

## A preliminary assessment of the Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum I at Rabat, Malta

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A hypogeum had long been suspected on one side of the staircase leading to the World War II shelter under the Wignacourt Museum. Under surveillance from the Museums Department (Buhagiar C.M. 2000; 49) and through continuous encouragement from the Curator of the Museum Monsignor John Azzopardi, the Grupp Arkeologiku Malti (GAM) decided to take over the work of partially clearing the hypogeum.

The eleventh and thirteenth December 1999 were selected for preliminary work on site, some clearing already being performed on the fifth December by the Qrendi Boy Scout Group. A number of later visits were conducted to finish the preliminary survey of the hypogeum.

### *The pre-medieval burial remains within the Wignacourt Museum*

The area now containing the southern part of Rabat (Malta) is well known for its richness in Punico-Phoenician and late Roman and Byzantine burial archaeological sites (Buhagiar 1986: 49-216; Caruana 1898: 35-36). The Wignacourt Collegiate Museum is certainly no exception, hosting an interesting number of funerary remains (Figure 1).

A number of burial sites were already known from within the premises of the Wignacourt Museum (Azzopardi 1990: 366). This heritage may already have been encountered when parts of this edifice were under

construction (Buhagiar 1990: 55). In the autumnal months of 1983 a hypogeum leading to one side of St. Paul's Grotto was rediscovered (Figure 1.2). This was subsequently excavated and later surveyed (Buhagiar 1990: 55-62).

In 1998, one of the present authors (AB) had accompanied Mr. Keith Buhagiar and Ms. MariaElena Zammit to assess the presence of an exedra and a baldacchino tomb within the garden behind the Museum (Figure 1.6). The location and arrangement of the remains make compatible identification with the rector's garden hypogeum (Buhagiar 1986: 68, Figure 13E) likely.

Monsignor Azzopardi pointed to us another mutilated hypogeum. This may still be found along the stairway, which from the underground World War II shelter led into the nearby school. Loculi and remains of what are probably window tombs were noticed here.

A further tomb was noticed closer to the shelter's outer entrance. In this part of the shelter, a cistern mutilated the lower part of a shaft and chamber tomb preserving some deposits in the shaft which may still be noted in situ (Figure 1.3).

The walls of one of the storerooms in the inner garden contain a number of depressions and recesses (Figure 1.10). Only an appropriate survey in the future may throw light on whether these are remains of hypogea or the *grotta con cortile e adito* mentioned in the notarial documents (Azzopardi 1990: 361; Buhagiar 1990: 55).

Another addition to the already rich archaeological heritage was the rediscovery of features from a hypogeum found along the staircase communicating the Museum to St. Paul's Grotto (Figure 1.4). Examinations performed by GAM members and the youth members of Din l-Art Helwa had to be suspended, following considerations into the stability of the overlying road. Remains of a chamber may be noted on the other side of the staircase.

Interest in the potential of a rock-cut feature suggestive of a burial site was aroused in the last months of 1999 and eventually led to excavation of the hypogeum studied in this paper (Figure 1.5).

### *Preliminary Assessment*

The group entered rather late in the investigations, when over a metre of deposit had already been removed from the hypogeum. At this stage the various rock cut features exposed (F1 to F8) were identified and labelled (Figure 2), while the deposits were numbered to facilitate cross-reference during the investigations.

A roughly rectangular opening (F8) to one side of a flight of steps leading into World War II shelter provides modern access to the hypogeum. Monsignor John Azzopardi informed us that at least half a metre of the lower part of this feature had been recently removed to allow a better access into the hypogeum.

A chamber with oven-like opening (F2) and a rectangular cavity (F3) were found open and disturbed while the openings to what appeared as two baldacchino tombs (F1 and F5) were not visible. A rectangular opening (F6) was identified in the southern side of the hypogeum, while the nature of an arched recess (F4) was already known to be a funerary exedra as the lip of its mensa element was exposed. Another arched recess (F7) was also noted.

A deposit containing globigerina chippings and rubble [1] extended over most of the upper parts of the hypogeum. It occupied the space above F1 but the levels found around this tomb were lower, exposing the openings to F2 and F3. The stone chippings also covered the rectangular space to the west of F4, most of F4 and the space between F5 and F7, but sparing the corridors east and north of F5. It is likely that the deposit removed by previous workers on site was similar to this deposit and filled the hypogeum to within a few centimetres of its ceiling. One of the present authors (AB) had noted, a year earlier, that this

deposit was filling F8 sparing only 0.05 metres of the upper part of the hypogeum. The group was informed that a number of 'modern' bottles were discovered close to F8 but these were not available to study. A soil and stone deposit [2] was noticed to emerge from under the stone chippings and extended into the upper parts of F6 (Plate 1). Furthermore a number of stones ranging from 0.10 to 0.40m, each covered by a thin layer of soil [9], were noticed immediately to the east of this deposit [2] on the southern part of F4.

### *Interventions and Results*

The interventions made by the group started after this preliminary assessment. Permission from the Museums Department was given to remove the globigerina rubble and to leave the remains of the soil and stone infill [2] for later investigations. Within these guidelines our aim was to study the later activity occurring within the hypogeum without compromising earlier deposits and future excavations on site. Thus, excavations proceeded until the soil-rubble interface was encountered. Once this was achieved a few centimetres of globigerina chippings were left overlying deeper deposits. Finds were bagged according to context. Indications to their location, with reference to the main features in the hypogeum were also noted.

A roughly rectangular cavity F3 (0.34m high, 1.12m wide and 0.57m deep), containing a single roughly finished headrest in its western end was found in the wall to the south of F1. In front of this cavity, soil was noted on the globigerina rubble and distinct from the soil layer at the bottom of the hypogeum (Figure 3; Plate 2). This fine dark brown soil layer [4] was similar in colour and consistency to that within the rectangular cavity F3. Examinations carried out by the Museum Department are reported to have recovered the bones of 'a baby' from the material in this tomb and the adjoining soil deposit [4] (Anon 2000: 6). Remains of plaster were noticed at the western edge of the opening to this chamber.

Work proceeded by removing the globigerina rubble around tomb F1. Only a few sherds, glass pieces and cans were found within this layer. As a dark brown deposit [3] containing a number of stones found to the west of F1 was likely to be disturbed due to its position close to the modern entrance, clearing of this small mound of soil was performed. This deposit, restricted to the corridor west of F1, was 0.10metres in height in its middle section and thinned out as it approached the northwest and southwest corner of F1. Animal bones

together with a few sherds and modern material were noted within this deposit. This soil layer covered a reddish brown soil deposit, which extended in the corridors north, west and south of F1. It was in the latter area that continuity with the soil and stone deposit [2] was established.

