

5. Conclusions

This section summarises the archaeological results and the conclusions to be drawn from them about the site of Ħal Millieri. The concluding section discusses the significance of the excavations for the history of the *casale* and for Maltese historiography, and their relationship to the development of medieval church architecture in Malta.

The excavations have added a certain amount to what was known about the site of Ħal Millieri prior to the building of its churches and to the first written documentation in 1419/20. The earliest archaeological features are admittedly not very informative. Beneath the church of the Visitation some shallow channels cut into the rock were clearly man-made, but they produced no dating evidence nor were they uncovered over a sufficient area for their purpose to be demonstrable. Evidence of similar channels was found beneath the western end of the Annunciation church. At the east end, however, where there was a sharper slope in the rock surface down towards the east, remains of an earlier use of the site were preserved in layers below the floor of the lower church. This evidence comprised stones and boulders overlaid with soil filling hollows in the rock surface, an irregular wall with a channel alongside it, and a line of four coarse cooking pots. Since the layers had largely been dug away by the foundations of the church and by the cutting of a grave, and since the area explored was in any case not extensive, no indication survived of why the pots were placed there. There was no apparent connection with the construction or with the use of the church; indeed, the event was probably considerably earlier than the building of a church on the site. A possible, though not certain, interpretation of the other features is that they represent an attempt to build up a field on the sloping exposed rock edge of the slight escarpment on which the church now stands. That this would have taken place no earlier than the fourth century is established by the presence in these layers of sherds of amphorae datable to between the fourth century and the seventh. There are North African parallels of similar late Roman date for the cooking pots, though such simple pottery cannot be regarded as closely datable. There is thus some evidence for the use of the site in the Roman or post-Roman period, prior to the building of the first medieval church; it may be related to speculations about agricultural practices in Malta in the Muslim period.¹

Some further information has also been added to the other indications of early settlement around Ħal Millieri,² mainly from the pottery found in layers brought in to make up the level for the present church floor. A few sherds of Borġ in-Nadur ware indicate some late Bronze Age activity in the area, though not necessarily an actual occupation of the site. One Punic coin and one of the Roman republican period (*infra*, 81, nos. 1 and 2) may have enjoyed a renewed circulation as curiosities in later times, for they were found in the uppermost layer, immediately beneath the floor of the upper church, and no identifiable contemporary pottery has been found at the site. What is datable of the considerable amount of Roman pottery runs from

1. Cf. *infra*, 104–105.

2. *Ħal Millieri*, 19, 26.

the first century BC to the sixth or seventh centuries AD; the bulk of it appears to be late, and includes a few sherds of North African Red Slip finewares and several amphorae. No other Roman coins were recovered, and there was only one Byzantine coin, a sixth-century half-follis.

The quantity of this pottery, both in the layers of the earliest phase and in those associated with the churches, the latter being material which, though apparently brought into the site, is not likely to have been carried from a great distance, indicates the nearby presence of a substantial late Roman site which may yet be discovered. In addition, large blocks of ashlar masonry were used at the base of the north wall of the Annunciation church, and are attributable to the first, or lower, church. They measure 1.62 m and 1.26 m long and 0.50 m high; these dimensions strongly suggest that the blocks came from a Roman building. The same may apply to other large ashlar blocks used, for example, at the west end and in the foundation for the apse of the Annunciation church. As has already been noted,³ numerous blocks of similar size are built into the rubble field-walls some 150 m to the north-east of the churches, and these and the blocks re-used in the churches were probably robbed from some building which lay in ruins nearby. The basin of an ancient olive-pipper, now standing on the *zuntier* of St. John's Church at Ħal Millieri, may possibly have come from the same site.⁴

In planning the excavations, it could not be foreseen how much, if at all, they would produce information about the site of Ħal Millieri prior to the medieval *casale*. That they should have done so, albeit to a relatively small and enigmatic extent, may be thought gratifying, if incidental. The major aim, however, was to investigate the two churches, and it is in that respect that the most important results of the excavations have been achieved.

