2. The Church of the Annunciation

The surviving structure of the church was described in 1976,[4] but since various of its features are referred to in describing the earlier phases of the site they are summarized here. The church consisted of a main room, or nave, with an apse at the east end.[5] Its roof was carried on arches, which sprang from piers which stood in front of the walls and are here numbered in two series, north and south, starting at the west end. These divided the church into five bays, and the spaces between the piers in all but the central bay to the south, where there was a door, were occupied by stone benches. Since time was not available to excavate the interior completely and as it seemed advisable to leave an undisturbed section for any future excavation designed to check or amplify the results of the present work, it was decided to concentrate on exploring the northern half of the church, so that what was discovered there could be related more immediately to information from the site of the Visitation church; this excavated area (trench 1) was extended to the south wall, in a strip 1.50m wide.

Prior to excavation the floor of the church consisted of a flagstone pavement. At the east end there were larger slabs covering three tombs; a fourth tomb or ossuary pit in the south-west corner, also covered with larger slabs, did not come within the area of excavation. The altar platform in the apse was relaid when the church was restored in 1968.[6] The paving stones and tombstones were planned and numbered before they were lifted, and were subsequently relaid in their original positions.

The excavations uncovered:

(1) Remains prior to the construction of the present church. These are interpreted as : (a) layers immediately above the natural rock surface which antedate the building of an earlier church on the site; (b) the construction layers, floor and structural remains of that earlier church; (c) a tomb cut during the period in which that church was in use.

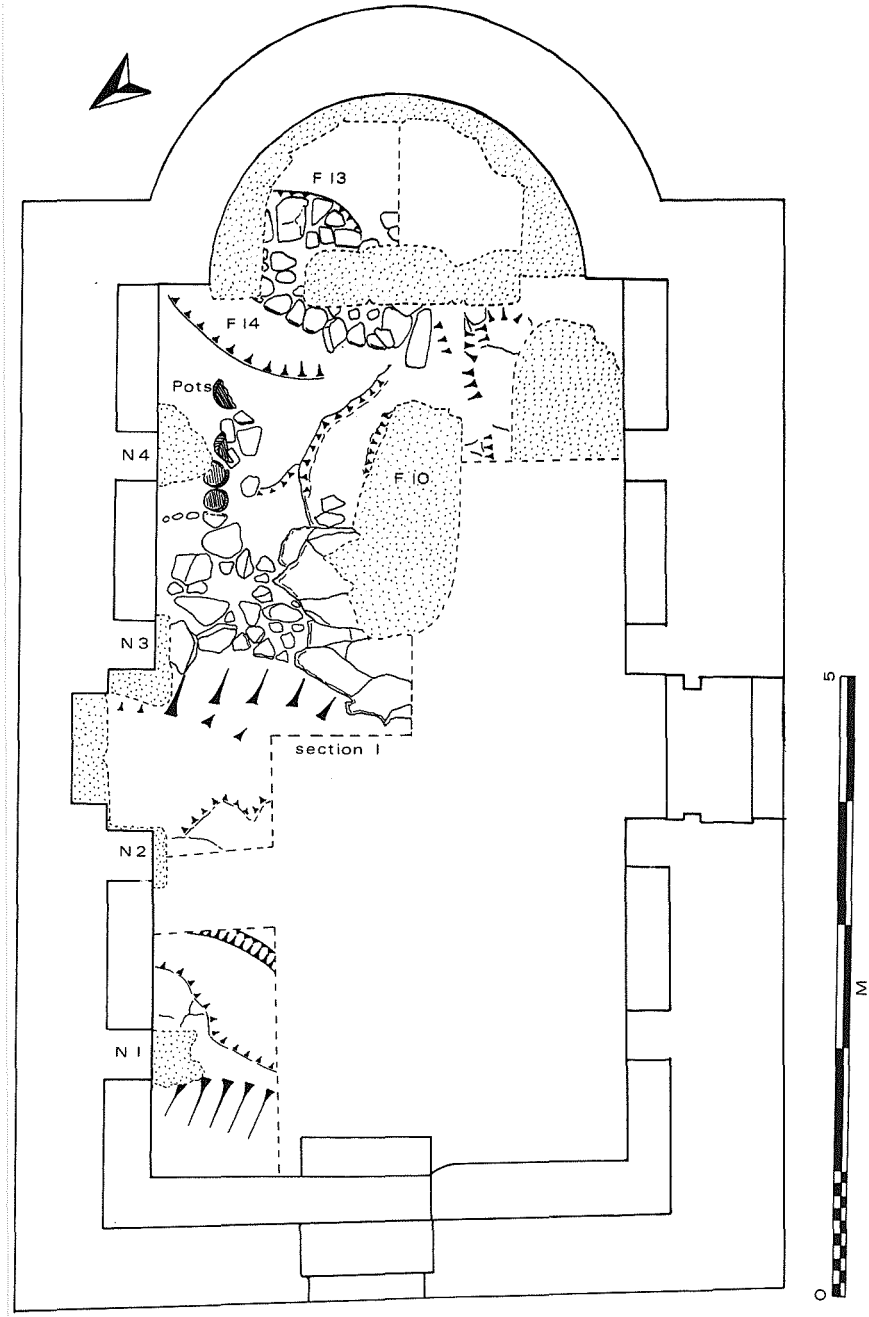
(2) Evidence associated with the present Annunciation church: (d) layers resulting from the demolition of the lower church and the construction of its successor; and (e) three tombs postdating that construction.

1. EVIDENCE PRIOR TO THE PRESENT ANNUNCIATION CHURCH: THE LOWER CHURCH (Fig. 3)

DESCRIPTION

The natural rock formation on the site consists of a smooth, undulating surface of Coralline limestone, overlaid in the south-eastern part of the church by a plane of sharp-edged and fissured Globigerina limestone. The rock was completely exposed

4. *Ibid.*, 69–75.
5. The church is actually oriented 119.5° east of true north.
6. *Ibid.*, 77.



3. Church of the Annunciation: rock surface and features of phase (a).

as far west as section 1 (Plate 9) and in two further small cuttings adjoining the piers N1 and N2 on the north side. Its highest point was next to pier N1, from where it sloped down towards the centre of the church, rising again to another small knoll at the north-east corner of the apse (Plate 5).

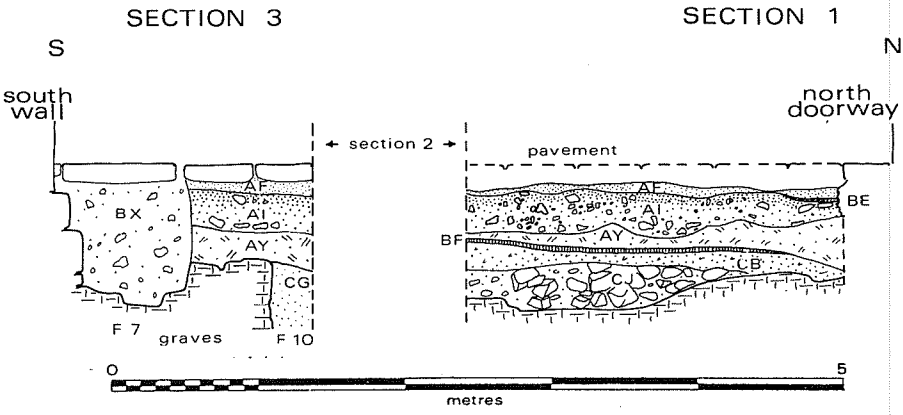
The main stratigraphy was as follows, in descending order of layers (Figs. 4, 7):

	Sec. 1	Sec. 2	
Layer	BF	BF, BO	Very compacted lime and clay, 5–6 cm thick.
	CB	CB, CN	Compact reddish-brown sandy silt with limestone chippings (as also in layer CU, not shown in section).
		CI	Compact medium-brown silt with fragments of stone.
	CJ	CM	Rubble of limestone boulders and fractured stone, with very loose reddish-brown sandy silt (as also in layer BY, not shown in section).

Phase (a): Layers CI, CJ, CM, BY.

The interruption by the pits of graves dug down from later levels had removed much of the stratigraphy of this phase. Layer CI was found only in the hollow east of grave F10, which was cut through the middle of the outcrop of Globigerina limestone. It contained a number of pieces of burnt daub. The looser, stony, layers CJ, CM and BY seem to represent a single deposit which filled most of the cavities in the rock. The overlying stratum of Globigerina limestone appears to have been cut away until its highest point was at the same level as the outcrops of the Coralline which lay beneath it. Most of the rubble in the hollows consisted of broken-up Globigerina.