To the north of F1 a rectangular opening (0.44m wide and 0.60m high) in an arched recess (0.75m wide and 0.70m high) leads into an oval chamber (1.67m long and 1.10m wide). In the upper layers of this tomb (F2) a fine globigerina powdery layer [5] was found lying over globigerina chippings mixed with lumps of a compact sterile light brown clayey soil [6]. These two layers rested over and totally covered a dark brown soil deposit [7] from which bones retrievable in fragmentary nature were observed.

A baldacchino tomb F1 occupies the space between F2 and F3. This baldacchino tomb is 2.80metres long and 1.50 metres wide and revealed plastering on its flat upper surface and most of its southern and eastern sides (Plate 3). Two superimposed hand impressions, probably applied by the medial four fingers of a left hand are found within the plastering at the north-eastern corner. Curvilinear impressions (0.5 to 1.0mm) on the plastering were noticed on the southern and eastern side of this tomb, but these impressions were absent from the upper surface of the tomb, which was exceptionally smooth.

When clearing was effected to the east of F1, a layer of compact sterile light brown soil 0.05m thick [8] was found 1.20 meters below the ceiling (Plate 4). This layer was similar in colour and consistency to the lumps of clayey soil in context [6] discovered within the window tomb. Once again only few finds were found within the globigerina chippings here. The group's work allowed partial uncovering of the entrance into the two baldacchino tombs. Various human bones were observed inside both baldacchino tombs, long bones appearing to be particularly well represented (Plate 5). The occasional pottery sherd was also noted within the funerary chambers. The remaining globigerina chippings around F5 and on F4 were removed following the guidelines indicated above.

This work allowed a better assessment of the other baldacchino tomb (F5) in the hypogeum. Measuring 2.40 metres in length and 1.50 metres wide, this baldacchino tomb is unusual in having a convex northern end and a concave eastern side, and is characterised by a saddleback upper surface. A human

femoral head was noted at the northwestern corner on the tomb's upper surface.

The two sides containing the opening to the Baldacchino tombs form the northern and western sides of a rectangular space. This space is enclosed on the eastern and southern side by a funerary triclinium (F4) and an opening (F6) respectively. This last feature is a framed rectangular opening (F6) measuring 1.12 metre in width and at least 0.50metre in height. On its southern side a wider bordering frame was noticed. Evidence of a horizontal arc cut in stone was noticed above this opening on its southern side, further details being lost within the fill [2] to the south of the rectangular feature.

The funerary triclinium (F4), 2.60m wide and 1.80m deep, occupies the eastern end of the hypogeum. Its upper surface is characterised by a circular mensa having a diameter of 0.94 metres, a lip 0.11 metres wide and 0.02 metres high. The present stage of excavations did not allow assessment of further details of this feature. A ledge of rock above the exedra contains remains of six lamp holes. These lamp holes are roughly hewn in a triangular or rectangular shape and face westwards (Figure 6; Plate 6).

To the west of F5, an arched recess (F7) has a rough niche and a central rectangular excavation; the area immediately in front of this feature was left uncarved for a height of about 0.5m and length 1.70m.

Other details may be noted in the hypogeum. In the sides closest to the exedra, the upper parts of the corridors south of F1 and west of F5 reveal a concave curvature forming a semicircular apsidal adornment. A number of other lampholes were noticed, and their position marked on the section drawings (Figure 5). Two deeply incised numbers (19 and 1941) were found on the walls north and south of F1 respectively. Faint horizontal black lines were noticed on the inner sides of the baldacchino arrangement to F1, while more pronounced areas with black discolouration were noticed in other parts of the hypogeum

### *Interpretation*

#### *Classical History*

The various architectural features visible reveal that the Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum I can be comfortably included to other underground burial sites of the late Roman and Byzantine periods found on the Maltese Islands (Buhagiar 1986). Its location is certainly interesting as a number of authors have identified in

the depression containing St. Paul's Parish Church and St. Rita street, the vestiges of the ditch to ancient Melitae (Bonanno 1992: 19; Caruana 1898: 85; Trump 2000: 127). The location of the Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum 1 and the richness of burial sites within the Museum and the immediate vicinity find a meaning in the reconstruction of the ancient classical landscape. Considered together, these sites are a testimony to the prohibition by Roman law for burial within the city walls and the extensive necropolis arising beyond the surrounding ditch.

The opening F6 was the original access into the hypogeum. It is still unclear whether the present arrangement is part of a larger complex or is served by a staircase to an opening above. The entrance (F6) led into a rectangular space, which was illuminated by lamps placed in the holes above the exedra to the east. Such arrangement, containing lampholes on the exedra, recalls that present at Tar-Raghad hypogeum.

Excavations have revealed four tombs in the hypogeum. Tomb F1 has been identified as a troughless baldacchino tomb while F5 is a saddled-back baldacchino or canopied tomb (classification as proposed by Buhagiar 1986: 23 is here being followed). The larger size, more detailed finishing and plastering in most of the eastern and southern sides of Baldacchino F1 (2.80m by 1.80 metres) reveals that this was probably a more important tomb or was finished earlier than tomb F5. The plastering and position of baldacchino tomb F1 with respect to the exedra make comparisons with a similar arrangement at the nearby St. Catald noteworthy and such arrangement supports the former hypothesis. On the other hand, the presence of the unfinished feature F7 does not exclude that work on tomb F5 was also left unfinished.

Another burial chamber F3 has all the features of a loculus, evidence from the bones confirming that this tomb served as the burial place for an infant. Although F2 still remains to be fully excavated enough features are exposed to suggest a window tomb.

The corridor to the west of tomb F5 appears to have been left unfinished. Recess F7 corresponds to a niche of window tomb, further excavation probably abandoned as this could have resulted damage to the window tomb F2. It is interesting to note that unfinished features appear to be concentrated in the northern part of the hypogeum. Once again this may suggest that this part was the last part of the burial place to be dug. Notwithstanding, there is nothing in

the southern part of F5 to suggest that this part of the hypogeum was dug as an afterthought.

The small size of the hypogeum suggests that this burial site may be included with others classified as family or private hypogea (Buhagiar 1986: 42).

#### *Later history*

The final assessment of the later history of the hypogeum will only be possible through further work on site. A preliminary opinion is being expressed here which hopefully will be revised with further excavations. Short of such work it appears that an early event to occur on site was the opening of tombs. The presence of skeletal remains contrasts with the apparent relative absence of pottery within the chambers. This may suggest a selective pottery looting of the site from treasure hunters or for materia prima in making *deffun*. Furthermore no particular arrangement can be observed for the bones visible within the chambers of F1 and F5. When considered with the presence of the femoral head on F5, this observation suggests a substantial disturbance to the burial deposits.

The hypogeum then experienced (at an as yet unknown date) a sizable soil deposit through its original entrance F6. It would be interesting to examine whether this deposit is related to the building phases of the Wignacourt Museum. Whatever its source, soil sloped from the entrance and filled most of the hypogeum. It is the high level of deposit within the entrance F6 and the gradual slope into the other parts of the hypogeum that points to the entrance as the source of such material.