There can be little doubt that the structural remains which preceded the standing fifteenth-century church of the Annunciation constitute an earlier church on the same site. Much of the building had been dismantled before the present church was built, but the foundation of the latter's piers at the north-west and south-east corners belonged to this earlier phase, and could be interpreted as part of a previous church of similar construction. These foundations had been placed on a slightly different alignment further to the north at the east end, and large dressed stone blocks at the base of the north wall of the present church could also be associated with them as part of this earlier structure. The most conclusive evidence for that, however, was a floor of compacted plaster, contiguous with these pier foundations. It had been cut through for the foundations of the remaining piers of the present church on the north side (those on the south not having been examined), and could not therefore be explained as an earlier floor belonging to the latter building.

This earlier church was 4.20 m wide, a little narrower than its successor, with ashlar masonry walls and piers in front of them not bonded into the walls; this

3. *Ibid.*, 26; Plate 23.

4. *Ibid.*, 26; Plate 8 a. Similar instances of the re-use of masonry in Malta include a villa of the classical period at Ras ir-Raheb, where use was made of prehistoric megaliths in its construction; Tas-Silg, where the structure of a Copper Age temple was incorporated into other buildings of religious nature in successive periods; and a more recent example, a field-hut at the end of a cul-de-sac leading west from the coastal road at Ghadira in which large square blocks are used.

indicates that its roof was carried on transverse arches in the same manner as that of the present building. There is no evidence that it had benches between the piers, but since, as will be seen, those of the later church lacked foundations, we cannot say for certain that the earlier church lacked such benches. Its length is unknown, save that it extended at least as far westwards as its successor. It would appear to have had some form of apse, but the building of the apse of the fifteenth-century church appears to have left little remaining trace of any earlier apse, save for part of its floor and one block of stone incorporated into the later foundations but apparently still in its earlier position. The large squared blocks at the junction of the present apse and nave were set in the floor of the earlier building and may be identified as the foundation of its altar.

Like its successor, this church was decorated with frescoes. Pieces of painted plaster found in the layers deriving from the demolition of the first church were too fragmentary to permit any restoration of the original design, though six elements in it could be distinguished. The fortunate survival of one piece with the tips of fingers painted on it showed that the earlier frescoes had included figures, though it is impossible to say to what extent they resembled those for which Ħal Millieri is celebrated today. It may be recalled, however, that in discussing the archaising character of those frescoes, Geneviève Bautier Bresc proposed that there might have been a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Maltese prototype.⁵ There is inadequate information to date the predecessor of the Annunciation church so early; but its paintings may, if Mme. Bautier Bresc's hypothesis is correct, perhaps be regarded as one of the links in the chain between her hypothetical prototype and the late fifteenth-century frescoes. It should, however, be remembered that none of the geometric designs from the earlier church has parallels in the later series, and this factor does not support, though it does not wholly deny, a direct connection between the two.

No clear dating evidence was found for the earlier church. There were no coins associated with its construction and no independently datable pottery, such as early maiolica, which might have been relevant. It would seem fairly safe to assume that it was later than the Muslim period, that is after about 1200, since there is as yet no evidence that pre-Muslim traditions of Maltese church building survived those centuries, or that this typically Maltese church design is to be found any earlier on the island. The fresco technique was not in normal use until after 1250,⁷ though the frescoes were not necessarily an original feature of the church. Presumably it had stood for some years before it was replaced in the late fifteenth century. The dating of the associated late-medieval pottery which has been identified as such by these excavations will, one hopes, be refined when more of it is excavated at other Maltese sites, and its study may in time allow a more precise date to be assigned to this building. The most that can be said at present is that it is unlikely to be earlier than the thirteenth or later than the middle of the fifteenth century.

5. *Ħal Millieri*, 100.

6. *Buhagiar*, *ibid.*, 81–82.

7. *P. Zanolini*, *ibid.*, 104.

