

el-GHERIEN tal-LIEBRU, MALTA,

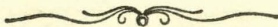
A **Hypogeum** discovered in July,
explored and described in October,
1884.

By Dr. A. A. Caruana

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1s. without Illustrations
4s. Illustrated,

el-GHERIEN tal-LIEBRU
at hal-SAFI, MALTA,
explored in October 1884.

Immediately after the publication of the Notice on the Discovery of the Tomb Cave tal Kaghan, Gozo, on the 15th. October last, I was asked, on the 19th, to visit a cluster of Tomb Caves, called by the natives "el-Gherien", in the rustic tenement tal-Liebru. The property of this tenement, in the boundaries of hal-Safi towards Gudia, Malta, belongs to the Saura Hospital.

The news of these Caves was brought to me by Sig. Carmelo Caruana Agius, of Zurricco.

I was informed by the farmer of the place and other villagers, that these Caves were opened and cleared towards the middle of July last; which statement was afterwards contradicted by the farmer himself. As a confirmatory evidence, however, that some of them had but recently been rifled, several human bones, and fragments of earthen jars, vases, and lamps, were still scattered in the surrounding fields, when I repaired to the place.

I sought in vain, amongst the rubbish lying on the spot, for some relics of inscriptions, which were sure to exist, at least, on some of the slabs closing the graves, or for some fragments of sculpture, or artistic ceramic remains. The only interesting object obtained is a nice, red, earthen, monocline, lamp, bearing the sculpture of a peacock in its centre, surrounded by fishes. I was shown two gold rings, said to have been found in one of these Caves. They are a pair of common ear-rings, usually worn by our countrymen: and though the assertion of the villagers about the place of their discovery may be true, the glittering of 18 k. gold proves, at once, these rings to be unconnected with the relics of these tombs.

2. These Caves, though few in number, form a very interesting group, telling on the history of the class of Antiquities to which they belong. As the farmer, in order to rid himself of the annoyance of visitors, made up, resolutely, his mind to fill them up again, and actually commenced his work of destruction, I instantly set to the exploring of these Tomb Caves, on the 23rd. October, by means of funds obtained from Government, through the kindness of the Hon. Mr. Hely-Hutchinson. Meanwhile, I prepared this brief description of them, with accurate illustrations of their ichnography and sciagraphy.

Our Antiquities are, by most competent authorities, pronounced to give to Maltese Archæology a peculiar, and almost unique, character, which renders them especially interesting.

3. The tenement tal-Liebru is composed of a number of plain and level lands: some are covered with vegetable earth, and are under cultivation: others remain barren rock, and are cut by artificial furrows in several directions. These furrows, about 15 in. wide, and 7 ft. deep, apparently bound some tracts of land, and along them holes are to be seen, dug in the rock, about 1 ft. deep, and 6 in. diameter. These holes may have been used for setting in poles to support a covering, whilst the trenches themselves may have served to drain the place. The lower layers of the dwarf walls, enclosing some of the cultivated fields, are of megalithic construction, which I noticed for the first time. At a short distance from this site are seen the megalithic ruins of et-Torri tal-Giauar, of which only one apse in decay is apparent, with a carob tree planted in its centre. I consider this an additional evidence, if further evidence be required, of the theory propounded by me in the Notice on the Tomb Cave tal Kaghan § 3, about the proximity of this kind of excavations to old megalithic ruins.

4. In the road outside this tenement, and infact in all the surrounding district of el-Midorbu, from the surface of the ground the apertures may be seen, not entirely hidden, of several isolated tombs, still covered with earth. But it is just in the middle of the second barren tract of land, above mentioned, in the tenement tal-Liebru, that the group of Tomb Caves, to be described, is found.

These Caves lie immediately below the ground, thus possessing an easy access through a rectangular hole on the surface, about 4 ft. 9 in. long, 2 ft. 6 in. broad, and 3 ft. 6 in. deep. Four steps, cut in the rock, lead the visitor down to a square landing place, on the left and front side of which there are apertures to two Caves of Phœnician type. The one at the left side is a double tomb, the one in front is a hollow chamber having a pit in the middle, on the sides of which are arranged one cell for a double interment, and two single cells of a family vault.