CM was present only beneath CI, that is, east of the graves F2, 3 and 10. The east end of F2 and the rising ridge of rock in the north-east corner of the church divided it from BY, which lay between F10 and the north wall of the church, cut through but not totally removed by F2. A greater depth of stone-free soil survived above the rubble where the rock dipped down to its lowest point (Plate 9). Further west, adjoining F5, the later foundation trench for pier N3, the layer consisted almost



4. Church of the Annunciation: Sections 1 and 3.

entirely of stones, though the depth of soil increased again south-westwards to appear in sections 1 and 2 as layer CJ.

The surface of BY was marked by a skim of blackening. Beneath this surface, and placed immediately in front of pier N4, was a line of four coarse, flat-bottomed pots, their bases resting in part on the natural rock surface, in part on the rubble at the bottom of the layer (Plate 8). The western two of these were intact; the others had been cut by the grave F2, which accounts for the presence of a number of their sherds in the layers filling the grave. The pots were not in any discernible archaeological feature, but they had clearly been placed there deliberately. The stratigraphy at this point had also been cut through in digging the foundations for pier N4, which adds to the difficulty in the interpretation of how the pots came to be placed where they were.

These vessels are listed as nos. 123–126 in the pottery report (*infra*, 68–69), under the heading of Handmade Cooking-pots. A fifth vessel could be restored from pieces found in one of the graves which cut through these layers, and there were fragments of several others. These pots are not in themselves closely datable. A better indication of the date of this phase is probably given by the amphorae with ridged necks (*infra*, 64, nos. 84–86), that is, between the 4th and 7th centuries. Although none of the amphorae is wholly restorable, the sherds of at least six can be identified, and they are large and numerous enough to indicate that the vessels may have been broken on the spot.

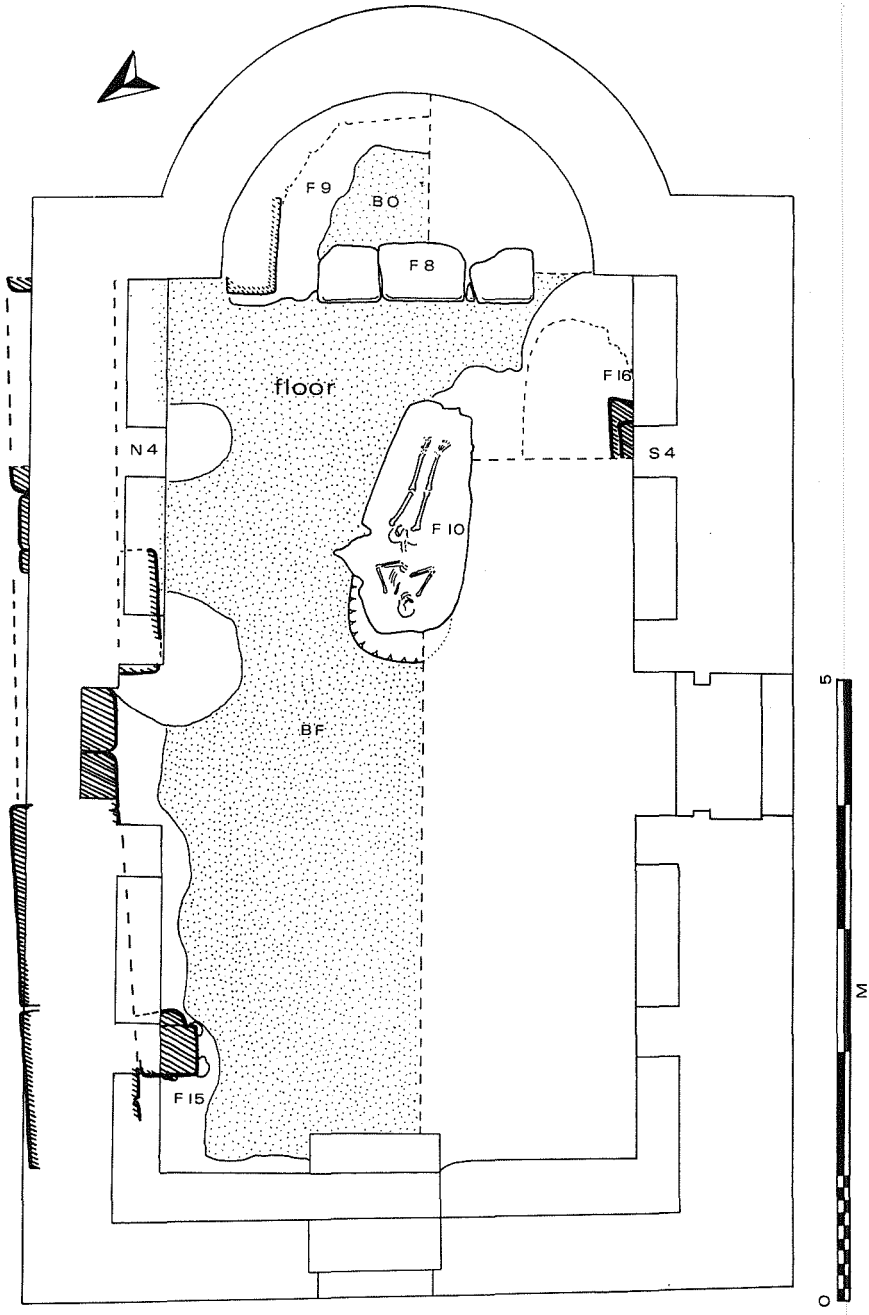
Two other features may be associated with this first phase. F13, a layer of large stones, filled a shallow pear-shaped depression in the rock, roughly one metre wide and running north-east to south-west. These stones were covered by layers CI and CN (section 2) and lay below the west end of the semicircular foundation of the apse F6 and the line of stones F8 which will be described in the next section. F14, a shallow channel 12–14 cm wide and 2 cm deep, was cut in the rock surface and ran from the north-east corner of the church along the west side of F13.

Phase (b): Layers CB, CC, CH, CN, CU, BF, BO (Fig. 5).

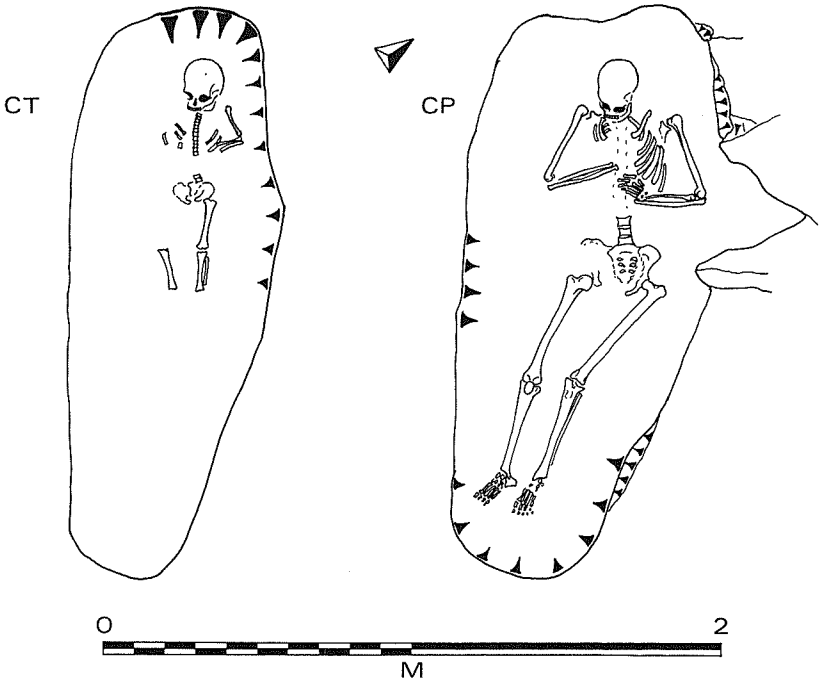
The second phase in this stratigraphy is marked by the laying down of layers CB, CN, BF and BO. This was preceded by the cutting back of layer CI to receive three large blocks of stone, F8 (Plate 12). The alignment of their faces ran parallel with the diameter of the apse of the present church, approximately 20 cm further west. Their total length was 174 cm. They ranged in height from 19 to 34.5 cm but were laid with their tops level. A circular hole 3.5 cm in diameter was cut through the north edge of the northernmost block. Holes of this type may be observed, both on the jambs of doorways of such prehistoric temples as Mnajdra, presumably for door-fastenings,[7] and also on modern vernacular buildings, where ropes for tethering animals are passed through them. The hole has no obvious function in the context in which the stone was found (*infra*, 18–19), which suggests that the block may have been re-used from an earlier building.

