

# The Terracotta Sarcophagi Discovered at Ghar Barca, Rabat (Malta)

George A. Said-Zammit

The area known as Ghar Barca is located on the south-western part of modern Rabat (*Figure 1*). Up to 1647, when Giovanni Francesco Abela, the father of Maltese historiography, published his monumental work *Della Descrizione di Malta*, this area was still uninhabited.<sup>1</sup> For several centuries this area was utilized mainly for agricultural purposes and until the second half of this century it was still considered as one of the most fertile agricultural districts in the Rabat area. However, since the Second World War this area started to be built over, and today much of the agricultural land has completely perished.

The archaeological importance of this area is confined to a small Punic necropolis, of which no single grave has apparently survived. In a recent systematic survey in this area, the author was unable to trace any Punic tombs. The Ghar Barca tombs were identified between the seventeenth and the late eighteenth centuries. The only information available about these tombs is provided mainly by three authors: Abela, Bres and Mayr.<sup>2</sup> The discovery of another tomb is reported in an anonymous manuscript, dated 30 March 1797.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, much of the information derived from these sources is not very helpful. The available descriptions are very generic, while diagrams of the grave goods were hardly ever produced. This study investigates the available literary sources from an archaeological viewpoint. It analyzes how many terracotta sarcophagi were actually found in the Ghar Barca area and the possible reasons why these coffins were restricted to only a single cemetery.

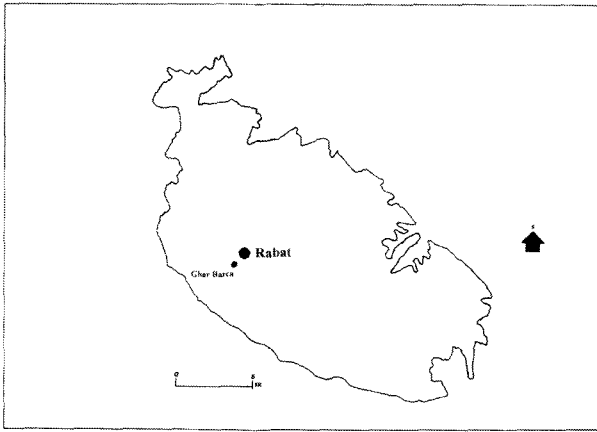
The available sources indicate that, between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, only three tombs were brought to light in this area. The first tomb was discovered in 1624, another one in 1698, while the third one was explored in the late eighteenth century. However, there are indications that the Ghar Barca cemetery was probably more extensive.<sup>4</sup> What follows is a short descriptive account of the three tombs which were found between 1624 and 1797 in this area.

1. G.F. Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie*, Malta 1647, 65.
2. O. Bres, *Malta Antica Illustrata co' monumenti e coll'istoria*, Rome 1816; A. Mayr, *Aus der phönikischen nekropolen von Malta*, Malta 1905.
3. Anon, *Descrizione di un sarcofago rinvenuto nei limiti della Città Notabile il di 30 marzo dell'anno 1797*, Malta: Archives of the Venerabile Crypta S. Pauli.
4. Bres, 128.

### ***Tomb 1***

This was found and explored by Abela in 1624.<sup>5</sup> It consisted of a square shaft and a rectangular chamber. The shaft measured 0.75 x 0.75 m. and the chamber was about 2.4 m. long, 1.8 m. wide and 1.8 m. deep. Access to the burial chamber was by a flight of rock-cut steps hewn in one of the walls of the shaft.