It is still unclear whether a rubble heap [9] on the southern part of the exedra entered the hypogeum with these events or was already present on site. Furthermore it pertains to future excavations on site to ascertain whether deposits visible with the bones inside the baldacchino tombs are contemporaneous to the burial or the abovementioned soil deposit.

The hypogeum was accidentally rediscovered again when a stairway to an underground World War II shelter was being cut. Fortunately enough the hypogeum was spared destruction by lying off the projected course of the works and probably by the intervention of Mr. Louis Degiorgio. Graffiti of numbers (1941 and 19) in at least two parts of the hypogeum probably reveal the date of this fortuitous encounter (1941). It is probable that at this stage the

shelter diggers, equipped with candles or lamps that left soot marks on the ceiling, explored the site. A number of lampholes for small candles may have been carved at this time. This is suggested by black soot marks present around some lampholes. Such marks contrast with the red discolouration of the stone resulting from flames with a more complete combustion. The latter have been probably produced from the classical oil lamps.

Interest in exploring the original entrance may have led to the partial removal of its containing deposit. This activity could provide a further alternative explanation for the rubble [9] found on the exedra. The shelter diggers proceeded with their work turning the hypogeum into a convenient place where they could deposit the rubble resulting from the shelter's excavation. This last scenario is suggested by the nature of deposit [2]. The absence of globigerina chippings [2] on the innermost parts of the exedra and the corridor east of F5, together with the concentration of contemporary remains (cans and glass) towards F8 provide further corroborative evidence

The origins of the compact sterile soil layer [8] to the east of F1 is likely to have come from soil-filled fissures found within the rock formations encountered during shelter digging. An alluvial event is one possibility through which this deposit finished as a layer within the hypogeum. Alternatively removal of a sizable original deposit and subsequent disposition within the hypogeum could be a further possibility.

### Conclusion

The results obtained from this preliminary assessment have provided information on this hypogeum comparable to what is available in publications on similar burial places. The presence of four tomb types and an exedra in such a small hypogeum is noteworthy and together they add further interest to the already rich heritage within the Wignacourt Museum.

Through the scope of investigations allowed, insights into the often-neglected post-classical processes effecting the transformation of underground burial places have been gained. Furthermore it is hoped that the preservation of early deposits will in the future allow a full scientific assessment of the remaining deposits as necessitated by the still unanswered questions on this intriguing subject.

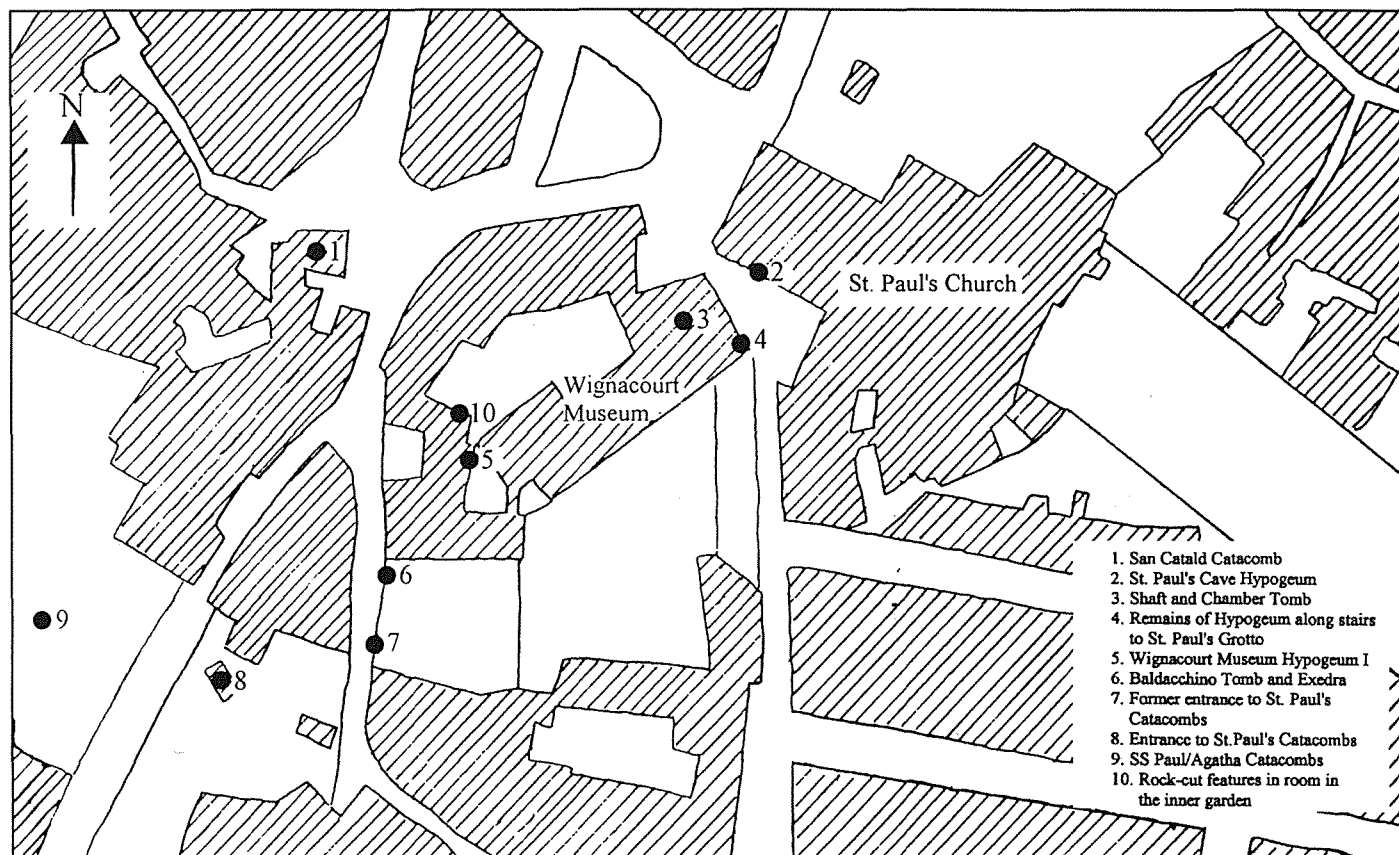
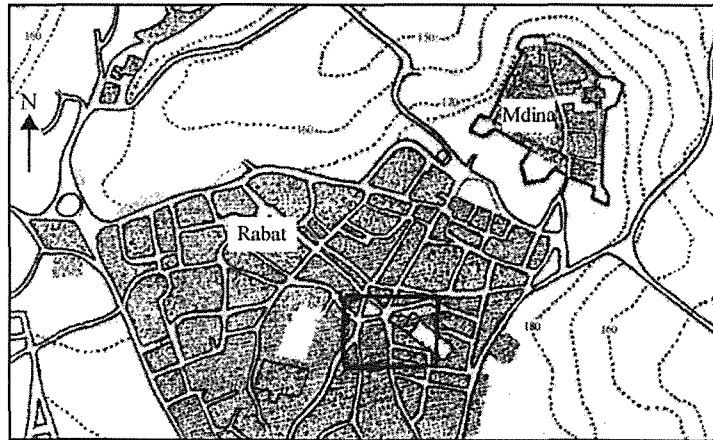
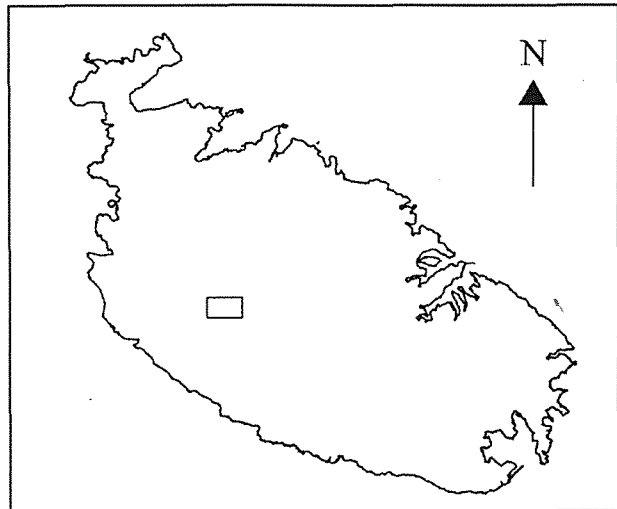
### Acknowledgements