Turning to the right, where, very likely, there was originally a third vault, seven more steps lead into the *ambulacrum*, or gallery, 17 ft. 6 in. long, 3 ft. wide, 6 ft. 6 in. high, of this rocky subterranean. Along either side of this gallery yawn, in two tiers, vaulted tomb caves, or cells. Each of these cells is provided with a rectangular vertical aperture in front, 1 ft. 10 in. by 2 ft., incavated into an arched cornice to incase the frame of the closing slab. These cells present the same form and type of the two already mentioned.

There are three of such cells in each of the upper tiers. The first two, on the side dexter, are fitted for two, and the third one for four, interments. The first cell, on the side sinister, is adapted for a single interment; the second one for three interments; the third one appears not to have been used.

In the lower tier, on the side dexter, there are two cells, each fitted for a double interment. On the sinister hand, the first cave leads to a narrow passage, with a pit near its entrance, on one of the sides of which passage there is one cell for three, and one for a double, interment; the second cave is a vault preceding a cell for a double interment, decorated with two coats of arms; and the third cave is a double tomb.

At the end of the gallery there is a blind alley, 8 ft. 10 in. long, 3 ft. 6 in. wide, 5 ft. 4 in. high, which turns to the left. On either side of it there are two more cells excavated: in the first one, on the side dexter, no arrangement is visible; the second one, bearing, at the head elevation, a particular decoration engraved in the rock, resembling the cup of a sacred vessel with a cross upon it, was evidently the sepulchre of some personage of distinction, probably belonging to Church Hierarchy. The two cells, on the side sinister of the alley, are fitted for double interments.

On both the walls of the gallery, and its terminal alley, are to be seen rudely engraved crosses, and the palm-branch of triumph is rudely scratched by the opening of some of the cells.

The vault of the gallery near the last cell of the upper tier, on the right side, is pierced from above by a shaft, now closed. As this subterranean cemetery does not extend beyond the area explored, it can be easily ascertained, that it had but one entrance, namely the original one already described. This shaft, in consequence, without any traces of foot-holds, is only a cataract of light and ventilation, or a *luminare*, added to this crypt at a later date.

5. The following Tables, referable to the annexed illustrated ichnography and sciagraphy of the place, will convey a clearer idea of the description of these interesting remains.

Table I.

The dark and shaded lines show the entrance and shaft. The dotted lines mark the general arrangement of the gallery D, the flight of steps *d, d*, etc., and the alleys E and G. A is the landing place, 3 ft. 6 in. below the surface; *a, a, a, a*, mark the four steps leading to it. B is the shaft piercing the vault of the gallery.

Table II.

The dark and shaded lines mark the ichnography of the upper tiers of caves, of those at the sides of the landing place, and the gallery D.

The dotted lines mark the entrance A, and shaft B.
1 is the double tomb at the left side of the landing place.
C is the hollow chamber at the front side; *c* the pit in the middle of it; 2, 3, 4, the cells at its sides;
5, 6, and 7, are the cells of the right upper tier;
8, 9, and 10, those of the left upper tier.

Table III.

The dark and shaded lines show the ichnography of the gallery, its alleys and lower tiers of caves.

D marks the gallery; *d, d, d,* &c. the steps leading to it;

11 and 12 mark the cells of the lower tier dexter.

E is the passage, or alley, through the first cave on the left; *e* the pit by its entrance;

13 and 14 mark the tombs on one of the sides of the preceding passage.

F points out the vault communicating, through *f.* with the passage E, and preceding the cell marked 15 decorated with coats of arms; 16 is the third cell of the lower tier sinister.

G marks the terminal alley;

17 is the first cell on its right side;

18 is the second cell with decorations, on the same side;

19 and 20 the two cells on the left side of the alley.

Tables IV and V illustrate the sciagraphy of the sides, dexter and sinister, of the entrance, gallery, and terminal alley.

In Table VI are illustrated the principal engraved decorations within some of the cells, and in the walls of the gallery.

No. 1 is a decoration, resembling a T cross reversed, at the head elevation of cell No. 15; *a, a,* are the two raised platforms.

No. 2. is the engraving of three bends sinister, apparently crossed by a barrulet, at the end elevation of the same cell. These simple decorations are sure hints of the early devices of Mediæval Heraldry.