In the sepulchral chamber Abela identified a single burial. The skeletal remains of a human being, whose sex and age could not be determined due to the weathered



*Figure 1* - Map of Malta showing the location of Rabat and Ghar Barca.

state of the bones, were found in an anthropoid terracotta sarcophagus (*Figure 2*). It is quite likely that this tomb pertained to a male human being because the cover of this coffin bears the image of a male adult modelled in relief. Abela also states that this coffin was oriented in an eastward-westward direction. In his account, the same author mentions that in this sarcophagus, which was found partly damaged, were also identified two ceramic vases as well as an iron needle. The presence of an iron needle indicates that the body of the deceased person was possibly wrapped in a shroud. This sarcophagus was subsequently conserved in Abela's museum, together with another two similar ones: *quest'urna fictile ... si conserva con altre due nel nostro Casino di S. Giacomo*.<sup>6</sup> The provenance of the other two sarcophagi is completely unknown.

5. Abela, 153.

6. *Idem*.

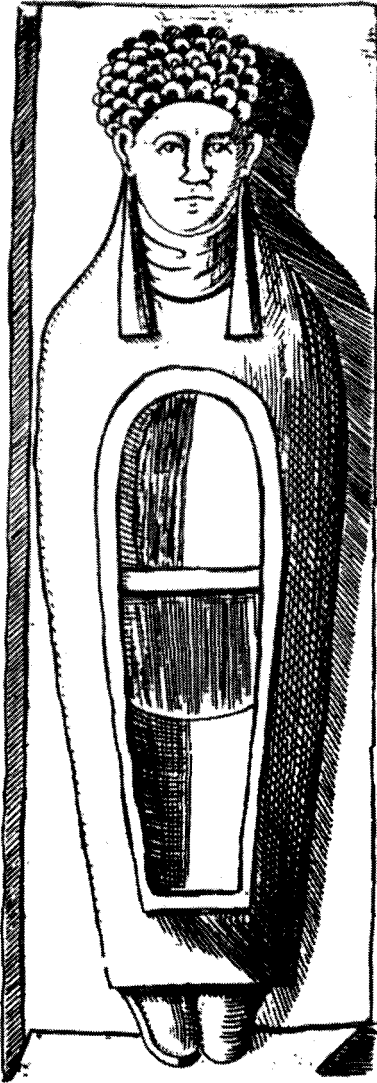


Figure 2

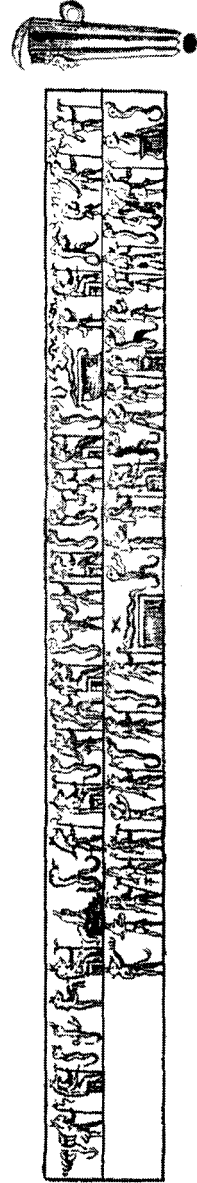


Figure 3

Figure 2 - The anthropoid sarcophagus found in Tomb 1 (after Abela 1647).

Figure 3 - The amulet-container and the accompanying gold foil found in Tomb 2 (after A. Bulifon 1696).

### ***Tomb 2***

This tomb was discovered in 1693.<sup>7</sup> According to Mayr it consisted of a shaft and chamber.<sup>8</sup> In the burial chamber there was a rock-cut platform on which the skeleton of a human being was laid. However, since the skeletal remains were found in a bad state of preservation, its sex and age could not be determined. In the chamber, there were also several glass vessels as well as a gold amulet-container. In the talisman, there was a rolled-up piece of gold foil which was characterized by several engraved images of Egyptian deities and hieroglyphic symbols (*Figure 3*). In 1694, Mons. Ignazio Costanzo donated this amulet and the accompanying foil to Jacopo Cardinal Cantelmo, the Bishop of Naples.<sup>9</sup> A description and a diagram of this amulet were published three years later by Antonio Bulifon in his fourth volume of the *Lettere Memorabili*.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Tomb 3***