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# Site Plan of Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum I



- 1. San Catald Catacomb
- 2. St. Paul's Cave Hypogeum
- 3. Shaft and Chamber Tomb
- 4. Remains of Hypogeum along stairs to St. Paul's Grotto
- 5. Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum I
- 6. Baldacchino Tomb and Exedra
- 7. Former entrance to St. Paul's Catacombs
- 8. Entrance to St. Paul's Catacombs
- 9. SS Paul/Agatha Catacombs
- 10. Rock-cut features in room in the inner garden



Figure 1

AB 2001

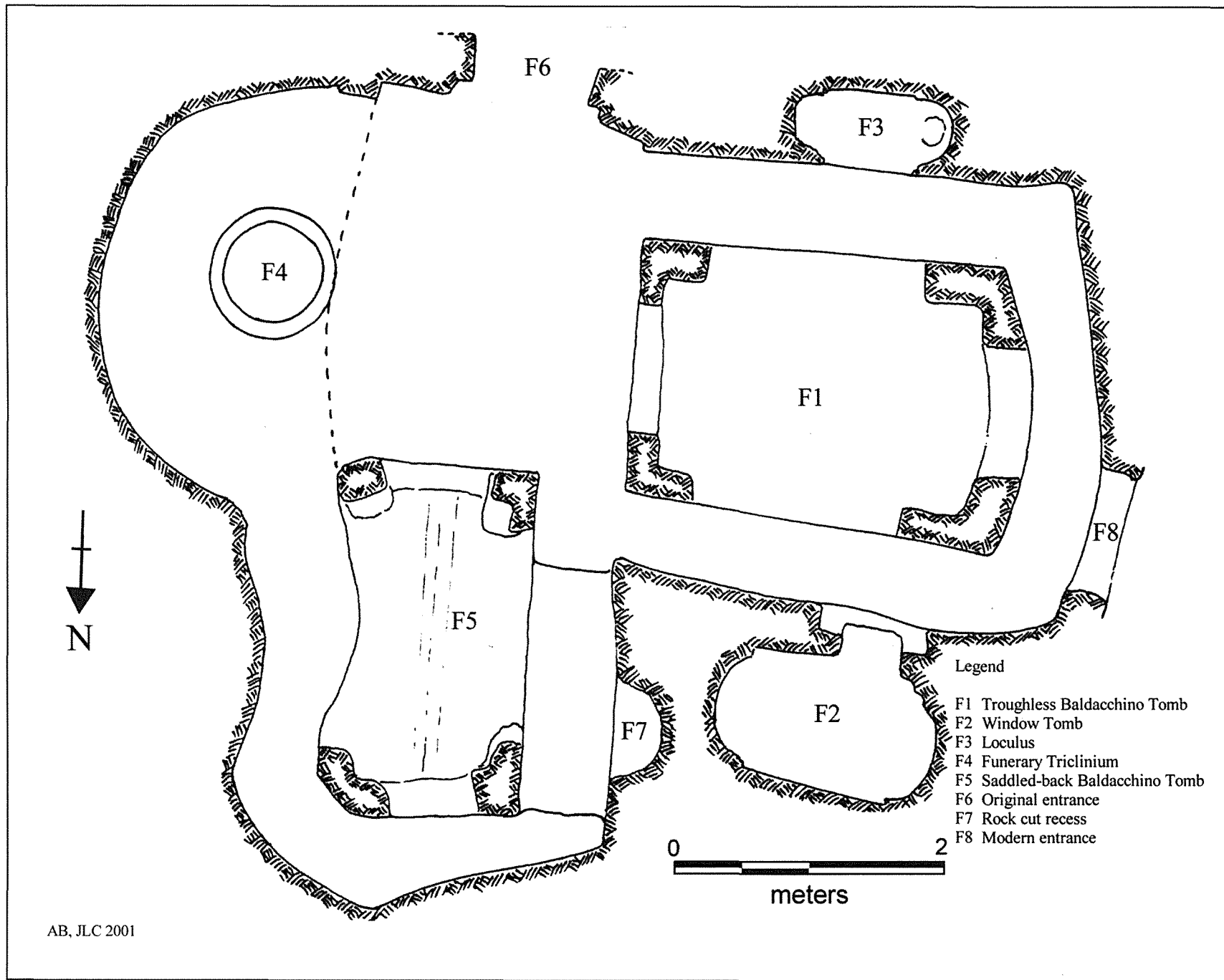
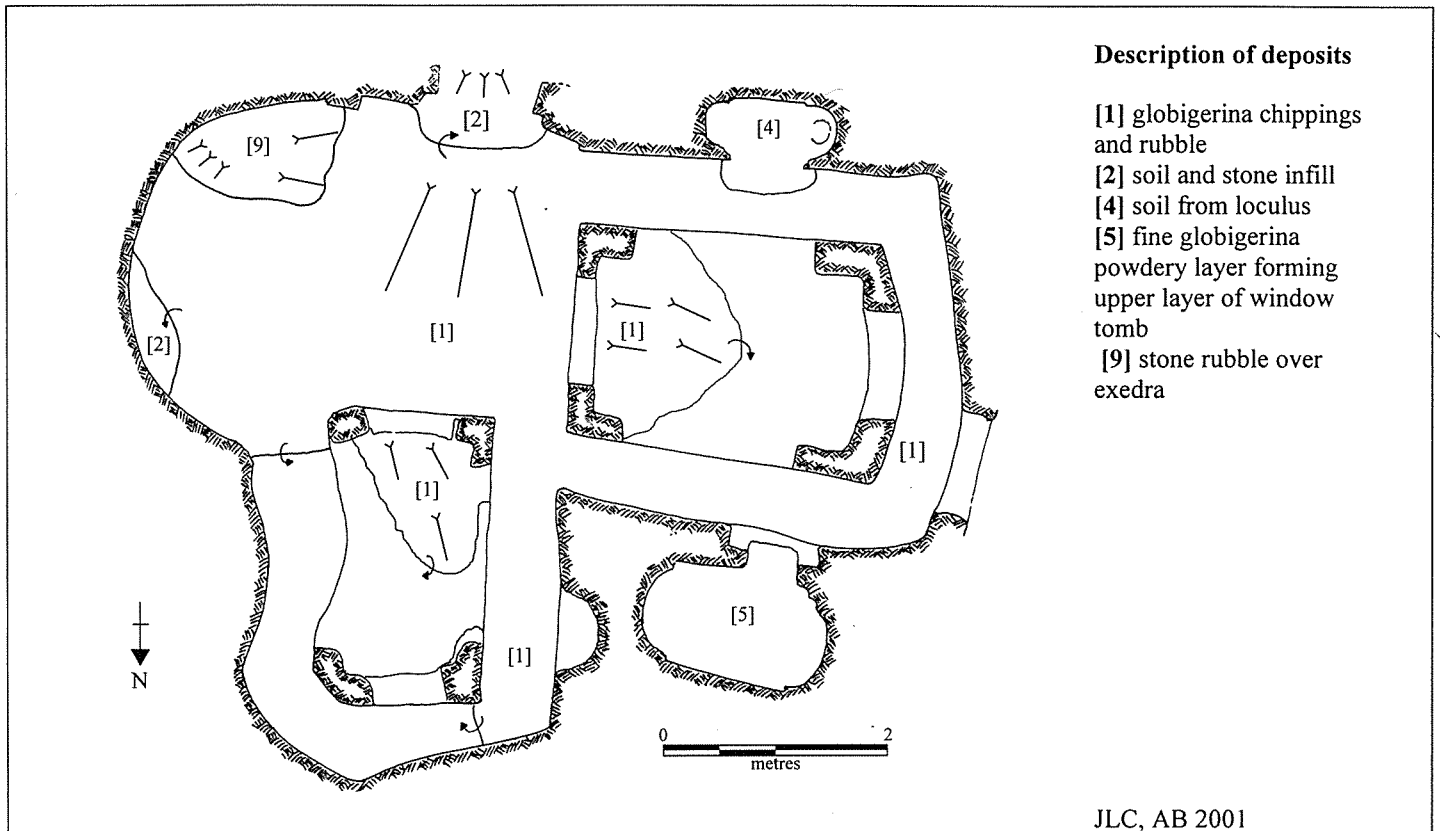


