

# DISCOVERY OF A TOMB CAVE

AT GHAIN SIELEM, GOZO

In June 1884

---

## NOTICE

By Dr. A. A. Caruana

*Librarian of the Public Library, Malta.*

---

### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Tomb Cave at Fauuara,  
do at Xgharet Medeuuiet  
do at San Dumincu, Rabato  
do at tal Horr Hill,  
do at el Hodba tal Gisuiti



Printed and sold by E. Laferla, No. 128 Strada S. Domenico  
8d. without Illustrations  
2s. Illustrated,

# NOTICE OF A TOMB CAVE

AT GHAIN SIELEM, GOZO,

discovered in June 1884.



THE Tomb Cave in the district "tal Kaghan", near the village of Ghain Sielem, about to be described, belongs to the class of isolated tombs, mentioned in the Report on the Phœnician and Roman Antiquities in the Islands of Malta, Class VIII.

It first attracted the notice of the Deputy Receiver General at Gozo, towards the middle of June 1884: on the 18th. the discovery was reported to Government, and on the 21st. referred to me, only a few hours before starting for a short trip.

Unfortunately, in spite of the energy of Mr. R. Micallef, that interesting tomb had been already rifled, when the discovery was announced to him, and cleared of the greater part of its contents, and the cave itself destroyed to give way to the construction of a public road.

2. The type of this Tomb Cave could not, consequently, be determined by inspection. Besides, no indications of the position of the skulls and bones were obtained, and no notes of other particulars with regard to the interments found in it were furnished. From the topographical knowledge of the place, however, with a plan of which I have been kindly favoured by Mr. Micallef, and from all other local circumstances, and the nature and quantity of relics obtained, I feel warranted to conclude, that it was an isolated tomb, or a family tomb, in which no less than five individuals were interred, unconnected with any cluster of tombs.

3. The situation of this Tomb Cave, in the road tal Kadus, is in the extensive heath of sandstone formation, outside the recent village of Ghain Sielem, on the S. E. slope of the denuded southern dip of the Island, towards the sea of Migiarr and the Frieghi. Its distance from the sea is about 1100 yds. It is, besides, topographically connected with the neighbouring area where the more numerous megalithic ruins are recorded, namely of Xeuchia, the oldest village of the place, at a distance of 2640 yds., of Xghara tal Hassenin, and of Dahlet Korrot at Nadur, distant about 880 yrd., which villages were once as many centres of the primitive seafaring population of Gozo. This

Cave penetrated 5 ft. inside the rock, beneath the level ground of the road, where it had its circular opening, and extended over 8 ft. longitudinally.

Canon Gio. Fran. Agius, in his *Gozo Illustrato* (Ms.), mentions several other Tomb Caves existing, in his time, at Gozo, near this locality.

It is the general nature of the country, wherever the isolated Maltese Caves, or family tombs, occur,—namely: a barren waste, called Xghara by the natives, in the neighbourhood of old ruins, hiding caves either in its sides overlooking adjacent valleys, as in Xgharet San Martin; or in some of its rocky heights, as in Xgharet Medeuiet, in l'art ta Lippia between Migriarr and Ghain Tuffieha, and at Bennaghal near the Saline; or as much beneath the surface as to have the greater part of the opening concealed, as in the plain at the foot of Emtarfa hill; and often at some depth under the ground, reached through a vertical shaft, ten or more feet high having footholds on either side, as in the illustration of a tomb found in tal Horr hill in 1865, and as it may be seen from a longitudinal section of several of these Caves in the neighbourhood of San Dumincu, at Rabato, Malta, and elsewhere. The illustrations, accompanying this notice, were purposely chosen to convey an idea of the different modes of occurrence of the isolated Tomb Caves in Malta.

Access to these Caves is, generally, gained by two or more steps according to the level, above or below, of the adjacent passage; and their entrance, often naturally wide and arched, and, when narrow, artificially widened to admit of the passage of a man in crooked position, is always covered and secured with large slabs of stone. The interior of many of these Caves is wide enough to admit the interment of one or two bodies, with sufficient room to put some earthen jugs, cups, lamps, plates, and saucers. But, often, they penetrate twelve or more feet inside the rock, appearing like an antichamber, communicating with inner and smaller caves through arched and low apertures, nearly at the same ground level of the exterior cave, exhibiting the cellular arrangement of a family tomb. The illustration of the Tomb at Kasam-el-Fauuara shows one of these instances.

