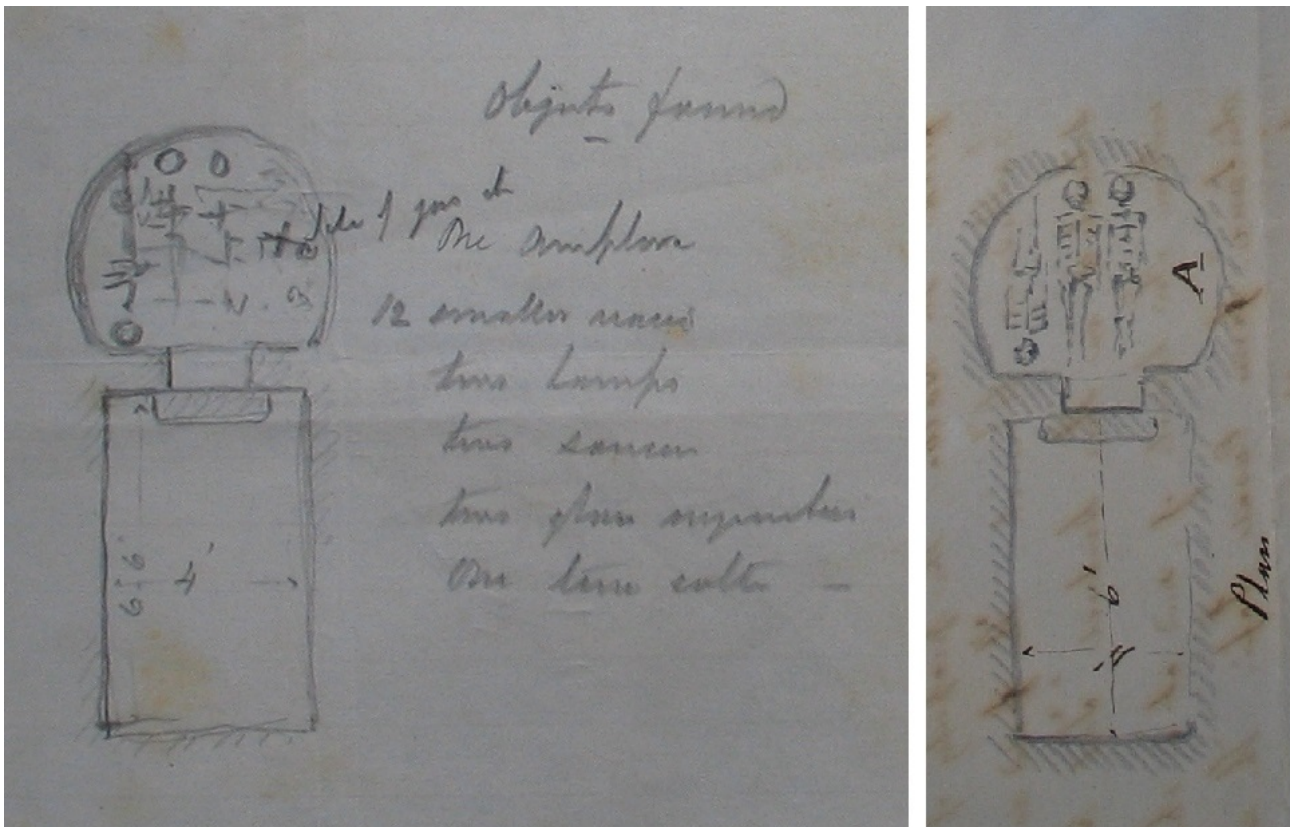


Figure 4: Notes of contents and plan (left) of a tomb at Ta' Hlantun and more advanced plan of the same on right (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta).

shows tombs and contents in a single drawing. Vassallo's work anticipates comparable but slightly more detailed and realistic standards of documentation provided by the later Superintendent of Public Works Lorenzo Gatt for a tomb at Qormi in 1901 (Bugeja 2019). Such meticulous documentation became a more common feature in later works and appears in Zammit's notebooks (1907, 29, 32, 41-42, 55) and Bellanti's works (1913, 60, 76), the latter also illustrating the sequence in deposits at a time when stratigraphy was being recorded at the megalithic site of Santa Verna (McLaughlin et al. 2021, 23-25).