Figure 2: Plan of Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum I



•Figure 3:- Distribution of globigerina chippings [1] and location of other deposits

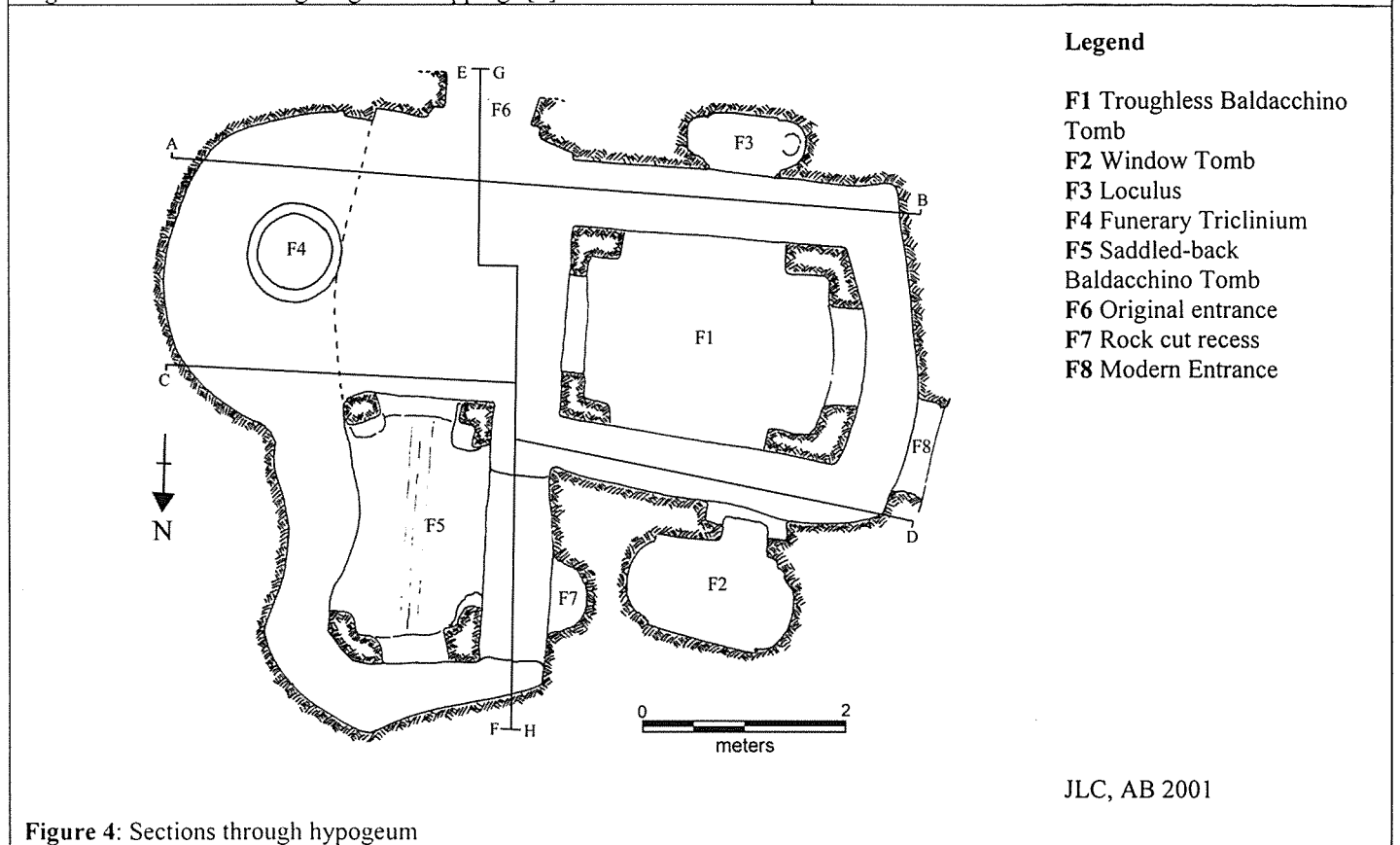


Figure 4: Sections through hypogeum