The floor of these Caves is of solid rock, even, sinking a little deeper of the entrance, and fitted to receive the bodies of the dead in an horizontal position, having a raised platform at either extremity with cavities for the head and feet. Sometimes these platforms are dispensed with, and then the bodies are found lying in lead, or marble, or earthen, sarcophaguses, or even within long jars, in pairs, so joined together as to have the bust and upper extremity of the body contained in one of those jars, and the rest in the other. Occasionally, these sarcopha-

guses are replaced by as many troughs cut in the rock with their edges *en relief*, as are the members of the same family buried in the Cave, as in the illustration of the Tomb Cave discovered on el-Hotba tal Gesuiti in the year 1861.

The top and sides of these Caves are entire without any crack or fissure, bearing no traces of disintegration from the erosion of water, infact they are remarkable for the absence of any detritus, except some humus mixed with what mice and rats could convey in.

The clustered tombs, on the other hand, are found, generally, on the more gentle slope of the mountainous districts, in the upper limestone formation, in two or more orders of superposition. They agree in their general appearance and interior details with the isolated Tomb Caves, as at the Bengemma and Wardia Ridges, at Selmùn, and on the hills of San Martin, in which the greatest number of tombs known in Malta are agglomerated, nearly 100 of them having been recently planted with carob trees.

4. The few relics recovered from the excavations of the Tomb Cave tal Kaghan, mentioned in the following description, are now classified in the Museum of the Public Library.

### Human Bones

- No. 1.—Skull, dolichocephalic, flat, well developed, male of middle age.  
Frontal bone shows an upright forehead; superorbital ridges of the orbits well marked; left external angular process, entire; right, broken; nasal spine, broken.  
Parietal bones, entire; sutures well serrated.  
Occipital protuberance entire; only left portion of foramen magnum, preserved; transverse and basilar processes, broken.  
Left temporal bone, squamous and mastoid portions, as also a portion of zigoma, and the meatus auditorius externus, preserved; styloid process, broken.  
Right temporal bone, only the squamous and mastoid portions without any of the processes.  
Sphenoid, Ethmoid, and bones of face, wanting.
- No. 2.—Skull, dolichocephalic, well developed, sutures open, male individual of advanced age.  
Frontal bone, wanting.  
Left parietal bone slightly broken near sagittal suture; right parietal bone, broken near the squamous border.  
Occiput entire, with prominent gibbosity posteriorly; the foramen magnum and basilar process, preserved; as also the two greater wings and basilar portion of the Sphenoid bone.  
Left temporal bone with styloid process and zigoma, nearly entire; right temporal bone not so well preserved.  
Ethmoid bone and face, wanting.
- It appears to have been the skull of the eldest member of the family.

- No. 3.—Frontal bone of a very young female, showing the frontal eminences of an upright forehead; upper border, broken.
- No. 4.—Right half of a lower jaw, broken near the symphysis; coronoid process and condyle, entire; only two alveoles for the inner molars, with one molar tooth in situ.
- No. 5.—Right portion of frontal bone, showing half of the superior border of the orbit, and portion of right parietal bone.
- No. 6.—Right humerus, and
- No. 7.—Left humerus; shafts, heads, and lower extremities entire; tuberosities, ridges, eminentia capitata, trochlea, and condyles, well preserved.
- No. 8.—Ulna, and
- No. 9.—Radius, articulating with No. 6; shaft and lower extremity, olecranon, coronoid and styloid processes of ulna entire; head, shaft, lower extremity, and styloid process of radius, well preserved.
- No. 10.—Os innominatum, right portion; iliac portion, posteriorly broken; crest, anterior superior and inferior spinous processes of ilium, preserved; posterior superior spinous process broken, inferior entire. Ramus and tuberosity of ischium, entire; body of os pubis, entire.
- No. 11.—Right femur articulating with the acetabulum of ilium No 10, and
- No. 12.—Left femur; shafts, head, trochanters, and condyles, entire.
- No. 13.—Right tibia articulating with No. 11. and
- No. 14.—Left tibia; shafts and extremities entire; tuberosities and spinous processes, well preserved.
- No. 15.—Right fibula, the companion of No. 13, and
- No. 16. Left fibula, the companion of No. 14, entire.
- No. 17.—Three dorsal vertebræ; and
- No. 18.—One lombar; body and processes, well preserved.
- No. 19.—Portion of a sternal rib; extremities broken.

From No. 6. to 19., inclusively, the bones belong to the same skeleton, as also, probably, No. 1.

- No. 20.—Os innominatum, right portion; ilium posteriorly broken, crest preserved, spinous processes broken; only portion of ischium preserved; os pubis wanting.

This bone, as also No. 2., is the most decayed.

- No. 21.—Right humerus; shaft and lower extremity, preserved; neck and head, broken.
- No. 22.—Femur of a child; shaft preserved; head and lower extremity not well developed.