No. 3. is the decoration, looking like a sacred vessel, at the head elevation of cell No. 18. This decoration is quite similar to the drawings III and IV in Table XVIII of *Malta Illustrata* by Count Ciantar, exhibiting some of the sculptures found on the slabs, covering the sepulchres of the old cemetery near St. Austin Gozo.

No. 4. is an illustration of a palm-branch, scratched on the left side of entrance of cell No. 12. Traces of another palm-branch are at the right of the entrance to chamber C.

No. 5 is a cross, carved inside a circle on the face of the rock in the gallery, between passage E and cave F.

No. 6. is a cross on the left side of entrance to cave No. 9.

6. We are, evidently, dealing with a Pagan Hypogeum converted into a Christian Catacomb by adding a cemeterial gallery and other details to it.

The complete contrast of characters between the pagan tombs and the christian sepulchres, and the occurrence of those characters coupled together in this singular instance, as far as I am aware of, in Malta, deserves to be fully demonstrated.

1st. Both the pagan tombs and the christian catacombs in Malta are hewn out of the living rock, without any masonry.

The *Fossors*, or grave diggers of the catacombs, however, have evidently taken the greatest possible care to hide the entrance to the christian cemetery from the profane, and to screen it from the vigilance of persecutors, as we observe in the catacombs of the suburb of Notabile. But the Pagans, just as it could be easily inferred from the local circumstances of the present hypogeum, and of a great number of heathen tombs existing in Malta, did not take any precaution to thoroughly conceal the inlet to their sepulchres.

It could not, then, be doubted, that the anterior, external, portion of this hypogeum is pagan; whilst it is certain, that its posterior, hidden, enlargement is christian.

2nd. In the pagan hypogeums, which very seldom penetrate a great depth below the surface, and have no need of light and ventilation through air-holes, mere caves only are observable, without any subterranean gallery attached to them. When these caves are intended for one interment, they open outside directly; they have an antichamber, when they are destined for a family tomb, like those in the entrance of the hypogeum tal-Liebru; and they are arranged in tiers, with an overt passage in front, when they are clustered together on a slope, or a cliff. A chamber, besides, for washing and dressing the dead, with other minor details, is very common in the clustered tombs.

In the christian catacomb, which lies deeper in the rock, a flight of steps conducts the visitor into a subterranean gallery and alleys, which must be supplied from above with an *aeroforum* for light and ventilation, like those mentioned in the description of this hypogeum. On both sides of the gallery and alleys receptacles for dead bodies are excavated, in two or more tiers. In the larger catacombs, like those of Notabile, these galleries intersecting each other into labyrinths, and forming crypts and *cubicula*, are repeated in several stories.

The topography, and internal construction, of the single and family tombs in the anterior portion of the hypogeum tal-Liebru prove, then, decidedly its pagan origin; whilst the cutting of a gallery, with the other particulars, across what was certainly a third pagan cave demonstrates its subsequent adoption by the Christians of the place.

3rd. The christian *loculi*, or graves, are narrow and shallow troughs, made to the size of the body, wide at the head and

narrow at the feet. They are, generally, excavated lengthways of the gallery, and arranged in tiers, looking like low shelves one above the other. These shelves are open in front, and the graves themselves are closed by horizontal slabs, resting on a ledge left on purpose. By some of the graves small incaves are observable, to receive small terracotta lamps, or glass vessels of scent. The Christian family tomb in the catacombs is, generally, an *arcosolium*, namely, a low arched excavation in the wall of the gallery, leaving a hollow niche, intended to remain open and empty, between the vault and a flat surface underneath, below which the *loculi* are constructed. The whole work, however, is executed with as much regard to economy of site in the graves destined for the reception of two or more bodies (*bisoma*, *trisoma*, *quadrisoma*), as to have the place of the feet of one body by the head of the other.

These particulars are illustrated by fig. VII, showing the sciagraphy of a small portion of the Catacomb of St. Paul, at Notabile.

The pagan caves, as they are constantly found in Malta, are true *ædiculæ*, or small vaulted cells, more or less lofty, and roomy enough to contain some jars besides the body of the dead. Their interior construction is made to one type, having a raised platform with a moonshaped cavity, adapted for the reception of the head, besides two or more small cavities to place in glass or earthen vessels, lamps, &c. These cells are walled up in front by the same rock into which they are excavated, having only a vertical, nearly square, opening, dug into an arched cornice, which is closed by a single rectangular slab.