Tomb 3 was discovered in March 1797.<sup>11</sup> This tomb consisted of a shaft and chamber and was very similar to Tomb 1. The chamber contained the remains of an inhumed individual, whose age and sex could not be determined since the bones were found in a very poor state of preservation: [il sarcofago] *si trovò ripieno di ossame umano riducentesi in polvere*. The skeletal remains of this person were laid in a terracotta non-anthropomorphic sarcophagus, the cover of which consisted of three rectangular terracotta slabs. It was rectangular in form and measured approximately 1.65 x 0.75 m. (*Figure 4*). The coffin was very simple in form and did not contain any decorative motifs or inscriptions: *senza verun vestigio di lettere ne di figure*.<sup>12</sup> The bottom of this coffin was supported by four small vertical legs. In this same sarcophagus there were also some ceramic vases. It is interesting to observe that the anonymous manuscript, from which our information about this sarcophagus derives, is dated 30 March 1797, but the original paper is watermarked 1807. It is quite likely that this is a copy of an original manuscript.

Therefore, the present sources indicate that at Ghar Barca only three Punic tombs had been identified. The anthropomorphic sarcophagus was identified in tomb 1, while the non-anthropomorphic sarcophagus was found in tomb 3. However, closer investigations reveal that other rock-cut tombs were apparently brought to light in the same area. Onorato Bres, for instance, refers to the discovery of another two sarcophagi which were similar to that found in 1624 by Abela; Bres states that these

7. Bres, 122.

8. Mayr, 3-4.

9. G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, Malta 1772, Lib. II not. ii, 458-59.

10. A. Bulifon, *Lettere Memorabili, Istoriche, Politiche ed Erudite*, Vol. IV, Naples 1696, 117ff.

11. Anon, f. 1.

12. *Idem*.