The evidence from beneath the floor of the upper Annunciation church elucidated some aspects of its construction. The piers which carried the roof arches stood independently of the side walls, without being bonded in with them. Their foundations went down to bedrock, and consisted of a layer of rubble cemented with mixed earth and stone chippings, with large blocks of stone, some of them apparently re-used from the earlier church, placed over them. The apse was also solidly founded upon three or four courses of masonry. These foundations were all of greater height than those of the earlier church, and it could be that this was intended to remedy an instability in the structure of the latter which had made its replacement necessary; though it must be said that the excavations produced no evidence that it had actually collapsed. The greater height of the new foundations required that the floor level of the new church be raised by about 0.50m. This, together with the levelling up over the irregular surface of the layer of debris from the earlier church, required the bringing in of a quantity of stony earth from nearby, and over this, fine soil, perhaps sifted from it, was laid for the bedding of the paved floor.

The benches between the piers which, since they did not carry any structural load, did not require substantial foundations, rested on the stony layer and extended only a few centimetres below floor level. The door in the middle of the north side, which at one time connected it with the Visitation church, is not mentioned in any document before 1621. Its crude masonry contrasts with that of the south and west doors and as part of the fresco in this bay appears to have been destroyed for the making of the doorway, it would seem that it was inserted later to provide a communication with the Visitation church.⁸ The stratigraphical evidence suggests that there may previously have been a bench in this central bay.

Although the original floor of the apse had been altered at some time before 1636, when the visitation report mentioned an altar platform of two steps and a newly-made wooden screen in front of it,⁹ the floor bedding there was found to survive to a higher level than in the nave of the church, implying that the apse had once had a raised floor. The moulded stones which formed the step of the platform as it existed in 1968 may well, therefore, have been moved from an original step into the apse. What was described in the previous account of the surviving structure as the apse's "original rude pavement"¹⁰ has now been shown to be the top of its projecting foundation.

In addition to the information about the construction of the church, the excavations have also established its date. Previously, the only positive indication of this was that the church was in existence by the time it received its frescoes, considered to have been painted in the mid-fifteenth century. That date now has to be revised slightly, because the evidence from the coins contained in the layers beneath the pavement shows that the church was not built before the reign of King Giovanni II of Sicily (1458–1479). While there is one among these twenty Sicilian coins which could just be later (it cannot be dated more closely than to the period

8. As already suggested by Buhagiar, *ibid.*, 72, and Mangion, *ibid.*, 125.

9. Text *ibid.*, 141–142.

10. *Ibid.*, 77.

1402–1516), the indications are that the church was built in his reign or so soon afterwards that coins of his successor were not in common circulation.

The Visitation church was erected some time after that date, since it is structurally later than the church of the Annunciation, against the north wall of which it was built. The single identifiable coin from beneath the pavement of the Visitation church is a Sicilian *denaro* which is not datable precisely but belongs to the period between 1402 and 1479, and takes us no further in defining the date of the church. One might infer, from references to the “lands” or “territory” of Santa Maria in documents of 1495 and 1508,¹¹ which do not distinguish between the Annunciation and the Visitation dedications, that the second church was not then in existence, so that no such distinction was necessary. On the other hand, if the second church had no property, no confusion would have arisen from the lack of further specification in the documents. The first certain evidence which we have for the existence of the Visitation church is the account of it in the Apostolic Delegate’s visitation report of 1575.¹²

It cannot be established with any certainty whether or not the area occupied by the Visitation church had been covered with earth before the church was erected. That the large blocks at the base of the north wall of the Annunciation church were left protruding might suggest that they had been hidden from sight below ground surface. From the limited areas in which excavation was taken down below floor level it appeared that when the foundations of the Visitation church were laid, the area was more or less bare rock or had been stripped down to bed-rock. This seems to be implied by the absence of construction trenches both outside the west wall and against south piers 3 and 4, the only points at which the church’s foundations were examined. This, in turn, would mean that the rubble fill beneath the floor of the Visitation church was deposited after the construction of the church foundations. Into that layer and into the rock below it a grave was cut. There is no reason to suppose that the grave was inserted after the floor had been laid and that the original bedding of the paving stones was replaced in such a way that the intrusion was invisible. Therefore the burial was presumably made before the paving was laid, that is presumably at the time when the church was built, and the body was possibly that of a founder or patron.¹³

The only point at which the church’s foundations were examined was in a trench outside the west wall, which rested upon bed-rock. The church consisted of a rectangular area of dimensions similar to those of the Annunciation church which it adjoined. Like the latter, it had a semicircular apse at the east end. The walls were formed of two skins of well-dressed squared masonry with an earth and rubble infill. The main doorway was somewhere in the centre of the west wall, and access into the church was down some steps. A communicating doorway was probably inserted through the north wall of the Annunciation church at this time. Its new neighbour was divided into five bays by four transverse arches which probably

11. *Ibid.*, 50.