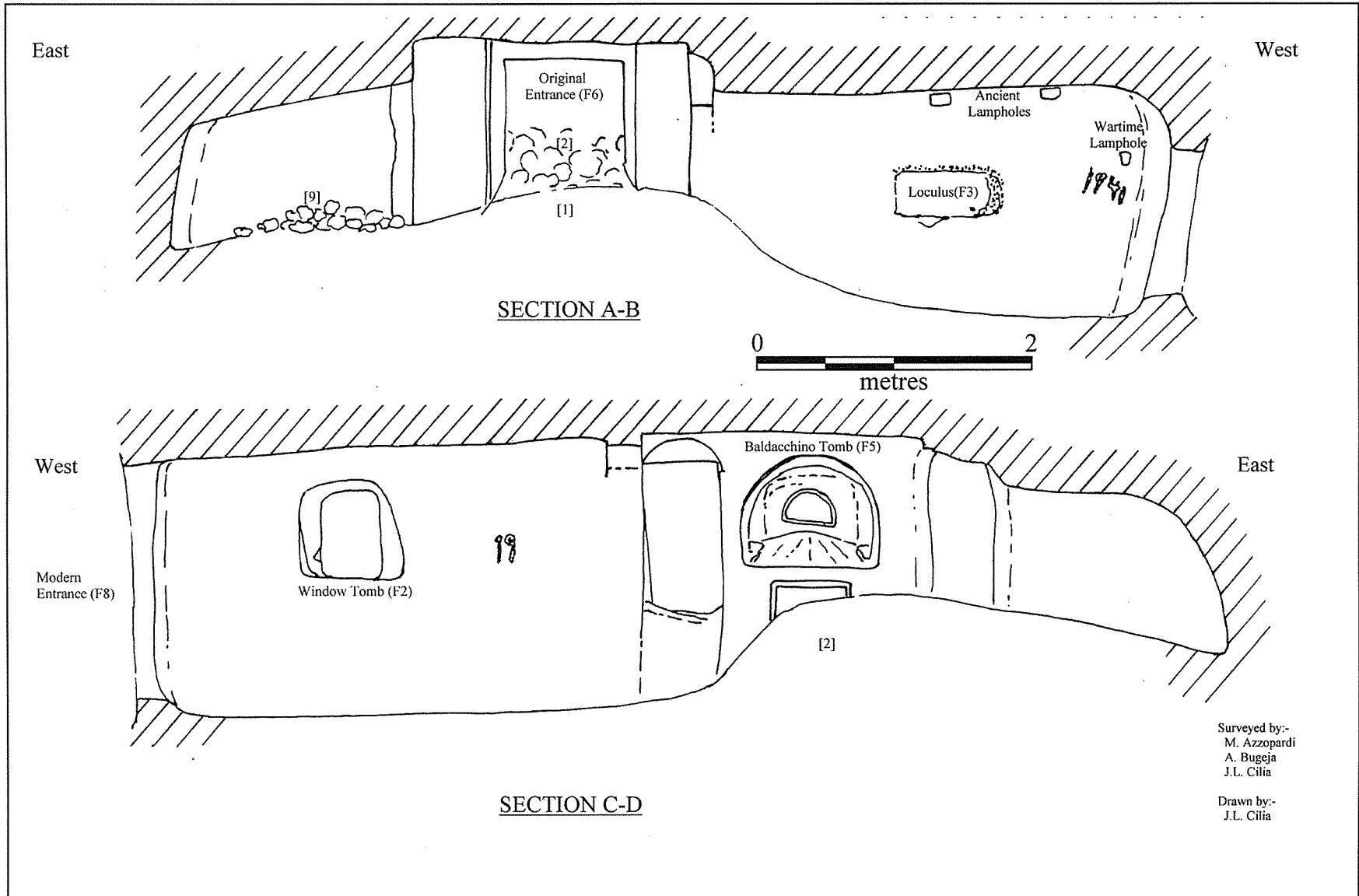


Figure 5: Sections A-B, C-D through Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum 1 as at end of excavations (stippled area represents plastering)

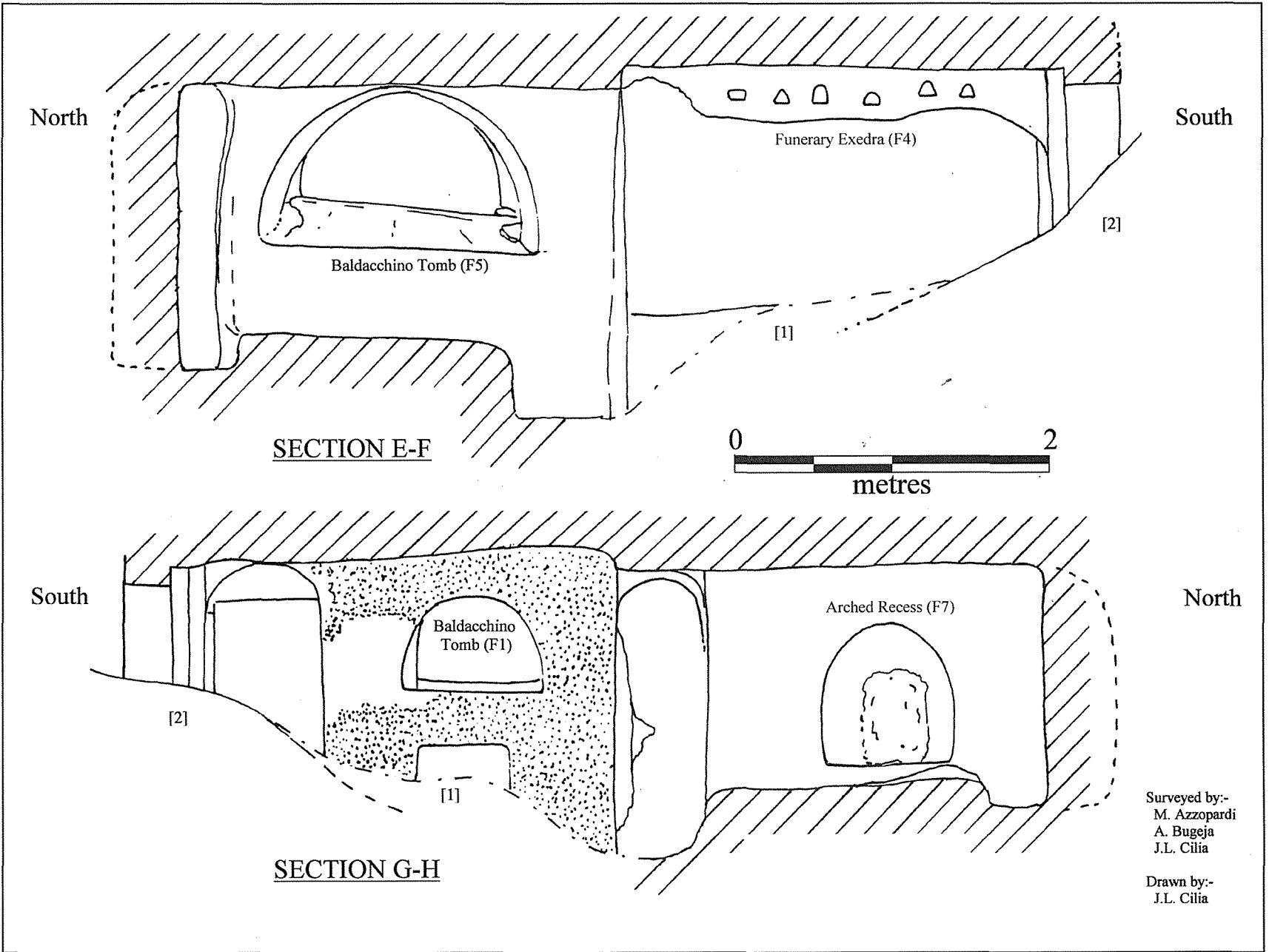
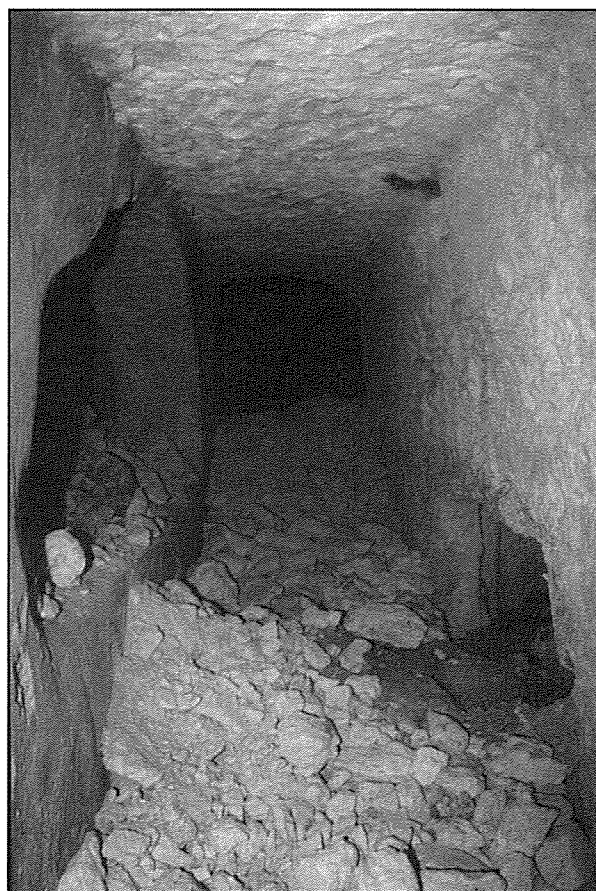