Vassallo's recording of finds may have followed Caruana's recommendation to take 'notice of the circumstances of each discovery' even if minute (Bugeja 2011, 363). This occurs at a time when Pitt-Rivers (1887) was pioneering detailed recording of sites and artefacts at Cranborne Chase but the documentation in the latter is by far much more voluminous, comprehensive and advanced than that by

Vassallo. Furthermore, unlike what Schliemann (1875, 10) had done at Troy and others (Schnapp 1999, 198-204, 312), Vassallo makes no attempt to record stratigraphy in his work even though Caruana (1881, 4) had noted a historical sequence in the deposits and remains of the Rabat Roman domus. In Malta where the regular training of archaeologists was only introduced in the late twentieth century (Bonanno 1996), it is a reminder that contributions to archaeology were often made by interested non-professional archaeologists who brought their personal skills to the subject, Filippo Vassallo contributing through his experience in surveying.

Sketches, studies and notes

Through the sketch book, Vassallo continued the legacy established by previous artists (e.g. Houel 1787) to record sites through freehand sketches. Two drawings of the Gozitan megalithic remains at Tal-Qighan and Borġ Gharib (Fig. 6) with the Torri ta' Kenuna in the background provide a good visual idea of what are now much

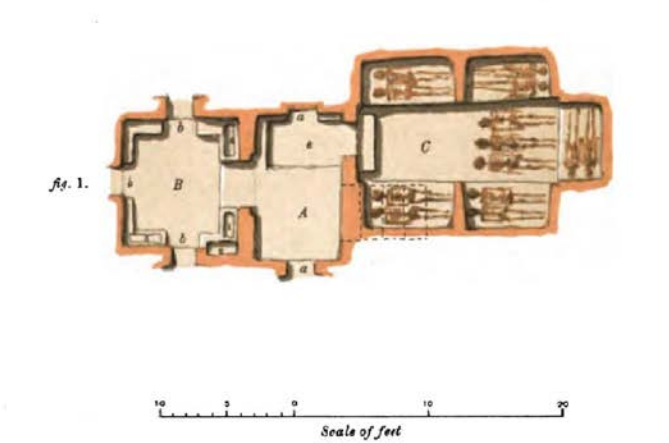
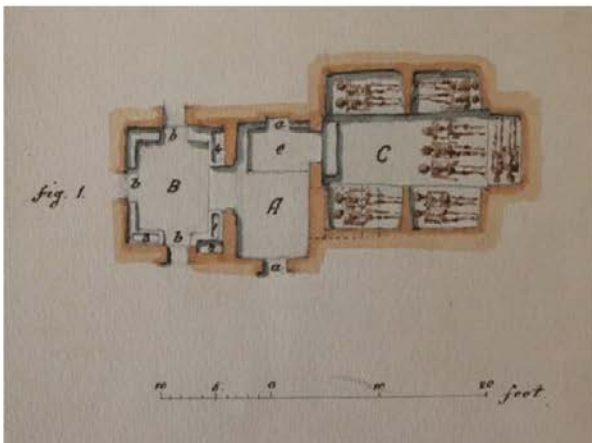
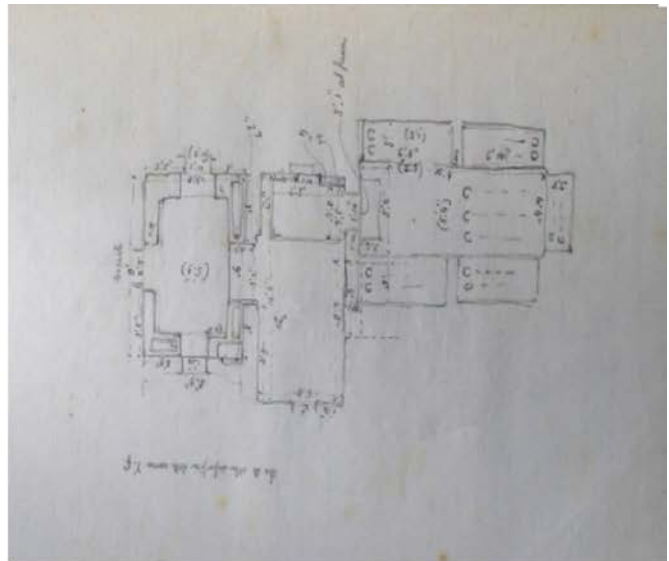
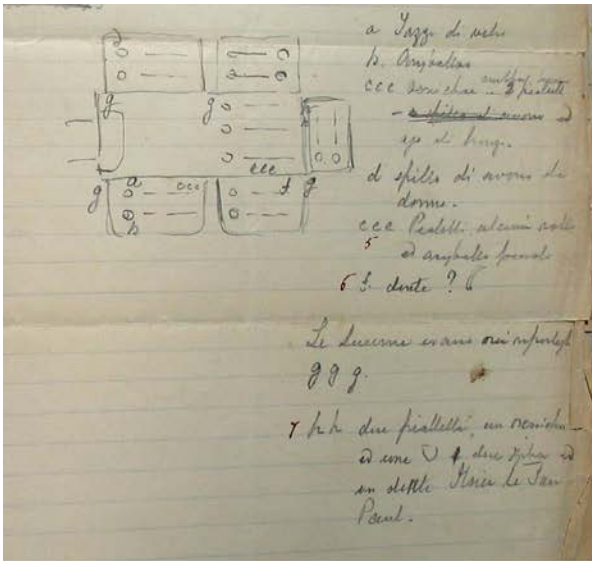