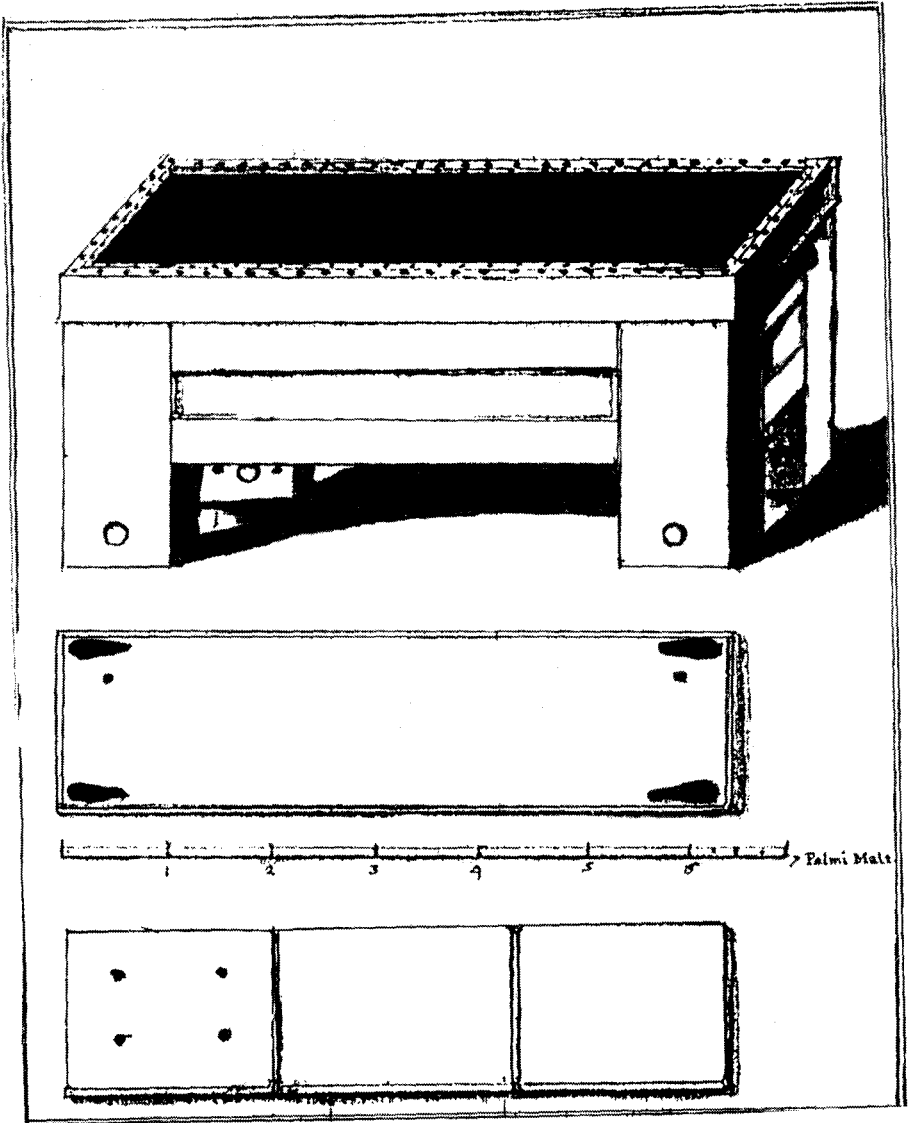


Figure 4 - The non-anthropoid sarcophagus found in Tomb 3  
(from an anonymous unpublished manuscript conserved at the Venerabile Crypta S. Pauli).

sarcophagi were unearthed in the late eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> If these two sarcophagi were found in separate tombs, then the number of tombs found in the Ghar Barca area would rise to five instead of three.

Bres also states that by the end of the eighteenth century the sarcophagus found by Abela had already been lost: *il sarcofago riportato da Abela non esiste più: e sul fine del secolo passato [eighteenth century] nello stesso luogo si ritrovarono due simili al precedente, che si conservano nel Museo di Casa Barbaro*.<sup>14</sup> A.A. Caruana states that these two sarcophagi were preserved in the collection of the Marquis Barbaro until the year 1800.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, Caruana does not specify whether these two coffins had then been transferred to another collection.

From the available sources one may deduce that from the Ghar Barca area there is evidence of four terracotta sarcophagi, one of which is non-anthropomorphic, while the other three are anthropomorphic. There is also archaeological evidence to indicate that the Ghar Barca tombs were reserved for single inhumation burials; in fact, in this area there is no evidence of cremation burials. These tombs do not appear to have ever been reutilized. Today, only two of these four sarcophagi still survive. One of them is the non-anthropomorphic sarcophagus found in tomb 3, while the other is probably one of the two anthropomorphic coffins found at the end of the eighteenth century. These two sarcophagi were originally conserved in the Museum of the Public Library, but were then transferred to the permanent collection of the National Museum of Archaeology when this was founded by Prof. Themistocles Zammit at the beginning of the twentieth century. For unknown reasons the other two sarcophagi, including the one depicted by Abela, seem to have perished. It is possible that the second sarcophagus found at the end of the eighteenth century was also exhibited at the National Museum of Archaeology, but was destroyed during the Second World War.

In Malta, burials in sarcophagi seem to have been limited to just a single cemetery. Other terracotta sarcophagi were brought to light at Victoria, Gozo, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> However, the information regarding the Gozo sarcophagi is downright vague and inconsistent. The available literary sources do not provide a coherent account regarding the discovery and the precise provenance of the Gozo terracotta sarcophagi. Moreover, one cannot determine whether these coffins belonged to a single necropolis.

13. Bres, 128.

14. *Idem*.