12. Text *ibid.*, 139–140.

13. The burials are also discussed *infra*, 106–113.

supported a roof of limestone slabs and crushed limestone; the four arches and the roof *ad modum lamiae* were mentioned in the visitation report of 1646.¹⁴ The arches rested on four pairs of piers built up against the side walls. In the easternmost and westernmost bays there were stone benches, and extensions of those at the west end flanked the doorway. The central bays lacked positive evidence for benches, but it is possible that they originally possessed them. One of these bays may have contained the altar of St. Matthew mentioned in the visitation of 1575 as standing on the right of the main altar, to which the obligations of St. Matthew's altar were transferred as a result of that visitation.¹⁵ The church had a stone pavement, mentioned in the same report. Two steps leading up to the altar were recorded in the 1646 visitation report. One of these may have been the low step at the east of the church, but the floor of the apse beyond it no longer survives.

The visitation report of 1646 also described the internal furnishings of the church. A lamp hung in front of the altar, and behind the altar there was a painting showing the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin, with Saint Joseph on the right and on the left another saint, identified in that report as Zachary, but in the report of 1636 as Joachim.¹⁶ There was no mention of any tombs within the church, probably because, while there were tombstones visible in the Annunciation church and in the *zuntier*, there was nothing to identify the presence of the grave in the centre of the Visitation church, and a tomb on its north side is indicated only by a variation in the pattern of the stones of the pavement there.

Although in 1646 the church was described as decently furnished and was presumably in adequate repair, twenty-one years later Bishop Buenos found it derelict and lacking all necessary furnishings. He ordered its doors to be locked and its roof to be demolished.¹⁷ In subsequent years the building became much more thoroughly delapidated. The apse pavement, the steps of the west door, the squared stones of the piers and the walls down to between one and five courses above floor level, were all removed. There is no clear indication from the coins and pottery found in the layers associated with the demolition of the precise date when it took place; indeed, it would seem likely that building materials were removed on more than one occasion. At some date the surviving courses of the apse and north walls of the church were used as the foundation for the irregular masonry wall which now encloses the site.

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One of the specific aims of the excavation was to attempt to secure, for the first time in Malta, a stratified sequence of dated medieval pottery. The floors of the churches did cover earlier layers which had not been disturbed since the time the churches were built, save by the digging of graves, and those layers did contain pottery; to that extent the aim was accomplished. The significance of the results has, however, been limited by factors which have been discussed more fully in the

14. Text *infra*, 120, mentioning steps, roof and so on.

15. Text in *Hal Millieri*, 139. The visitation report of 1598 (text *ibid.*, 140) recorded that the transfer had been made as ordered in 1575.

16. Texts *ibid.*, 141, and *infra*, 120.

17. *Hal Millieri*, 122.

pottery report; namely, those affecting the interpretation of pottery from a site where it was not in domestic use, and the problem of identifying medieval wares with certainty among a collection of pottery where much was clearly residual from an earlier period, and where previously undefined wares from that period might also have been present.

At Hal Millieri there were no securely datable and provenanced examples of the finer quality Mediterranean wares of the medieval period which might have found their way to Malta, such as Islamic glazed wares or early maiolica from Sicily or central Italy. Indeed, there was very little glazed pottery at all, and none which was of any use in providing comparative dating. Nevertheless, it has been possible to identify two probably indigenous late medieval wares. What has been named here as Red and Brown Burnished Ware was previously known, having been excavated in seventeenth-century contexts.¹⁸ The Hal Millieri excavations have now shown that it was current before the end of the fifteenth century. The second, here named Red Painted Ware, had not previously been identified. Neither of these wares occurred in layers sealed by the construction layers and floor of the predecessor of the Annunciation church, but a couple of sherds of the Red and Brown Burnished Ware were present in the floor layers themselves. The manufacture of this ware can thus be shown to have begun before the present Annunciation church was built, that is before about 1479 at the latest.