Figure 5: Evolution of illustration of catacomb at Hal Pilatu: Upper two from sketch book, Vassallo's drawing by hand in Caruana 1898 (DAG 16.185 No. 152) at bottom left (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta) and Caruana 1898 publication at bottom right.

disturbed sites. Interest in background features also appears for the Qala menhir where the Ta' Sufa windmill is also included.

The sketch book was also a useful place where notes were kept, and records of ancient and more recent Latin inscriptions made. It also reveals an interest in site positioning within a wider landscape as evident in a comment that the Marsaxlokk harbour was visible from Tal-Gawhar. Several drawings of funerary triclinia and notes on the number found of each within the respective catacomb, hint at an attempt to study these features according to shape, later undertaken in more detail by Camilleri and Gingell-Littlejohn (1997).

Notes of bills related to the surveying of the catacombs by candlelight, cabs needed for travel

and boat trips essential to record sites in Gozo throw light what was behind the practice of recording archaeology. A letter related to a tomb near the Corradino prison on 26 July 1893 records the first known use of the telephone in Malta to communicate the discovery of an archaeological find.

Relevance to modern archaeology

Beyond its interest for archaeological historiography, the sketch book is also useful as a resource for modern archaeological research. Generally, it provides plans and details about archaeological sites uncovered around Mdina and in rural Malta in the late nineteenth-century often through the contemporary increase in building and developments in infrastructure and



Figure 6: View of Borg Gharib in the sketch book (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta).

transport (see Zammit 2002). More specifically it may hold information that supplements that acquired through more recent investigations. One example is Vassallo's plan of the area adjoining the Tal-Balla windmill at Gheriexem which provides more information and a more precise location of a site already known for doorways and mosaic pavements (*Pavimentum Lestaceum and Pavimentum Sectilia*) (Caruana 1899, 276; Sagona 2002, 17). An amphora from the site, drawn by Vassallo, allows it to be identified as 'most probably a Dressel 1 amphora...' commonly 'Late Republican in date' and imitated 'after the late first century BC/early first century AD in many regions' (pers. comm. M. Anastasi 23 February 2021) (Fig. 7). This fits neatly with the late second century BC to first century AD finds from the Roman domus (Bonanno 2005, 308, 310) and in line with findings at the nearby Melita esplanade site (Anastasi 2019, 12-21) revealing widespread use of the area during these times. Likewise, a sketch of an undated long wall made of sizable blocks and built in two courses on Via Boschetto (modern Triq Nikolas Saura) close to the Franciscan Convent in Rabat (Malta)

compliments other archaeological remains in the area (Bonanno 2005, 215-16) and may serve as a resource to throw light on the ancient urban landscape of Melite, the reconstruction of which remains a desideratum.