Layer CB was laid up to F8, filling the remaining part of the cut which had been made for these stones in CI. It continued round them, and is in fact the same

7. J. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands* (London, 1971), Plate 10.2.



5. Church of the Annunciation: features associated with the Lower Church, phases (b) and (c).



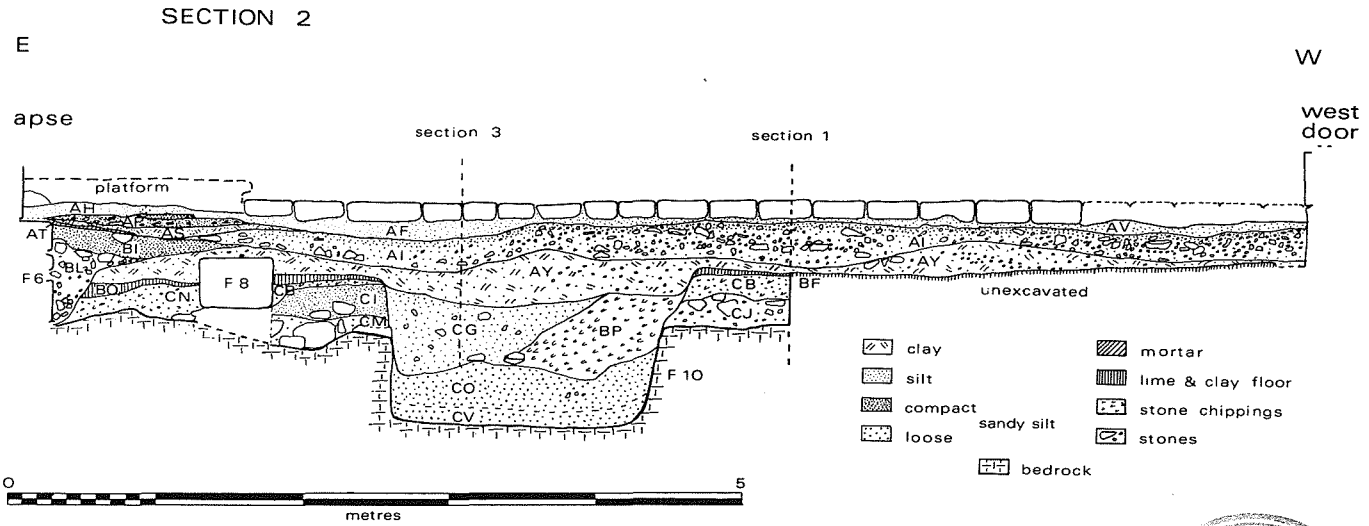
6. Church of the Annunciation: plan of burials in grave F10.

as CN; a separate designation was given to the layer east of F8 before the identity of the two was demonstrated by excavation. This layer CB/CN had the effect of levelling up the rather irregular surface of CI and CJ to provide a firm and compact basis for layers BF and BO. Of these, BF extended over the whole excavated area within the body of the present church, save where cut by subsequent features, and BO was the equivalent deposit in the apse. The mixture of clay and lime of which BF/BO was composed constitutes the composition widely used in Malta for flooring. Like CB/CN it was laid up to F8, and around it on the north side. The top of F8 projected 11 cm above the surface of BF on the west side, and 16 cm above the slightly lower surface of BO on the east.

In the centre of the church, sandwiched between layers CB and CJ, was a spread of loose reddish-brown sand CH which partially overlapped a patch of compact yellow mortar CC, 80–100 cm across (Fig. 7).

A number of structural remains can be associated with these layers:

1. BF was laid right up to the foundation of north pier 1 (F15) which consequently must have been placed there beforehand. This foundation consisted of a block measuring 40×41×27 cm high, dressed with an axe and with a chisel-dressed block above it (Plate 10), and rested on a layer of compacted earth and chippings CU, similar in composition to CB/CN, and lying below BF and immediately above



7. Church of the Annunciation: Section 2.

the Globigerina bedrock. Behind F15, and 18 cm further back than the front of the bench wall of the upper church, were two stones of a wall on an east-west alignment. They were separated from the pier foundation by a 5 cm-thick packing of earth and stone chippings. The floor BF was contiguous not only with the pier foundation but also with this east-west wall. It was not possible to observe the wall further west than 40 cm from the pier, as the rubble and make-up layers under the benches of the upper church (Plate 9) could not safely be removed.

2. On the same alignment at the other end of the excavated area was a block underneath the bench in the eastermost bay and 28.5 cm behind its face, that is 6 cm in front of the face of the main wall of the upper church. That this was not related to the later structure was also implied by the fact that there was a space of 12 cm between it and the east end wall of the upper church, which would be difficult to explain if the two were of contemporary construction.

3. In F16, the foundation of the easternmost pier on the south side (south pier 4; Plate 13) the lowest block measured 54 cm east-west and 26 cm high. It rested on a packing of smaller stones, chippings and earth. The surface BF was laid up to it, and layer AY (above BF and interpreted below as belonging to a later stratigraphical phase) overlapped it. It projected 13 cm in front of the bench at the east end and 8 cm at the west end. There was a further block 26 cm high above it, set a little further back. The pier of the upper church was built on top of this. The chiselled tooling on the stone used for this foundation is the same as that on the upper stone of F15 and on the stones re-used in the foundation of north pier 2 (F4, *infra*, 23). It contrasts with the rougher trimming employed on the stone in the foundations of north piers 3 and 4, both of which belong to the upper church.

4. A well-dressed rectangular block, 76 cm long, lay below the north-west corner of the apse of the upper church (Plate 12). It projected 12 cm south of the diameter of the apse, the same distance as that which separates the block mentioned at (2) above from the east end wall of the upper church. Its relationship to the stratigraphy is not clear. The layers inside the apse which have been described so far, CN and BO, were cut through by F9, the trench within which the foundation of the apse was constructed. This is described below as part of the phase in which the present church was built. Although layer BF/BO had been removed by this trench along most of the south side of the block it did appear to overlie the fill of the western end of the trench. It is possible that there were in fact two trenches, the fills of which were so alike that they were not distinguished in excavation, and that the one, dug for the insertion of the block and sealed by BF/BO, survived only as a small section, the rest having been removed when the other (F9) was dug.

The evidence so far may be summarized as follows:

(a) Layers of limestone rubble and loose earth (CJ, CM, BY) containing a number of complete pots, and an alignment of stones (F13) with a channel (F14) in front of it, overlaid by a layer of more compact soil (CI).

(b) A compact layer of earth with stone chippings (CB/CN) covered by a very compact surface of lime and clay 5–6 cm thick (BF/BO), both extending over the whole area excavated within the church except where interrupted by later features. Associated with this layer were structural remains which included: blocks later re-used to serve as the foundation of piers north 1 and south 4 of the upper church; two blocks in position almost but not exactly on the alignment of the main north wall of the upper church, and a third across the east end of the nave; and three blocks (F8) in line projecting above the surface BF/BO in the centre of the present apse. These structural remains, though scanty, conform sufficiently closely with the layout and dimensions of the present church to suggest that they formed part of a similar building.

Phase (c):

A single grave (F10) was dug through the layers in the centre of the church from the level of the surface of BF, beginning at a point 80 cm west of the line of blocks F8 (Fig. 6; Plate 7). It measured 184 cm long and 86 cm at its widest point. The bottom was flat, sloping down slightly towards the west, where it was 109 cm below the level of the floor BF and 69 cm below the top of the Globigerina limestone through which it had been cut. Its fill consisted of the following layers (Fig. 7):

CG: Medium-brown silt with red and grey patches and small stones.
BP: Limestone chippings.
CO: Medium-brown sandy silt containing the skeleton CP of a young woman.
CV: Medium-brown sandy silt containing the skeleton CT of a girl of about 2½ years.