A start has thus been made on the classification of medieval Maltese pottery; one firm date, that of the Annunciation church, has been established in its chronology; and a group of stratified pottery has been obtained. All these results of the excavations are positive steps forward. Further advances will depend on the discovery of more stratified and datable material which excavations at other sites, such as those at the Lunzjata church outside Rabat, have begun to provide.¹⁹ It must be expected that future work of this kind will cause many of the conclusions about the pottery which have initially been proposed here to be amplified or revised in the course of time.

Another result of the excavations which will be of general significance for medieval archaeology in Malta and perhaps further afield is the study of the skeletal remains of those buried within the churches. The report here presented constitutes the first published study of securely datable late medieval and early modern bones from a stratified archaeological context in Malta.²⁰

The fifteen identifiable individuals from the Annunciation church and the three from that of the Visitation comprise only a small proportion of the total number of inhabitants of Hal Millieri. Nevertheless, they supply us with information about the physical condition of the population which supplements what the documentary sources tell us about such aspects of their lives as their marriages, wills and property holdings, in addition to a number of features of interest to physical anthropologists and anatomists. The incidence of arthritis and of well-developed muscular ridges

18. Personal communication from Mr. F.S. Mallia.

19. Preliminary excavations of 1979; the materials can be inspected in the National Museum at Valletta.

20. There is no certainty that the bones from the church of St. Gregory at Żejtun are late-medieval: *infra*, 143.

on the bones indicates a life of hard physical work. It is of some interest that the young woman buried in the earlier church on the Annunciation site had borne a child before her death at the age of about sixteen years.²¹ Two of the skeletons exhibited a hereditary condition in which the two furthest joints of the little toe were fused together. Again, information of this kind should prove of wider significance when more comparative material has been excavated from other sites. Insufficient animal bones were found to throw much light on the domestic economy of Ħal Millieri.

In general, the aims of the excavations outlined at the beginning of the report can be said to have been successfully achieved. It is appropriate, however, to conclude by making some observations which arise not only from the positive results, but also from some of the limitations which were revealed, since they may be relevant to the planning of future archaeological research on medieval Malta.

While it might be expected that other medieval churches, like those at Ħal Millieri, should have deposits of earlier date stratified beneath their floors, it should be noted that the practice in building those churches was to clear the soil away down to the rock surface where the walls were to be built, and such layers are also likely to be disturbed by burials within the church. In the Ħal Millieri excavations clear conclusions could not be drawn about the nature of early occupation of the site. The main reason for this is that the time and resources available for the excavation, which had the exploration of the churches as its principal aim, did not permit more than a limited investigation of these earlier layers. They were only excavated in one quarter of the Annunciation church and in two small soundings in that of the Visitation. Only complete stripping of much wider areas, that is potentially the whole of both churches, could have been expected to produce a more intelligible pattern. The unexcavated evidence, however, remains for future investigation. In addition, the extent to which evidence for medieval sites still survives where buildings are no longer standing has not yet been tested.

Had earlier secular buildings been found beneath the churches, more light might have been thrown on the domestic economy of Ħal Millieri than was perhaps to be expected from exploration of two of its churches. In this connection, the bringing into the Annunciation church of soil from elsewhere, while it complicated the interpretation of the pottery's stratigraphic significance, amplified the amount of the pottery as a whole. This, however, could only have contributed significantly to the dating of the churches had there been present sherds of imported wares which are independently well-known and dated. It is perhaps not surprising that a *casale* of Ħal Millieri's small size should not have afforded expensive exotic types of pottery, and excavations of other more prosperous medieval sites may yet produce them. Their absence, however, meant that it was only as a result of the fortunate presence of a group of coins that a date could be suggested for the Annunciation church. Much more remains to be done in providing the basic material for the archaeological dating of medieval sites in Malta. That will only be achieved by more extensive excavation of carefully chosen sites.

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21. *Infra*, 85.