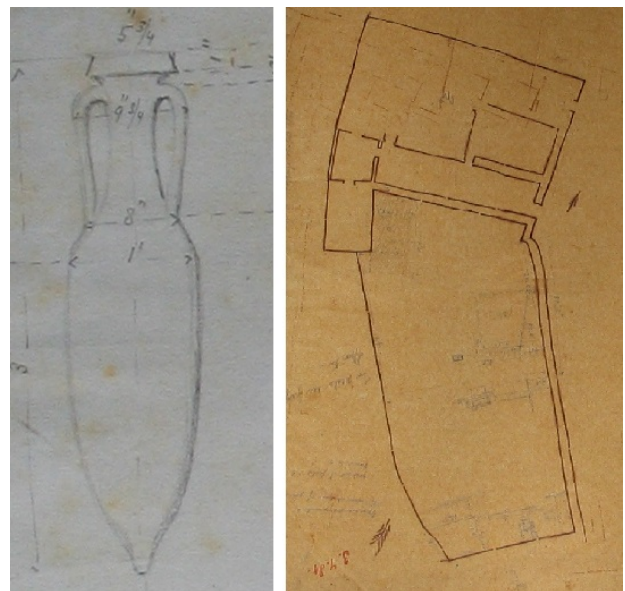


Figure 7: Gheriexem: sketch of amphora found on site and plan of area (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta).



Figure 8: Plan of cave at Ir-Ramlġija (National Museum of Archaeology, Heritage Malta).

The sketch book also provides information on sites which have witnessed change over the past century. Indeed, the sketch book documents two megaliths at the location of St Anthony's chapel at Ta' Hlantun that have since disappeared and is also an early record of measurements of

the ancient ashlar wall at Safi and the round buildings at Ta' Ġawhar and Tat-Torrijiet. A plan of a cave at Ir-Ramlġija (Fig. 8), close to Marsalforn is rare, if not unique, and probably concerns the cave described by Houel (1787, 86) a century earlier (see Buhagiar 2014, 297-98).

Sources for Caruana's publication on funerary sites

Together with other documents, the sketch book was a resource used to compile Caruana's (1898) volume on ancient Maltese burials, throwing light on the process behind late nineteenth-century Maltese archaeological publication (Fig. 5).

As outlined above, the sketch book was used for on-site documentation but also served for further detailing of preliminary observations (Fig. 3). The more advanced and larger drawings in a 'collection of manuscripts, loose field notes, and sketches' catalogued as Lib. Ms 1598 at the National Library of Malta (NLM) (see Azzopardi 2007, 9, 10, 36, 39; Vella 2005), probably represent a subsequent stage in the preparation for publication. Although catalogued by the NLM as by Caruana, the handwriting in most of the notes to the sketches resembles more that by Vassallo, making the latter the likely author. Reference in this library manuscript to dated entries and abbozzi (sketches) in a 'field-book' (see Azzopardi 2007, 36, 39) do not correlate with the sketch book at the NMA. This points to a further manuscript used in the documentation process. The whereabouts of this field book remain unknown.

From all these sketches and drawings, Vassallo's produced small hand-coloured paintings. Paintings like those that were subsequently published are affixed in a volume of Caruana's 1898 publication on tombs donated to the NMA by the Caruana Galizia family (NMA, Caruana 1898 listed as DAG 16.185 No. 152) (Zammit 1965, 7). These paintings are almost certainly the 'accurately executed' drawings referred to by Caruana (1898, 41) and are behind the chromolithographs by the London firm Griggs and Sons in the published book.

Conclusion

Vassallo's sketch book is an important record of sites explored in the late nineteenth century and is a natural addition to other later field notebooks related to Maltese archaeology. Through this essay, it is hoped that the sketch book and contribution made by Filippo Vassallo

are further appreciated for their contribution to the development of archaeological practice in Malta in the late nineteenth century.

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Anton Bugeja

42, Tbissima

Triq is-Salib

SIGGIEWI SGW3301

Malta

antonbugeja@hotmail.com

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Anton BUGEJA is a family doctor by profession, and shows a keen interest in the history of Maltese archaeology. He has been active in archaeology-related NGOs for a number of years.