When the grave was dug layers BF, CB, CI, and CJ/CM were removed as well as a large quantity of rock. Layer CG was much the same in nature and consistency as the layers through which it was cut, and can be accounted for as a back-filling composed of what had been removed. This interpretation is supported by the fact that some sherds found in it join with others excavated from the other layers in question (*infra*, 56–64, nos. 18, 43 and 85). The larger pieces of rock which had been quarried out were not thrown back in but were taken away. The debris had probably been dumped on the west side, and the remaining small fragments and chippings appear to have been swept or tipped back in to form a steeply-sloping pile (BP) against the west end. If this undisturbed layer represents the originally excavated material, it shows, since it covers both burials, that they must have taken place at the same time. In any case the grave had been dug to accommodate a full-length burial.

The two lower layers, though relatively free of stones, can also be shown to derive from a redeposition of the layers through which the grave was cut. Joining sherds of several different vessels (*infra*, 56–64, nos. 18, 84–86) were found in all layers of the grave fill and in the layers BY, CI, CJ and CM which preceded them.

The woman's burial (CP) was separated by a thin layer of soil from the child's (CT). As the other archaeological evidence shows that the burials were contemporary, this means that after the child's body had been laid in the grave it was covered with a layer of earth before that of the woman was laid on top of it. The two lower layers

are of essentially the same composition, and the distinction made between them was merely for convenience during excavation to separate what was below the skeleton CP from what had surrounded it.

Twenty-four beads of several different types were found with the body: bone, pale blue and black glass, and one each of amber and jet (*infra*, 96, no. 7; Plate 40). Some of these beads lay across the wrist. Sixteen of the twenty-four were found beneath the body, but it was not possible to say for certain that some of them had not fallen through from above after the body had decayed. The beads buried with the dead woman may have been a rosary and a necklace, or maybe a single long rosary. Their number does not tally with a precise number of decades of a rosary, but if there had been such additional beads of organic material as of wood or fruit stones, these would have been unlikely to survive decay.

INTERPRETATION

Phase (a):

Three events are clear. First, that the surface of the Globigerina rock was broken up and the resulting debris was used to fill up the cavities which remained. Loose earth was laid over the top of the rubble (BY, CM), or mixed up with it (CJ). Secondly, that a foundation of stones was laid along the crest of Coralline limestone at the east end of the area, with a channel in front of it. Thirdly, that some cooking pots were placed in line above the rubble, within loose earth or later covered by it.

It seems unlikely that the foundation F13 was for the wall of a building. It forms a somewhat irregular oval shape, and the ground falls away rather sharply both to the south-east and to the north-west. No trace of any other wall was found to the west or south nor any floor surface, though the area was admittedly disturbed by later features. No layers attributable to this phase were present to the east, within the apse, and the area excavated there was very constricted so that any relationships the foundation had on that side remain unknown. The possibility of a building here cannot be ruled out entirely, and the presence of pieces of burnt daub in layers CI and CJ suggests a mud-brick structure somewhere in the vicinity, though not necessarily on this precise spot.

As an alternative, it may be suggested that this phase represents the building up of a field on the sloping exposed edge of the small escarpment on which the church now stands. The foundation F13 could thus be interpreted as that of the terrace wall. New fields created in this manner can still be seen in section in the Maltese countryside. The process was described in 1791 by De Saint Priest:

> They level the face of the rock, giving it a slight slope to carry off the superfluous waters and piling up stones broken into irregular small pieces to the height of a foot, and this they cover with a bed of the same stones crushed very small; they then place a layer of earth, brought from other places on the island or found in the crevices of the rock, then a layer of dung and a second layer of earth.[8]

8. F.-E. de Guignard, Comte de Saint Priest, *Malte par un voyageur françois*, part 2 (s.l., 1791), 43–44.

The evidence from Ħal Millieri does not correspond precisely with this description. No apparent attempt was made to alter the conformation of the underlying, and harder, Coralline limestone, where it rose highest; the rubble was only made rather roughly level with the outcrop of Globigerina which was left, and into which grave F10 was later cut, and there was no sign of any thinner bed of small stones. Nor was there found any stone-free layer lying over the loose rubbly layer of CJ to correspond with CI. Nevertheless the explanation of these layers as the result of partial levelling and subsequent cultivation does seem to fit the observed facts reasonably well.[9]

The dating of this phase depends in part on the feature that is most difficult to explain, the line of pots in layer BY. It does seem clear that they do not represent a burial with grave goods. The pottery does not have the character of a grave offering; it was not found in a discernible grave pit, nor were any bones present. Analysis of soil samples from within two complete pots proved inconclusive. They contained some plaster, which included plentiful tiny shell fragments, small fragments of fired clay, possibly building debris, but no organic residue or, indeed, other materials to suggest what the pots had been used for.[10] The pots were all blackened at the bottom, from having presumably been used for cooking. There was no sign, however, that this had taken place on the site, as no hearth or charcoal was found. They had been placed on the rocks, and were filled with earth similar to that which surrounded and covered them; they had not been disturbed or damaged by any other activity than the fortuitous digging of a later grave, which cut through two of them. While, therefore, they were clearly placed carefully in position at a moment just after the rock had been levelled, there seems no way of deciding why this was done.

Phase (b):

As summarised above, the layers and features which can be assigned to phase (b) indicate the construction of a building similar in its size and orientation to the present Annunciation church (Fig. 5). Although its remains are scanty, they are sufficient for it to be concluded with reasonable certainty that they represent an earlier church on the site.

The skim of blackening on the surface of layer BY may be explained as the result of a preliminary burning of vegetation. Layer CB/CN constituted a levelling up of the rather irregular surface of the layers of the previous phase, and probably derived from their partial removal, both in the centre of the building (for such constructions as F8) and also where the walls were to be founded and the earth was excavated down to bedrock. The layer contained fragments of coarse cooking pots similar to those in BY, and of one of the Amphorae with Ridged Necks represented in the phase (a) layers; this tends to confirm this suggested derivation of layer CB/CN.

9. See further, *infra*, 105.

10. Comments kindly provided by Dr. Myra Shackley following her microscopic examination of the samples at the Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford. Professor V. Jaccarini of the University of Malta kindly examined some objects from pot no. 124, uniform in shape and size and similar to corn grains; they were composed of sand-like particles, and were possibly coprolites.

Layer BF/BO was evidently a floor surface. It was made almost entirely of compacted plaster, with the addition of lumps of lime and a little quartz sand. Microscopic examination showed no other inclusions, and no building debris such as mortar fragments. The sediment was not made by puddling, but was probably mixed in the usual way for plasters and compacted when laid and by subsequent use.[11]

Little remained of the superstructure. It seems likely that nearly all of this had been removed for the building of the present church. Enough was found, however, for it to be clear that, like that church, it had piers standing in front of the walls and not bonded into them, and it can therefore be inferred that it was also roofed in the same way, with slabs carried on arches. One of the pier foundations (F16) at the south-east corner was re-used by pier S4 of the upper church. The diagonally opposite north pier 1 was also founded on that of its predecessor F15. Both these features were demonstrably contemporary with the floor. The piers rested directly on bedrock and a mixture of earth and limestone chippings was used as cement. There is no sign that there were benches between the piers.

Some of the blocks at the base of the north wall of the upper church are placed on a slightly different alignment and may be identified as part of an earlier structure. They include blocks beneath north pier 3 and its adjoining bench, beneath the threshold of the north door, and the two blocks behind the pier foundation F15. Further possible evidence for the earlier north wall, this time for its outer face, came from the excavation of the Visitation church. Two blocks of stone measuring 1.62 m and 1.26 m long respectively were exposed at the foot of the wall of the Annunciation church, but at a slightly different alignment from it, projecting further north at the east end. They were situated between the later doorway connecting the two churches and their west end walls (*infra*, 35; Fig. 5; Plate 21). The alignment is the same as that of the blocks of the inner face just mentioned. Its slight difference from that of the upper church explains why only two of the earlier church's piers could be re-used in the later building. Those further east on the north side would have been situated too far behind the planned line of the new piers. Certainly, new foundations were dug for north piers 2, 3 and 4 (*infra*, 24). The same presumably held good for south piers 1, 2 and 3, but all these were in any case outside the excavated area.