Now, in the hypogeum tal-Liebru, in place of the *ocular* arrangement of the Christian cemetery, we observe the pagan *ædicular* construction. Yet, it is clear by the presence of so many crosses, and christian symbols, in the gallery and at the entrance of the cells, that it was used as a christian burial place.

7. The time, when this Pagan hypogeum was converted into a Christian one, is, I think, a matter of mere conjecture.

We must dismiss the supposition, that the Pagans and the early Christians made use of the same burial ground. On the one side, the Pagans so exclusive in their mode of burying, would never have admitted the hated, contemned, and persecuted Christians, to share their sepulchres. On the other hand, the Christians would never have borne their cemetery to be profaned by the idolatrous rites, accompanying heathen funerals.

Moreover, no consideration of any nature would lead us to surmise, that the transformation of a pagan into a christian burial place was operated in the early centuries of Christendom.

Besides the striking conflict between the primitive architectural arrangement of the *loculi*, *arcosolia*, *cubicula*, and crypts, in the Christian cemetery, and the *ædicular* construction of the pagan hypogeums, it would have been impossible for the following reasons:

1st. The practice of using the same grave a second time, is of comparatively recent introduction into the discipline of the Church. The early Christians took Our Lord's burial as their pattern. Graves, that once had been occupied, were never returned to use, much more so heathen ones.

2nd. In my Memoir on the Recent Discoveries at Notabile, §§ 14, 15, 16, I have proved Comm. Abela's, and other historians', opinion to be untenable, about the rapid conversion of the native population *en masse* to Christian faith, by the preaching of St. Paul at Malta. I have demonstrated, that, side by side with an invariable local tradition, attested by monuments, with ample uncontested historical evidence, which clearly prove, that the faith, preached by the Apostle, was received in these islands, we have the authority of Ptolemy celebrating the temple and worship of Hercules, in A. D. 196; and several local Roman inscriptions, testifying to the restoration of the temples of Proserpine and Apollo, together with the existence of the *Seviri Augustales*, and the Dignity of *Flamen Divi Augusti*, up to the time, very nearly, of Aurelius Constantius. Moreover, that the necessity of celebrating the Divine Mysteries in our catacombs is itself an evidence, that Heathenism was the only public worship allowed in Malta; and that, consequently, the process of conversion to Christianity has been, as elsewhere, slow though progressive, and as elsewhere, compelled to privacy and seclusion by pagan intolerance. Hence, it would be impossible to fancy the appropriation of a pagan hypogeum by the Christians, until the complete collapse of Heathenism.

8. After the emergence of the Church of the Fathers from the Church of the Catacombs, and the concession to Christians to worship publicly, Church Discipline, both Latin and Greek, provided *dormitories* for christian interments within the precincts of a church, and the use of this privilege was only refused as a canonical penance. This change could not, then, have taken place, canonically, after the General Peace of the Church, and as long as the Emperors of the East held possession of these islands. Nor, for similar reasons, could it have happened, after and ever since the Norman Conquest, which delivered the islands of Malta from the yoke of the Arabs, in A. D. 1090.

9. It remains, then, to be investigated, under what circumstances the Arabs were led to take hold of these islands, and what kind of Rule the Moslem invaders of Northern Africa, of Spain, of Sicily, and the adjacent islands, held over the Rum,

or the native Christians, in Malta. This brings us to the epoch, we are seeking for.

We can only draw our information from funds, recently published, of Cufic literature, to which we might add a valuable contribution by collecting our own cufic epigraphs (1).

The conquest of the islands of Malta was undertaken under Abu al-Garaniq Muhammad ibn abu Ibrahim Ahmad of the Aghlabite Princes, Emir of Africa, and Prince of *al-Qayrawan* in the year 869. The next year, Muhammad ibn Hafagah, Emir of Sicily, sending an army to raise the siege laid to Malta by the Greeks, completed the conquest (2). The precise date of the capture of Malta by the Arabs, given in the *Tarik Gazirat Si-quilliah* (the Chronicle of Cambridge) (3), is the 29th. August 870.

10. Undoubtedly, at this time, a Latin and a Greek element, which had long before been introduced, still existed in the population of these islands.