#### Pottery.

- No. 23.—One jug with neck broken off.
- No. 24.—One do, of smaller dimensions, entire.
- No. 25.—One flask (Kus), entire.
- No. 26.—One do, of smaller dimensions, entire.
- No. 27.—One cup, entire.
- No. 28.—Four saucers, entire.
- No. 29.—Three do, chipped off.
- No. 30.—Fragments of a great jar with lower extremity pointed.

#### Coins.

A phœnician Coin, 3d. brass, with covered head of Astharte with diadem, on obverse; and three crowns over a tripod with the usual three phœnician letters, on reverse.

An imperial Coin, 2nd. brass, with the head of Augustus (?)

5. The epoch of the Tomb Cave "tal Kaghan" cannot, consequently, have preceded that of the earliest Roman Emperors. But, in general, an age somewhat beyond 3000 years may be safely assigned to many of the Maltese Caves, the oldest being those of the Phœnician races, and many of the recent ones of the old Greeks and of the Romans. All circumstances appear to go against their higher antiquity. Indeed, nothing fossil is observable about the bones found in them: on the whole, they are in good preservation, their surface smooth and close, their layers adhering well together, though light their condition firm and solid, and the absence of any dendritical marks upon them, show, comparatively, much more recent human interments than those in the Bone Caves of prehistoric ages, which at present form the subject of very interesting and much debated investigations in paleontology and ethnography.

The two classes of Caves widely differ, the one from the other, by striking characteristics. Besides their being invariably found in the proximity of old centres of habitation, our Tomb Caves exhibit a fixed type; while a topographical indication of the Bone Caves of prehistoric times, without any fixed form, converted into burial deposits by an unsettled and hunting race, must, perhaps, remain always uncertain.

The mode of occurrence of human bones in the Bone Caves, when they are not found under a covering of stalagmite, is that of a mass of scattered bones of men together with those of extinct species of animals, once his prey, mixed up with stones crumbled from the top and sides, brown earth, ashes, flint tools and implements for cutting and other purposes. This rubbish fills up the Bone Caves at various depths below the level of the entrance to the unequal, abruptly sinking and then again rising, bottom of the Caves, once inhabited by troglodytes of the age of the Mammoth and the Cave Bear.

The mode of interment in the Maltese Tomb Caves is calculated to maintain undisturbed the entirety of the skeleton, and the preservation of bones. No debris, or deposit whatsoever mixed up with animal relics, or lithic instruments, fills the caves. They are fitted out with iron tools for a burial place, conformably to a rite, and supplied with fictile jars, vessels, and other homely implements, which might be useful for a journey or for rest, after death, by a people anxious to preserve in after life the most intimate social ties, those of the family. This people could not, consequently, have lived in any of the lithic ages.

6. The tendency of these remarks is not to preclude the possibility of discovering Bone Caves of prehistoric ages in our islands. There are several stalagmitic caverns, which may still cover human relics in their beds. Besides, the numerous animal exuviae

obtained chiefly from five caverns, one by Capt. Spratt R. N., in 1859, on the North side of the valley separating Zebbug & Siggieui, two at tal Maghlak near Krendi, by Dr. A. L. Adams, in 1861, one at Candia in 1865 by Dr. Adams and myself, and one at the is-Shantin near Micabbiba, by myself, in 1870, on which discoveries papers were read to the R. Geological Society of London, and to the R. Dublin Society, evidently prove that herds of several extinct species of animals, chiefly of the proboscidian and hippopotamus species, roamed over these islands, and hence the possible coexistence of man at their time, even in Malta. But here again, these ossiferous caverns are vertical, funnel shaped, fissures of very moderate dimensions, due to the expansion of narrow rents crossing the sandstone beds in every direction, quite unlike the Bone Caves of Ojcow in Prussian Poland, of Sainte Reine, Vergisson, and Moustier in France, of Kent, Kirkdale, and Durham Down in England, of Liege and Lunel Viel in Belgium, of Mentone in Nice, Caverna del Corno in Bergamo, Grotta dall'Onde e di Parignana in Tuscany, and others in Italy. Moreover, the absence of human relics, ashes, or any relics of human industry, in these gaps, together with the disorderly state in which these animal remains are found impacted, showing to have been forcibly swept in by impetuous currents of water, and not interred by men, leave as yet undemonstrated the presence of man in these islands during their age.

7. A thorough investigation of the Maltese Tomb Caves, before they are cleared of their deposits, and utterly destroyed for agricultural purposes, might contribute some scientific data to the modern ethnographical researches, and a collection of the crania obtained, as in the Musée Gallique Romain at St. Germain, would be desirable.

These few particulars are collected, that they may lead to the determination of undertaking a thorough study of these interesting monuments by abler hands.

Valletta, Public Library,  
29th. September, 1884.