It is not possible, from the available evidence, to state the exact dimensions of the lower church. Although one of the piers of the south wall was found, no part of the wall itself could be seen. If, however, one assumes that the pier projected the same distance (45 cm) in front of the wall as did the north-westernmost pier (F15), that would give a breadth of 4.20 m between the walls, compared with the 4.45 m of its successor. No evidence of the west wall was found, but the church cannot have been shorter than the present building's 7.50 m. The layers beneath the westernmost bench on the north side and beneath the bench at the west end were removed so far as it was safe to do so without risking the benches' collapse, but nothing was found that could be identified with a wall earlier than that of the present church.

The line of three stone blocks (F8) cannot be interpreted as an east wall, since the floor extends around and to the east of it. Nor could it have been a step up

11. Dr. Myra Shackley analysed the sample and provided these comments.

to a platform, since the floor surface on the east side is at a lower level (Fig. 7). Its position suggests that it was the foundation for the altar. The length, 174 cm overall, is appropriate. The *mensa* at present in the church, the stone slab which served as the top of the altar in the upper church, is 165 cm long. This is cited for comparative purposes only, since it cannot be shown that this *mensa* was actually the original. Although the alignment of the body of the lower church is slightly more northerly at the east end than that of the later building, the line of the altar foundation is parallel with the diameter of the present apse. This suggests that the east end wall of the lower church was not at right angles to the north wall, an error in layout which was corrected in the later building. Where the east end wall stood and what form it took must remain matters for conjecture, since the floor level was cut into by the construction trench for the present apse and by the east walls of the nave which connected with it. The width of the apse wall in its lowest courses, and the sharp drop in ground level to the east of the church, prevent our ever knowing the eastern limit of its predecessor. That fall in ground level, however, would have prevented it from having extended much further than the present structure.

The large block at the north-west corner of the present apse foundation may, however, indicate that the east wall of the lower church lay 12 cm further west than the present wall, and that it too had an apse, of which the block in question formed the north cornerstone since the south face of the block, 76 cm long, is straight. That would imply that the apse of the lower church was rectangular, not semicircular. Rectangular apses are known in medieval Maltese churches, for example at Santa Domenica at Zabbar, the Virgin of Victories at Ta' Qali, and one of the two adjoining churches at Santa Marija tal-Ftajjar, Luqa,[12] and the features can also be observed in some of the rock-cut churches such as Tal-Abbatija in the Tad-Dejr catacombs and at St. Agatha, both at Rabat.[13] Admittedly, there is no evidence at present that such a feature is generally an early one.

The stratigraphy adjoining the rectangular block was disturbed, and the interpretation just offered cannot be proved conclusively. This block and another on the south side of the apse foundation of the upper church differ in their careful dressing from the undressed or irregular stones used for the remainder of the foundation, which does suggest that they were first used in another building. In relation to the lower church, however, all that can be said for certain is that its east end enclosed an area at least as wide as the altar F8 and extending at least to within 30 cm of the easternmost point of the inner curve of the present apse, which is as far as the layers associated with the lower church were preserved. It may have terminated in a rectangular apse, or even a curved apse since obliterated by its successor; the church may equally well have had a simple rectangular plan, with its north-east and south-east corners extending outside the perimeter of the upper church.

The lower church was decorated with frescoes. One of the blocks re-used in the foundation F4 of north pier 2 had colour remaining on its upper surface which was

12. Cf. *Hal Millieri*, 84 and Fig. 8.

13. Plans in *Medieval Malta: Malta before the Knights*, ed. A. Luttrell (London, 1975), 163, 170.

clearly not added later, since it ran beneath the block above. Quantities of plaster were found in the layers sealed between the floors of the two churches, those associated with the demolition of the lower church and the building of its successor. The fragments were too small and diverse for any reconstruction of the original scheme of decoration to be possible, but a number of different elements in the design could be isolated. From layer AY (section 2, Fig. 7), interpreted as deriving from the demolition (*infra*, 24), a fragment with the tips of fingers in yellow with red outline, on a background of dark pink picked out in cream, light pink, black and brown, showed that the frescoes had included figures. Other designs include (Plates 24–26):

1. A hexagonal diaper pattern with blue, yellow and deep red grounds separated by white bands, with white dots.

2. Yellow, with straight and curved lines 1.5 to 1.6 mm wide, in maroon and cream, or with concentric red and white circles.

3. Dark grey with thin lines of blue-grey, red and blue.

4. Red and maroon with light pinkish stripes shaded in, similar to the background of the piece with the fingers.

The layer AI, laid after construction of the new church had begun, but before the laying of the floor, included nos. 2, 3 and 4 above, and in addition:

5. Blue and yellow, with a cross within a square in red set in a white square with a brown border.

6. Dark grey or black with a fretted cross and deep yellow and white curved lines of varying thickness.

A small hole dug in the north-east corner of the church appeared to be a recent disturbance of AI, backfilled with the same material. It contained plaster with the designs numbered 2, 3, 4 and 6 and a large quantity of cream plaster with broad red bands similar to that on the top of the block in the pier foundation F4. None of the geometric designs is paralleled in the celebrated frescoes of the upper church, but the overall effect of the decoration would seem to have been at least as elaborate and accomplished.

We have, therefore, an earlier church, approximately as wide as its successor, but of unknown length, built in similar fashion using dressed ashlar masonry, with its roof carried on piers which were free-standing from the walls. The foundations rested on bed-rock, levelled up where necessary with a cement of earth and stone chippings. It had an altar with a foundation of stone blocks, and may have had an apse. The church had a floor of compacted plaster, and was decorated with frescoes.

Its dating is difficult. Most of the pottery contained in its construction layers, namely the floor BF/BO and the layers CB/CN, CH and CU immediately beneath the floor, is residual from the Roman period. Layers BF and BO did contain sherds of the Red and Brown Burnished Ware described (*infra*, 71–74) as late medieval, but this pottery was also present in the layers associated with the construction of the upper Annunciation church in the late fifteenth century, and with that of the Visitation church (*infra*, 78: Chart). It is not known, however, how much earlier

this pottery began to be made. It seems fairly safe to assume that the church was built later than the Muslim period, but at present there is no way of locating its date more precisely within the period from the thirteenth to the late-fifteenth century.

Phase (c): The Grave in the Lower Church

At some time during the use of the church a grave was cut through the floor and into the rock beneath. This contained the burial of a young woman aged about sixteen years, lying above a child of about two and a half (*infra*, 84–85). The burials appear to have been made at the same time. Most of the pottery in the grave derived from the layers through which it had been dug, but apart from two sherds of Red and Brown Burnished Ware, none of this pottery was identifiably medieval.

The level of the top of the grave fill was some 25 cm below that of the floor (section 2), and the hollow was filled with the layer AY which covers the floor. As this layer appears to have accumulated during demolition, that means that immediately prior to that event there was a large hollow in the middle of the church floor. Had this resulted from gradual settlement of the grave fill one would have expected the upper edges of the grave pit to have been trodden down. This had not happened. It may therefore be suggested that the edges were protected and the hollow filled by a tombstone or stone slabs, removed immediately before the church was demolished. The rectangular shape of the west end of the grave in plan (Figs. 5–6) gives some support to this idea, which would be entirely appropriate to the unique character of the grave in the early church.