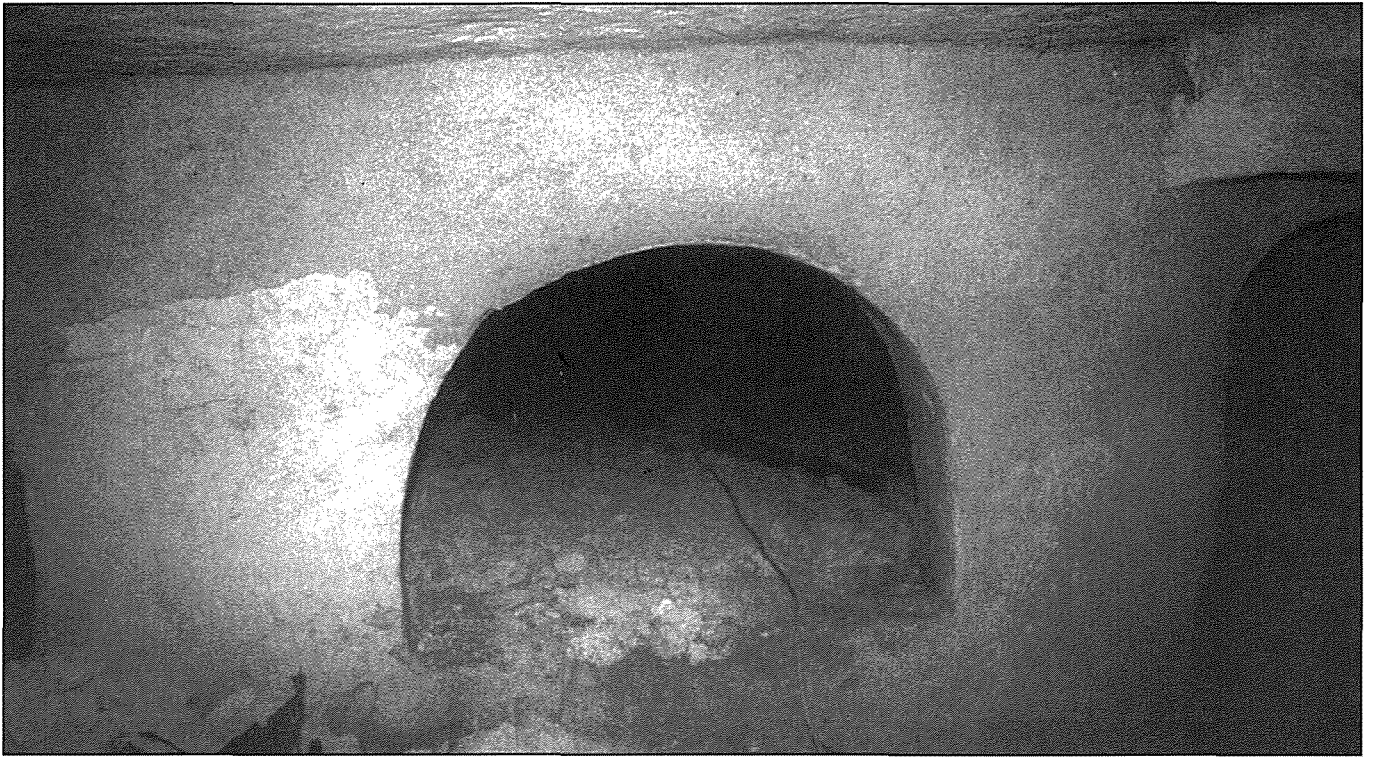
Figure 6: Sections E-F, G-H through Wignacourt Museum Hypogeum I as at end of excavations (stippled area represents plastering)