This might be logically inferred from a numerous series of inscriptions, testifying to the existence of an early Greek Senate, of later Roman Institutions, of two Roman Municipalities, of Roman Orders of knighthood, laws, habits and manners, artistic taste and skill, in the islands of Malta and Gozo, even under the Eastern Emperors. It is, further, proved by the use, made at that time by the natives, of latin and greek names, such as Publius, Diodorus, Castricius, Deerus, Lutatia, C. Vallius, M. Vallius, Poampus, Claudius, Syrion, Ælia, Flavia, Dapsinus, Cestius, L. Marcius, Pollio Rufus, Dicanilia, Cœlia, Columba, Flavius Titus, Idomenus, Junia, Zosimus, Domesticus, and many others. Moreover, the Ep. XXX, Lib. II, Ind. X; and LXII, Lib. VII, Ind. II, of St. Gregory the Great, ordering a canonical process for the deposition of Lucillus, a Latin, Bishop of the Church of Malta; and convening the clergy and people of this Diocese to appoint Trajanus his successor, another Latin from Valeria in the Abruzzi, prove the Latin Church supremacy in Malta, at least, up to the seventh century. Whereas, the presence of the Greek Manas, as a Bishop of Malta, taken prisoner in Sicily, together with his Greek comrades, by the Arabs, shows the Greek ascendancy towards the epoch we are touching.

(1) I chose to be somewhat diffuse on the following subject of our National History, to correct some common opinions, hitherto exclusively grounded on the one-sided authority of the greek panegyrists of the Byzantine Emperors.

(2) See *Kamil at-tawarik* (Annals) of Ibn al-Atir, who fought with Saladin in 1160; and *Kitab al-Ibr* of Ibn Haldun; edited, respectively, by Tornberg in 1871, and Baron De Slaine.

(3) Edited by Caruso, at Palermo, in 1716, from the text at Cambridge.

But neither the Latin, nor the Greek race, had ever prevailed over the stock of the native population. The permanent possession, up to this day, of a native language thoroughly alien to either Greek or Latin, which, considerably altered by its akin the Arabic, is the present vernacular, tells enough on the subject.

It happened otherwise in Sicily, where the Latins and the Greeks, equally numerous, having already absorbed the native races, were always fiercely contending between themselves for ascendancy. The Greek race, then, ruling in Sicily, crushed by the Arabs, gave way to the Latins; and the Latin language, unable to bear any modification from the Arabic, dying away gave rise to the Italian vernacular, now there spoken.

11. The successes of the Arabs, first in Sicily, and then in Malta, were mainly due to these permanent contentions between those two races, and especially to the ferocious religious strifes, provoked by Iconoclast and Monothelist Emperors, by the odium against Imperial Despotism, by burdensome extortions of imperial officers, and by all the crimes of a rotten Administration. In several instances, the help of the Arabs was even sought for by Latin Municipalities, which preferred to pay their *harag*, or tribute, to the Arabs, after securing their persons and wealth, religious toleration, and, in some instances, their social institutions. In other cases, when no resistance was offered to the Conquerors, towns were reduced to the condition of *disma*, or vassalage, nearly on the same terms.

12. In Malta, after the massacre of the Greek garrison, the rest of the Greek population, without means of ransom, was reduced to bondage, and allowed to live only in some of the quarters of the old town, near Bieb el-Gharrekin. The natives, who, either tired of the misgovernment of the Greeks, or powerless, had offered no resistance, were spared in the Arabs' own interest, to have the place cultivated. They were, accordingly, reduced to a state of vassalage, as all places taken by force of arms, their lives and wealth being secured by an *Aman*, regulating the civil rights commonly granted by the Arabs to their vassals. A text of this *Aman* was preserved by Mawerdi, in *Ahkam Sultania*, a kind of treatise on Public Right.

These vassals were prohibited to carry arms; to ride horses; to dress asses or mules; to build houses to the height of those of the Moslems. They were compelled to wear always a sign on their dress, and keep one in their houses, so as to have them distinguished from those occupied by the Mahomedans. Every authority of the Christians was abolished; public property was confiscated on behalf of the Mahomedan Commonwealth; religious toleration was regulated by a special *Aman*. But personal

security was thoroughly protected, towards the payment of the *gezia* (personal tax), and that of property towards the payment of the *harag* (land tax), as also the maintenance of local laws and manners, all citizens enjoying equal civil rights in the eye of the law.