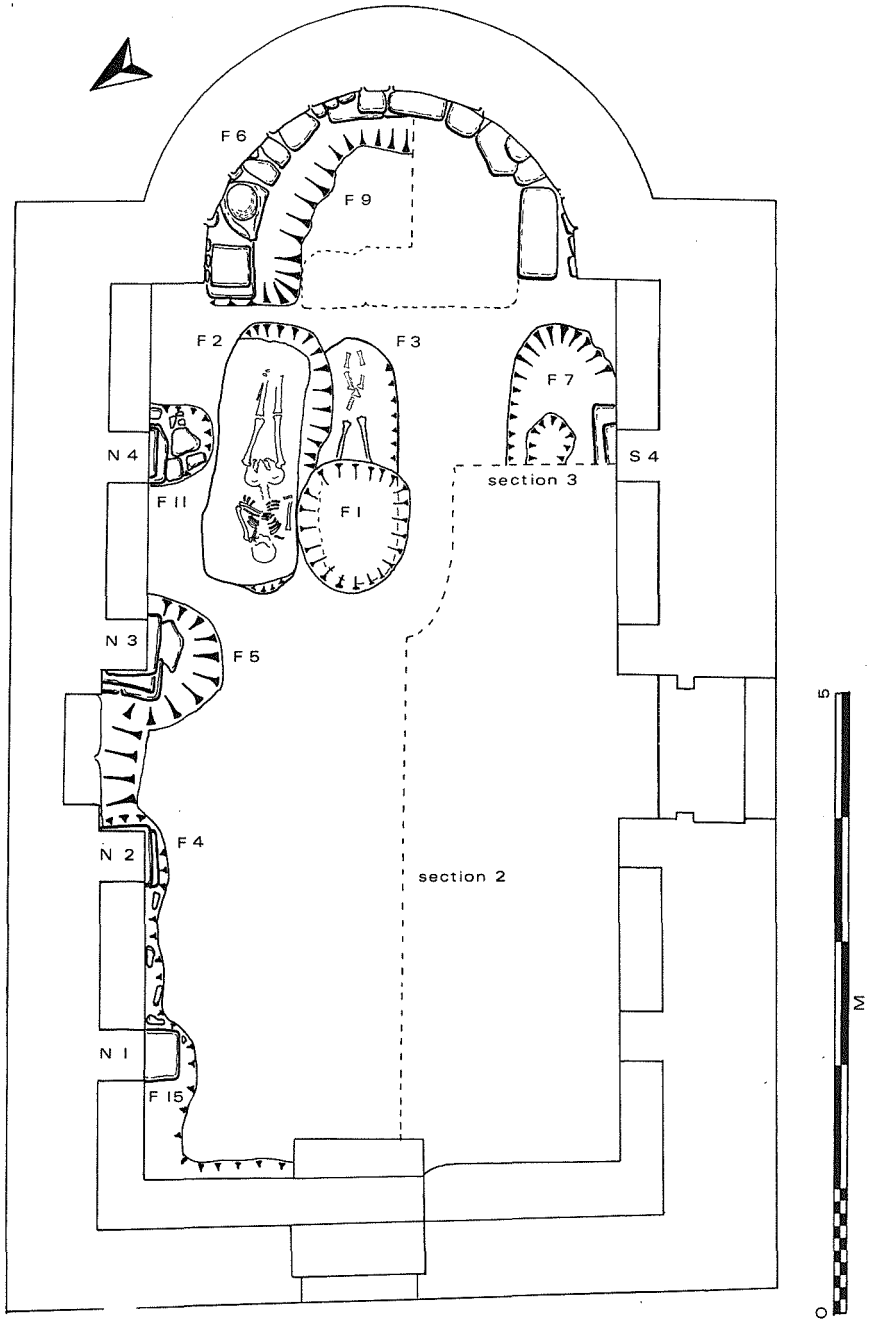
2. THE PRESENT ANNUNCIATION CHURCH

Phase (d): Demolition of the Lower Church and Construction of the Upper Church (Fig. 8)

DESCRIPTION

The stratigraphy between the floors of the present church and of its predecessor just described was as follows (section 2, Fig. 7, in descending order):

AA, AB	Loose dust immediately below the present pavement.
AF, AV, AH	Pale brown sandy silt.
AM	Extremely compact dark brown stony spread; found only in the apse.
AP	Very dark, compact but not cohesive, earth with much mortar and flakes and chips of stone; found only in the apse.
AS	Extremely compact, cohesive, clayey silt with small stone chips and mortar, and a smooth level surface; it filled a hollow in the apse and extended 40 cm further west into the church.
AT	White mortar spread 0.5–1.0 cm thick; in the easternmost part of the apse, overlapping the stone foundation F6.
AI	Greenish-brown sandy silt with large flakes and chips of stone; compact on top, but much looser and with more stones in the lower part. The surface was uneven, and the depth of the layer varied from 10 to 30 cm. It extended over the whole area of the body of the church and halfway into the apse, and it also lay beneath the benches.



8. Church of the Annunciation: features excavated in the Upper Church phases (d) and (e).

BI Compacted medium brown silt with occasional large stones, continuous over the whole apse.

BL Loose medium brown earth with numerous stones filling the trench F9 within the apse.

AY Uniform pale brown clayey silt with lime and many stone chips. The surface was irregular but compact and smooth. The layer extended throughout the church, except where cut by later features, and it covered the floor BF/BO of the lower church. It contained fragments of wall plaster (*supra*, 20).

Associated features within the body of the church comprised three pits cut through AY and the underlying layers (those associated with the lower church) adjoining north piers 2, 3 and 4 and containing the foundations of those piers (F4, F5 and F11 respectively).

F4 contained two rectangular blocks, neatly dressed with a toothed axe (Plate 10 centre right). The lower measured 47×38×23 cm high, and its upper surface retained a coat of red and white plaster, demonstrating its previous use in another building, presumably the lower church. The upper stone measured 49.5×37×24 cm high. Both were set at a slight angle to the present church wall, possibly because the lower courses of the lower church wall whose alignment they follow were still in position. The pier of the upper church rested on a layer of earth and limestone chippings 1–4 cm thick above the upper foundation stone, and was not bonded in to the wall behind it. This consisted of large roughly-dressed blocks measuring 42 cm in height which were exposed below the threshold of the north door.

F5 (Plate 9) contained, immediately below the pier, an adzed block 50×42×39 cm high, not bonded in with the church wall. It rested on an irregular foundation of large blocks and smaller stones, cemented with a mixture of earth and chippings, which lay partly on bedrock and partly on the rubble layer CJ associated with the lower church. This foundation extended below the north wall of the present building.

F11 was constructed in the same manner, with two squared stone blocks immediately below the pier resting on an irregular foundation of boulders.

Layer AI filled these pits after the foundation blocks had been placed within them, and covered the whole area of the upper church. Its varied depth resulted for the most part from the irregularity of the surface of AY beneath it. The benches between the piers were built on top of AI (Plates 9, 10).

Two features in the apse were associated with this phase: a trench, F9, approximately concentric with the apse, containing a foundation of stones, F6. The trench was dug through layers AY, BO and CN down to bedrock. The stone foundation formed an irregular semicircle projecting between 20 and 30 cm from the face of the apse wall, which was built upon it (Plate 12). It included some large dressed blocks which must have come from an earlier building, possibly the lower church, as well as smaller rectangular blocks and boulders and also a stone mortar. Except at its western terminations, where larger blocks were used, it was three or four courses high, though these were not regular since the stones used were not of uniform height.

The foundation was higher on the north side than on the south (Plate 5). The projection from the apse wall of the top course diminished to a point 45 cm north

of section 2, where it disappeared beneath the wall. The height of the remaining three courses of the foundation at that point was 90 cm. At the south-west termination the level of the top of the foundation was 17 cm lower than in the middle at section 2.

The trench F9 was filled with loose rubble (layer BL) which included painted plaster of designs 3 and 4 (*supra*, 20) and some of a deep salmon pink with red and white curved lines 2–6 mm thick. These may have formed part of the frescoes in the apse of the lower church. The space between the top of the foundation and the hump formed by AY over what was interpreted above as the altar of the lower church (F8) was filled with a solid layer BI. This layer was partly overlapped by AI.

INTERPRETATION

There is no sign from this stratigraphy that the lower church had collapsed or had been exposed to a long period of neglect or decay; there were no large fallen building stones, broken roof slabs or accumulation of dirt; nor had the floor surface been damaged. One may therefore infer that the lower church was deliberately dismantled and that layer AY was the remains of the mixture of earth and chippings used to cement its walls (as in F4 and F16, *supra*, 23, 14), following a common Maltese building practice also employed in the upper church.[14] The wall plaster present in the layer is easily explained as that which had fallen off the walls as they were being demolished. As well as filling the hollow over the earlier grave F10 the layer covered the foundation of the altar F8.

All the other layers are connected with the construction of the new church. Several features were associated with this. Pits were cut through AY and the underlying layers adjoining north piers 2, 3 and 4 for the laying of the foundations (F4, F5 and F11) and a solid foundation for the apse wall was built (F6). North pier 1 and south pier 4, the only others examined, re-used the pier foundations of the lower church (*supra*, 12, 14).

After the foundations for the piers had been prepared and, probably, at least the lowest courses of the wall laid, the whole area of the church except for part of the apse was levelled with the layer AI. It filled the pits dug for the pier foundations, and the benches between the piers rested upon it. None of the construction work could have produced the quantity of spoil, about six cubic metres, which it represents and all or a substantial part must therefore have been carried in from elsewhere. AI contained a large quantity and a wide range of pottery, which included a few Borġ in-Nadur sherds, late Roman finewares and other Roman material, as well as much later wares, and a piece of ostrich egg shell (*infra*, 97, no. 25). Unfortunately, there is no way of telling from where the soil had been brought, but it is unlikely to have been from far away, and this adds to the indications given by small quantities of prehistoric and Roman pottery from other layers on the site and by previous finds[15] that there were sites of those earlier periods nearby. The loose and stony consistency suggests that much of the finer earth had been sifted from AI before

14. *Ħal Millieri*, 69.