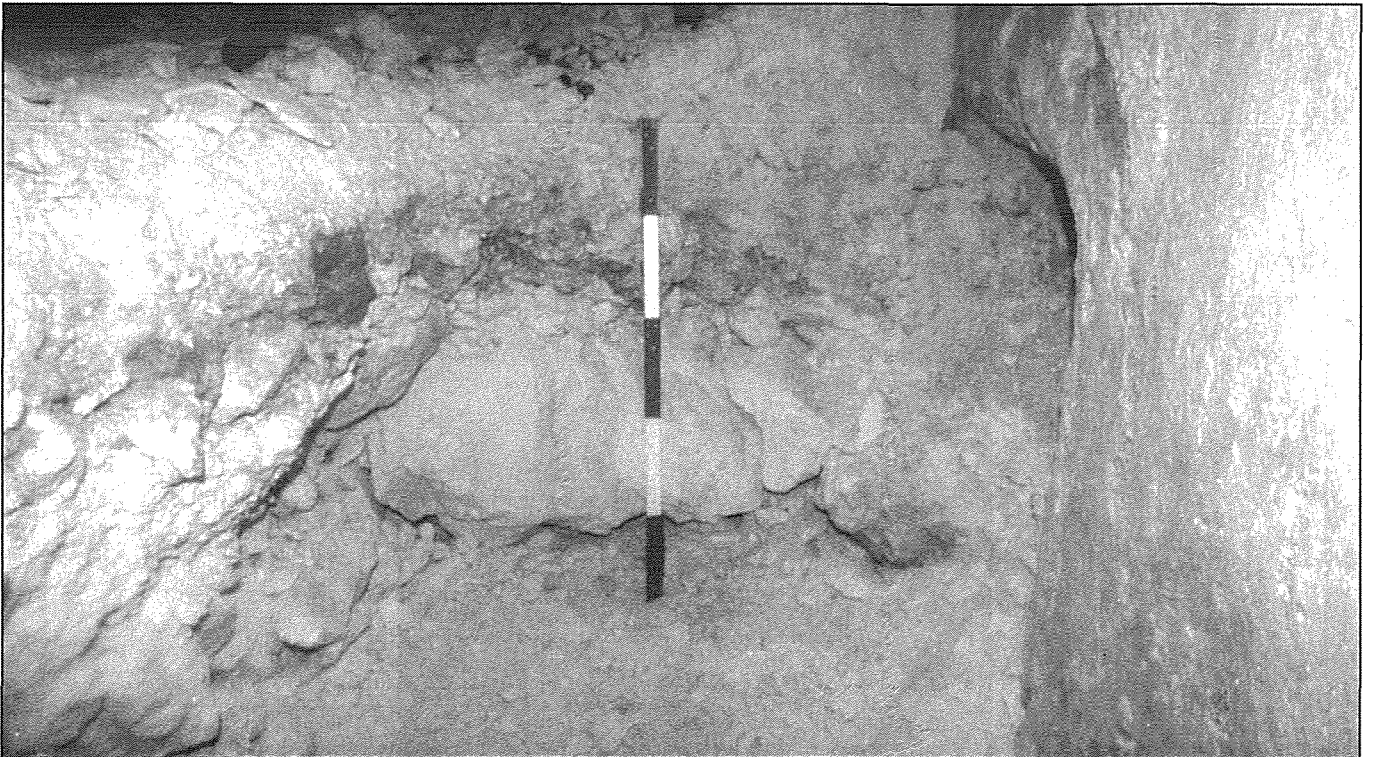
**Plate 1:** Original entrance containing soil below globigerina chippings



**Plate 2:** Soil in front of loculus



**Plate 3:** Cocciopesto on eastern face of Baldacchino F1

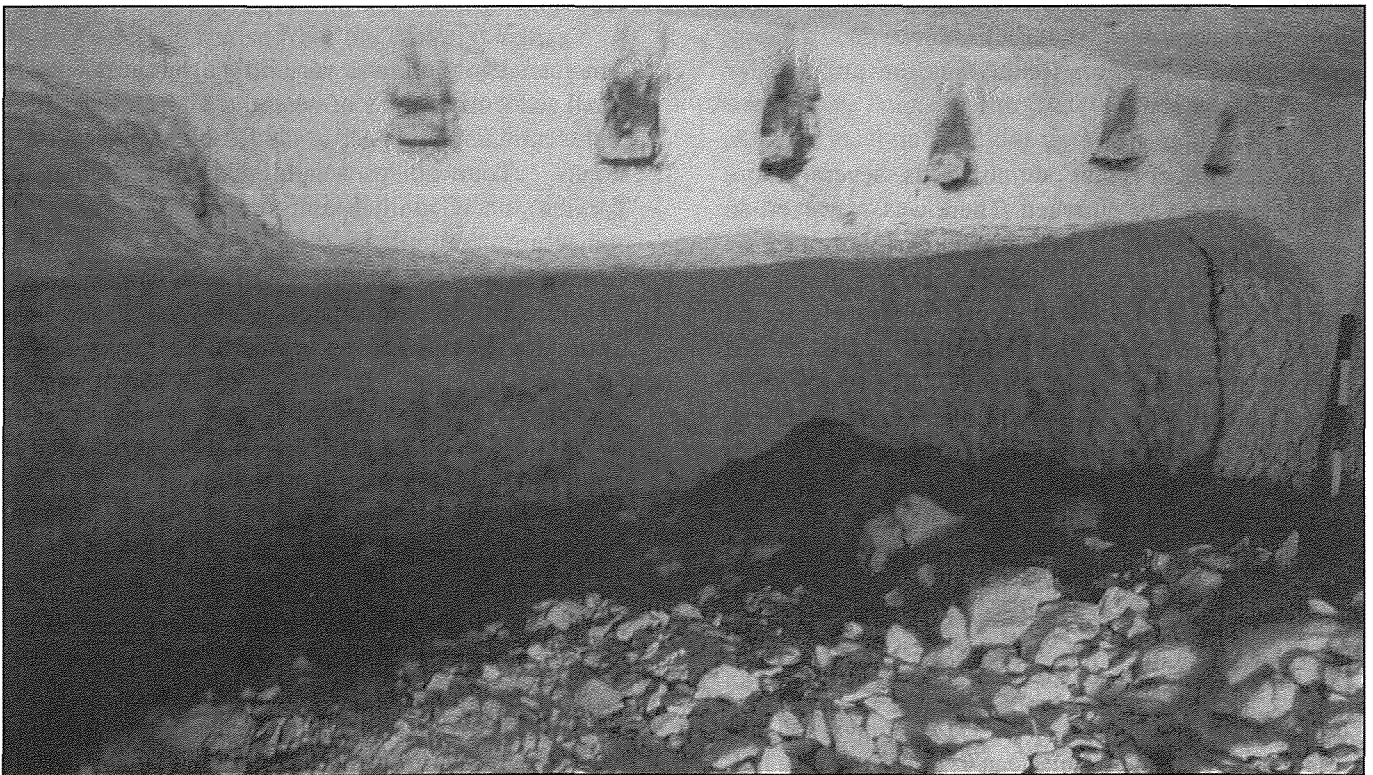


**Plate 4:** Sterile soil layer within globigerina chippings





**Plate 5:** Bones in Baldacchino tomb F5



**Plate 6:** Lampholes over exedra