13. Under these circumstances, we glean from contemporary Arabic Annalists, that the island of Malta and its population were thriving. Qazwini, in *Atar al-bilad* (1), thus describes the island: "Malitah, island near Sicily, rich in everything that is good, and in the blessing of God; about 30 miles in length, well peopled, possessing towns and villages, trees and fruits." And Al-Umari, in *Masalik al-Absar* (2), writes: "Malitah possesses a secure harbour to the east; it abounds in sheep, honey, and fruits." Imad-ad-din (3) gives the particulars about some of the native sages and poets, who of course were Arabs. Amongst these he mentions Ibn as-Samti, al-Maliti; Abu al-Qasim, al-Maliti; and Abu as-Susi, the grandfather of Maymunah, whose tomb was found at Xeuchia, Gozo.

We are, further, informed by Qazwini (4), that the Arabs of Malta, being assailed by the Greeks in 1049, were on the point of being compelled to deliver up their wealth and their wives, together with the place. The Arabs, then, fearing the number of *serfs* (vassals), which exceeded their own, proposed to them, that they should take up arms and aid them in the defence of the island: "If we win, they said, you will enjoy equal rights and liberty forming one body politic with us; otherwise we shall be slain, and you will be slain." These terms were accepted by the *serfs*, the field was won against the Greeks, and the promised social reform was, accordingly, effected, about 41 years before the expulsion of the Arabs from Malta.

14. The kind of religious toleration, alluded to, was, according to circumstances, more or less regulated by the *Aman*, granted to the Christians of Jerusalem by the Caliph Omar. The Christians were forbidden, amongst other particulars:

- to build new churches, or monasteries;
- to restore those in decay, in places inhabited by Mahomedans;
- to show publicly the image of the Cross;
- to ring bells;
- to read the Gospel loud, so as to be heard by Mahomedans;
- to make public funerals, or mourn over their dead;
- to place, or bury, their dead near the Mahomedans.

(1) Text published by Wustenfeld, at Gottingen, in 1849.

(2) Text edited by Amari, at Turin, in 1880, from the Oxfordian Code.

(3) See *Haridad al qasr*, in the Catalogue of Arabic Writers, edited by Prof. Dozy, at Leiden, in 1851, Vol. II.

(4) Op. cit.

15. These limitations, and the absolute forbiddance of any show of public worship, I think, fairly account for the circumstances, under which the natives may have found themselves compelled to use the pagan hypogeum tal-Liebru as a Christian cemetery, especially in places where they had formed centres of their own, apart from those of the Moslems, and where they were not allowed to build any chapel. Indeed, that the Christians had, then, gathered also in this part of the country is proved by the erection, in this place, of the *Vicaria* of Birmiftuh, including Gudia, Safi, Chircop, Tarxien, Luca, and Farrug, which was one of the eight vice-parish Churches dependent from the Cathedral, and instituted by Bishop Gualtieri as early as the rescue of the island from the Arabs took place.

To opine, that the natives had, during the interval, amalgamated with the sturdy race of their Arabic conquerors, is, I think, simply absurd. The triumphant welcome, and ready help lent by them to Count Roger, who had come to deliver them from the Arabs; the immediate restoration of the estates of the Church and of public worship, by their Deliverer; the ready nomination of a Bishop to the place by Urban II, and of Parish priests to the eight *Vicarie* distributed amongst the rural population—demonstrate, beyond any doubt, the perseverance of the Maltese in the faith of their forefathers. This must have debarred them altogether from any mixing up with the Moslems. Likewise, the grant of the *Consiglio Popolare* by Count Roger himself, with a self-government within certain restrictions; the establishment by the Normans of Municipal laws, which subsequently became the basis of the *Constitutiones Regum Siciliae* of Frederick II, and of the *Capitula* of the Kings of Aragon, evidently prove that a shadow, though fading, of the old Roman culture still existed in these islands.

Public Library, Valletta,

22nd. November, 1884.

A. A. CARUANA

Librarian.

I must acknowledge with thanks the facilities afforded to me by the Ecclesiastical Authorities and by Mr. A. Caruana, M. D. the Administrator of the Saura Hospital, in carrying out the above mentioned exploration.