15. *Ibid.*, 19, 25–26; *infra*, 53–69.

it was spread. Beneath the bench at the west end it contained some very large boulders (Plate 9).

Two features in the apse were associated with the building of the church: the trench F9 dug for the construction of the apse, and its stone foundation F6 (Fig. 7). The reason for this substantial foundation was probably to ensure the stability of the apse at a point where the natural ground surface slopes away to the north and east. The construction trench F9 was dug down to bedrock, and the broad foundation was built with that much greater solidity in the north quadrant where the ground level is 10–25 cm lower on the inside than in the south-west corner of the church and is sloping downwards. It is curious, therefore, that the large squared blocks at the north-west and south-west terminations of the apse foundation did not themselves support the apse wall (Plates 12, 13). The lower north block measured 78×39×37 cm high. Its north-east corner was not visible but may just underlie the apse wall, but the block above it (41×38×31 cm), next to the re-used mortar, stood free. The south block (81×38×31 cm) was also entirely free-standing. So far as the stability of the foundation was concerned, these blocks could only have given lateral support. It may be that part of their purpose was served during the actual construction of the apse and its vaulting, in providing a firm basis for the scaffolding of the arch.

At this point one may imagine the foundations for the new church laid and perhaps the lowest courses built, and the interior levelled with loads of stony earth brought in from outside. Possibly the walls of the body of the church had already risen higher, since the surface of AY was considerably compacted, perhaps by the feet of the builders as they went about their work. Certainly, construction work remained to be done in the apse. The layer of mortar AT overlapped the top of the foundation F6, and the very compact layers AS, AP and AM in the apse can be explained as earth trampled in by workmen, with the flakes and chips of stone in AS and AP produced from the dressing of the stonework.

The north doorway which communicated with the adjoining church of the Visitation was probably not an original feature of the upper Annunciation church, and is discussed separately (*infra*, 41–42).[16]

The final stage in the building of the church, apart from its roof, was the laying of the floor. A bedding for the paving stones was spread over the whole church, and consisted of a stone-free brown earth. Possibly this had been sifted from AI for the purpose. It comprises layers which were separately designated as AF, AV and AH before excavation revealed that they all formed one deposit. AV is that part to the west of section 1, AF that to the east of it where the stratigraphy was evidently disturbed by later burials, and AH that in the apse. Layers AA and AB formed the loose dust lying above this deposit immediately below the paving stones, and overlay AV and AF respectively.

Twenty-eight coins were found in these layers, mainly as a result of careful sieving. AA produced eighteen; AB, two; AV, six; and one came from the surface of AI below AV (*infra*, 81–83). Most of these coins appear to have been lost while the layer was being spread and the floor laid: their concentration was at the top of the deposit (layers AA and AB) and at the west end of the church, whereas if they had

16. Cf. *Ibid.*, Plate 14B.

already been present in the earth when it was brought into the church, a more uniform distribution throughout these layers might have been expected.

It seems safest to regard only the coins in AV as providing the securely stratified dating evidence for the make-up and laying of the floor. All six coins from the layer are of the period 1402–1479. So far as concerns layers AA and AB, immediately beneath the floor, the possibility has to be considered that some of the coins they contained might have found their way though gaps between the paving stones, having been dropped on the floor after it was laid. To a large extent this can be discounted, since a plotting of their measured positions showed that they did not coincide significantly with the joins between the slabs. It is difficult, however, to explain the presence of two coins of Grand Master Lascaris (1632–1657) in layer AA as other than intrusive in some such way, since the paved floor is mentioned as already in existence at the time of the apostolic visitation in 1575.[17] These, moreover, with the possible exception of one poorly preserved coin from layer AB datable only between 1402 and 1516, are the only coins from beneath the floor which are later than 1479, a fact which also makes their presence suspect.

The latest of these coins among the remainder which can be dated to a particular ruler are two Sicilian coins of King Giovanni II (1458–1479). It would seem safe to conclude, on the basis of the coin evidence from AV, as supplemented by that from AA and AB, that the layers on which the paved floor rested were laid in or shortly after his reign. This is of great importance because, since the construction of the floor was integral with the building of the church, these coins thus constitute the only archaeological evidence for the date of the church. The pottery does not provide this information, since much of it is residual, that is, already contained in earth brought in from elsewhere; and little may be thought likely to have been broken during the building operations. Furthermore, in view of the lack of well-dated medieval pottery in Malta, one has to look to the date of the church as giving a fixed point in the dating of the pottery, not vice-versa.

The church can therefore be dated to the last third of the fifteenth century, and this fits well enough with Bautier Bresc's dating of the frescoes of the church to the middle of that century, contrasting them with the new stylistic currents apparently introduced into Malta by the followers of Antonello da Messina after 1477,[18] if one allows a slightly greater degree of conservatism on the part of the Ħal Millieri painter. It should perhaps be noted at this point, however, that there is no evidence whatsoever that the present church had any floor earlier than that datable to the late fifteenth century. That floor and its associated layers must therefore be regarded as contemporary with the church, as indeed their structural relationship shows. The church cannot therefore be regarded as any earlier than that date, nor, consequently, can its frescoes.

The paving of the apse was relaid in 1968 with the stones from the platform which had been extended into the body of the church at some time prior to 1636, when it is mentioned in the visitation report.[19] It was described at the time when

17. Text *ibid.*, 139–140.

18. G. Bautier Bresc, *ibid.*, 103.

19. Text *ibid.*, 141–142.

it was cleared in 1968 as having been built mostly of re-used stones, including moulded blocks along the front row.[20] It seems likely that these came from the apse floor contemporary with the present pavement, since what was thought in 1968 to be 'the original rude pavement' is now known to be the top of the apse's foundation wall F6. A small hole had been dug, presumably in 1968, which exposed the top of this without going down into the layers adjoining it.

The surface of the floor make-up in the apse (AH) was higher than that of the rest of the floor, showing that the original apse pavement was higher than that of the rest of the church. If the moulded stones from the step came from the original floor, it is probable that they have now been relaid almost exactly where they once were and that little of layer AH was removed in 1968 to accommodate them. None of the layers beneath this present floor can be identified with the raising of the platform before 1636; if any additional material was laid then, it must have been cleared away in 1968.

Phase (e): The Graves in the Upper Church (Figs. 8, 9)

DESCRIPTION

Three graves were dug in front of the altar. Two of them were side by side in the northern half of the church – F2, the northernmost, and F3. The third (F 7) was dug alongside the south wall. They were all covered by tombstones, which have already been described[21] while the skeletal remains are discussed *infra*, 84–95. Here, it will be sufficient to outline the details of their archaeological contexts.