15. A.A. Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta*, Malta 1898, 6.

16. G.F. Agius de Soldanis, *Gozo antico e moderno*, Malta 1746, 30; Caruana, 6.

The presence of only four sarcophagi and their derivation from the same cemetery indicate that the tombs in which these coffins were found were possibly intended for a particular class of people, for example priests or wealthy landowners. Anthropoid and non-anthropoid coffins have been identified all over the Phoenician and Punic world and were often reserved for the interment of important persons.<sup>17</sup> They were common in the Near East, Carthage and Spain, but were less popular in the central Mediterranean colonies.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of burying the dead in such coffins owes its origins to the Near East.<sup>19</sup> The Phoenicians inherited this idea from the neighbouring Egyptians, who used to bury important people, like pharaohs, noble landowners and priests, in anthropoid sarcophagi. Phoenician kings and princes were occasionally buried in marble, stone, basalt, or even in terracotta sarcophagi, whereby the facial image of the coffin was presumably meant to depict the facial image of the deceased person.<sup>20</sup> Occasionally, smaller anthropoid sarcophagi were used as cinerary urns. Certain coffins also contained inscriptions or even some decorative motifs.<sup>21</sup> Examples of sarcophagi in the Near East are those of Ahiram of Byblos, conserved in the Beirut National Museum, of Tabnit, king of Sidon, today found in the Istanbul National Museum, and of Eshmunazer II, king of Sidon, which is preserved in the Louvre. The coffin of King Ahiram has been ascribed to the late thirteenth/early twelfth century B.C., while the other two, which are made of basalt, have been ascribed to approximately 500 and 490 B.C.<sup>22</sup> The earliest sarcophagi bear several Egyptianizing motifs, especially in the rendering of the face and the hairstyle. However, from the late fifth century B.C. onwards, the sarcophagi became more Hellenized, particularly in the rendering of the face and of the drapery folds.<sup>23</sup>

The anthropoid sarcophagus exhibited in the Valletta Museum has been ascribed to the early fifth century B.C. The rendering of the face and the hairstyle portray clear Egyptianizing, Ionian and Rhodian motifs, suggesting either that the coffin was imported from the East or it was manufactured locally at a time when these islands were still under Phoenician cultural influence. It is a life-size coffin (it measures 1.56 m. in length), where only the unbearded face (of a male human being), the hair and the toes appear; no inscriptions or any other decorations are visible. The lid was

17. S. Moscati, *I Fenici e Cartagine*, Turin 1972, 567-69.

18. J.L. Escacena, Gadir, *Los Fenicios en la Peninsula Iberica* (ed. G. del Olmo Lete and M.E. Aubet Semmler), Vol. 1, Barcellona 1986, 48.

19. S. Moscati, *I sarcofagi, I Fenici* (ed. S. Moscati), Milan 1988, 292.

20. *Ibid.*, 292-99.

21. Moscati (1972), 568.

22. Moscati (1988), 292.

23. *Ibid.*, 295-97.

apparently fastened by means of lead fitted clamps. Gouder states that these clamps were inserted into dovetailed cavities at the back of the head, at the sides, and at the feet.<sup>24</sup> The non-anthropomorphic sarcophagus has been dated to a period ranging between the late fourth and the middle part of the third centuries B.C. There are stylistic indications that this coffin was probably of local manufacture.<sup>25</sup> The coffin discovered by Abela seems to have been of a relatively later date than the anthropomorphic sarcophagus exhibited at the National Museum of Archaeology. It appears to be of a Greek inspiration, and can tentatively be ascribed to a period which spans from the late fifth to the early third centuries B.C. Therefore, from the available evidence one can ascribe the cemetery of Ghar Barca to a period ranging between the early fifth century to the middle part of the third century B.C.

It seems that the Ghar Barca cemetery was apparently intended for the interment of a particular class of people, whose political, religious or social status has not been determined so far. Unfortunately, the available sources do not describe in detail or portray the grave goods which were identified in association with these sarcophagi; this would have aided the archaeologist to date the Ghar Barca tombs with a certain degree of reliability. Ultimately, it is hoped that the remaining unbuilt lands at Ghar Barca will be explored properly by the competent authorities before further building development in this area is allowed to take place.

24. T.C. Gouder, Phoenician Malta, *Heritage*, Vol. 1, 177.

25. Moscati, 295.