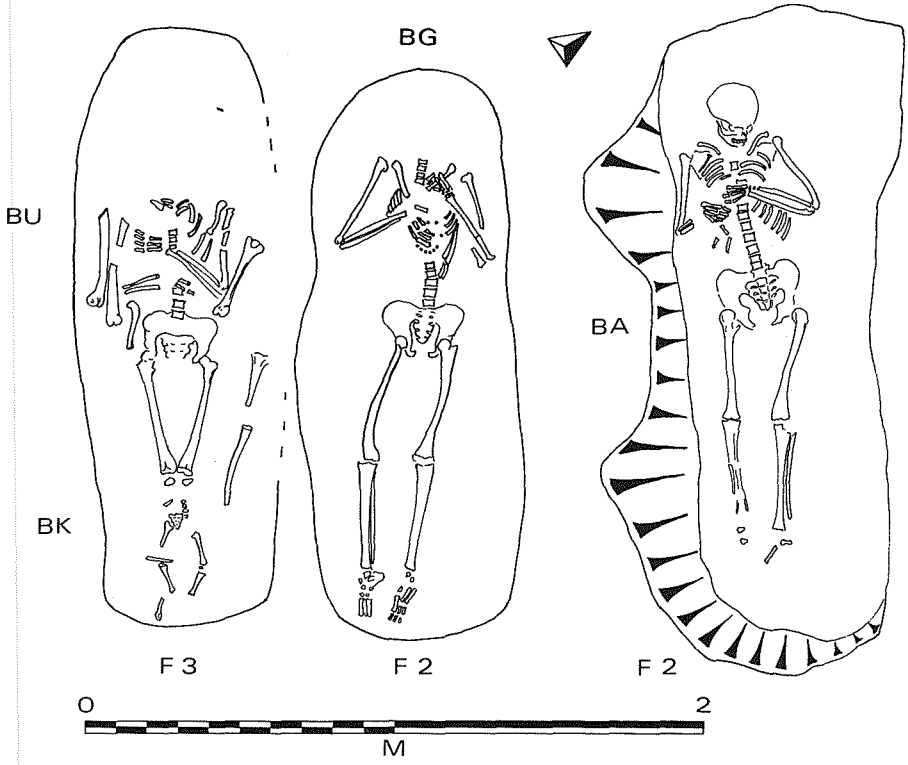
Grave F2 contained three burials. The uppermost (BA), a man of 25–30 years, had a bronze pin (*infra*, 96, no. 8) at the right shoulder. Loose bones in the fill (AJ) of the grave associated with this burial included a cranium which was presumably that of the otherwise headless underlying burial BG. The upper fill (AJ) was separated from that which surrounded BG (layer AX) by a thin film of organic deposit. AJ contained fragments of painted plaster from the lower church (*supra*, 19–20; designs 2, 3 and 4) and a considerable quantity of pottery. Skeleton BG, a tall man of over 40 years, had a rosary of twenty-three round glass beads by his left hand (*infra*, 96, no. 5). The head of the lowest burial BW, a woman of similar age, was also missing, probably having been removed when the burial above was inserted. The vertebrae at the waist and the adjacent finger bones were stained green through contact with some bronze or brass object which had corroded. This could have been something held in the hand, such as a crucifix, or an attachment to a belt or girdle. The grave fill BV contained several fragments of two of the pots from BY, a layer in the phase antedating the construction of the lower church (*supra*, 9–10).

Grave F3 contained four articulated burials. The latest was that of an infant, BK. It had been inserted at the east end of the grave, disturbing the lower legs of the previous burial, BH. It survived only in fragmentary condition, namely the long bones, finger and toe bones, and part of the pelvis. BH, a woman of about 30 years,

20. *Ibid.*, 77.

21. M. Buhagiar, *ibid.*, 77–79.

had also been buried with beads, of which seven were discovered where they had fallen through into the rib-cage (*infra*, 96, no. 6). The layer surrounding it, AO, contained numerous loose bones from other disturbed burials. It also contained a large fragment of painted plaster (Plate 27), which showed the outline of a head in orange-red and maroon on a yellow ground with a dark grey border. The style appears to be that of the present frescoes.



9. Church of the Annunciation: plan of burials in graves F2 and F3.

Beneath that burial, separated from AO by a thin light grey layer stained by organic matter, grave fill BT contained the poorly-preserved bones of a male skeleton BU. No part of the skull remained, and all that survived were part of the rib-cage, the pelvic girdle, and some of the arm and leg bones. The earliest interment found in the grave was that of an arthritic woman of about 50 years, CA. The upper part of the skeleton was well-preserved, but from the pelvis downwards the bones were missing, having been disturbed by the digging out of the grave for the subsequent burial BU. A number of the bones had been replaced in the grave fill BZ before BU was laid there.

The upper part of F3 had been disturbed by the digging of an oval pit, F1, filled with two layers of loose earth, AK and AL. Both contained quantities of human bones, in very poor condition, no doubt because of the well-aerated friable soil. Both

layers contained pieces of painted plaster similar in colouring to the surviving frescoes, as well as some identifiable with designs from the lower church. AK contained sherds of a thin-walled drinking glass and other pieces of glass, probably from a lamp. AL contained two beads (*infra*, 96, nos. 2 and 3) similar to those of the rosaries with burials BG and BH, and four fifteenth-century coins.

Grave F7 had also suffered from disturbance by later digging, which had removed its eastern edge. The east end of the grave could only be distinguished where it cut into the natural rock at the bottom. The north edge was probably little damaged; the cutting through layers AF, AI and AY (section 3, Fig. 4) coincides with that through the rock. Any trace of the original stratigraphy adjoining the south wall and south pier 1 had, unfortunately, been removed. The disturbance had been carried almost to bedrock beneath the tombstone, and the layer BX contained only fragmentary bones; any large bones must have been discarded. It also held a small quantity of pottery, and it is of some interest that one sherd joined with others from the fill of the apse construction trench (BL and BI), and must originally have come from other layers associated with the construction of the present church (*infra*, 57, no. 29). The part of the grave beneath the westernmost of its three covering slabs was not excavated.

INTERPRETATION

All burials were oriented in the normal Christian manner with their heads to the west, and laid with the arms lying across the chest, the right hand nearer the head than the left. No coffin nails were found, nor were any outlines of wood visible in the soil. The dead may have been laid to rest in a simple shroud.

The arrangement of paving slabs around the tombstones is notably less regular than in the western two-thirds of the church. It would appear that none of the tombs was an original feature of the church, but that when they were made, the floor was taken up, and some of the paving stones were then relaid in the remaining spaces round the tombstones, but without fitting them exactly. The graves had been dug down through the make-up layers for the church floor and the layers beneath them associated with the lower church. Pottery found in the fill of all three graves is of similar character to that in the layers through which the graves were cut; indeed there are several instances of pieces of the same vessel being found in both types of context. Thus, as one might expect, the graves were filled up again with earth which had been dug out before each burial. This would account also for the presence of fragments of wall plaster from the lower church in layer AJ of F2. If, however, the piece of fresco in layer AO of F3 had correctly been identified as part of the present frescoes, this must mean that those frescoes had begun to disintegrate at the time of that burial, unless they had been damaged in the course, say, of some contemporary building operation.

The earliest that any of these burials could have been made is after the laying of the floor of the church in the late fifteenth century. The latest date for them is indicated by the report of the episcopal visitation of 1636.[22] This mentions the

22. Text *ibid.*, 141–142.

altar platform which partly covered these tombs until it was removed in 1968.[23] The platform incorporated the eastern two slabs into which the original tombstone of grave F7 had been broken, and it must be at the time of the platform's construction, or in 1968 when the slabs were restored to their original position, that the disturbance of that grave took place. The tombstones above the graves F2 and F3 have rectangular sockets for the bolts and uprights of the wooden screen which was described as *nouiter facta* in the visitation report in 1636. All three tombs had therefore become inaccessible for further burial by that date.

The pit F1 which disturbed the upper part of the grave F3 may have been dug when the tomb slab was broken in two and the two parts were replaced in reverse order, conceivably at the time the altar platform was built. The purpose of the hole is obscure; it does not seem to have been for burial, since no articulated skeleton was found in it. Possibly it happened when the two parts of the tombstone were restored to their proper relative positions in 1968.[24] A certain amount of dust and modern rubbish had been swept in at that time.

Graves F2 and F3 were both used for burial on several occasions. Save that the latest grave fill in F2 (layer AJ) cut through, and is therefore later than, the latest in F3 (layer AO), it is not possible to demonstrate whether the tombs were in contemporaneous use, though this may be thought likely.

While seven skeletons could clearly be identified as still lying, even if in some cases partially disturbed, in their articulated positions, the graves, particularly the uppermost, contained numerous bones of other individuals. Various bones from earlier burials were redeposited in the filling of the later graves which had disturbed them, notably the skulls and mandibles, which were concentrated in the latest grave fill in F3 (layer AO) and in Pit 1 (layer AL). The specialist report contains tables (*infra*, 88) which show how the displaced mandibles may be related to the graves from which they had probably derived. Grave F2 contained in addition to its three skeletons the remains of an infant, and grave F3 and pit F1 contained the mixed bones of two other adults, a child of about three years and two infants, in addition to F3's four skeletons. The total of burials in this phase, datable to between the late fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries, thus comprised eight adults, aged between 25 and 50 or so years, and five children. This was not the total of burials within the church, for the bones from F7 were in too fragmentary a condition for any individual to be identified, and there is also the tomb or ossuary indicated by the five large slabs in the south-west corner of the church (Plate 6) which has not been investigated.

T.F.C. BLAGG

23. *Ibid.*, 71, 77.
24. *Ibid.*, 77.