

EXCAVATION REPORT

1. Introduction

The only buildings of the *casale* of Ħal Millieri which survive in whole or in part are its four churches. The church of St. John, rebuilt in the seventeenth century, and the contiguous church of St. Michael, now in ruins, do not concern us here.¹ The church of the Annunciation and the remains of that of the Visitation, which formed a similarly contiguous pair, are the subject of this report.

They now stand in an irregular walled enclosure which is entered through a monumental gateway, probably of seventeenth-century date, from the present road from which they stand at a distance of 18 m (Fig. 1; Plate 1). The date of the enclosure wall is uncertain, but in its northern part it was shown by the excavation to have used the wall-footings of the Visitation church, demolished in 1667, as its foundation; the cemetery area was described in the episcopal visitation of 1636 as having an *introytum longum, et latum ac foris muro septum*, that is "an entrance long and large, and shut off from the outside with a wall", but we cannot be sure that the wall then followed exactly the same course as it does now.²

As indicated in the Introduction above, the excavations were planned in the light of the historical and architectural studies of Ħal Millieri which have already been published. The particular aims of this archaeological research were as follows:

1. To explore the layers beneath the floor of the Annunciation church, in order to examine its method of construction and to answer various questions concerning its structural history raised by the documentary research; to seek independent archaeological evidence to confirm or revise the date of its construction, which had been inferred from the study of its frescoes; and to investigate the earlier history of the site, for which no known documentary evidence survives before 1419/20.
2. To uncover whatever survived of the adjoining church of the Visitation, of which almost nothing remained above ground level other than the evidence of the blocked doorway which once connected it with the Annunciation church to the south, and to compare any such archaeological evidence with that contained in the documents.
3. To demonstrate the structural and chronological relationship of the two buildings.
4. To throw further light on the architectural development of this characteristically Maltese type of church.
5. To obtain for the first time in Malta a stratified sequence of medieval pottery, in the expectation that beneath the two buildings a medieval stratigraphy would have been preserved relatively free from disturbance since the time the churches were built.

1. For a brief account of these churches, see *Ħal Millieri, a Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings*, ed. A. Luttrell (Malta, 1976), 134–136.

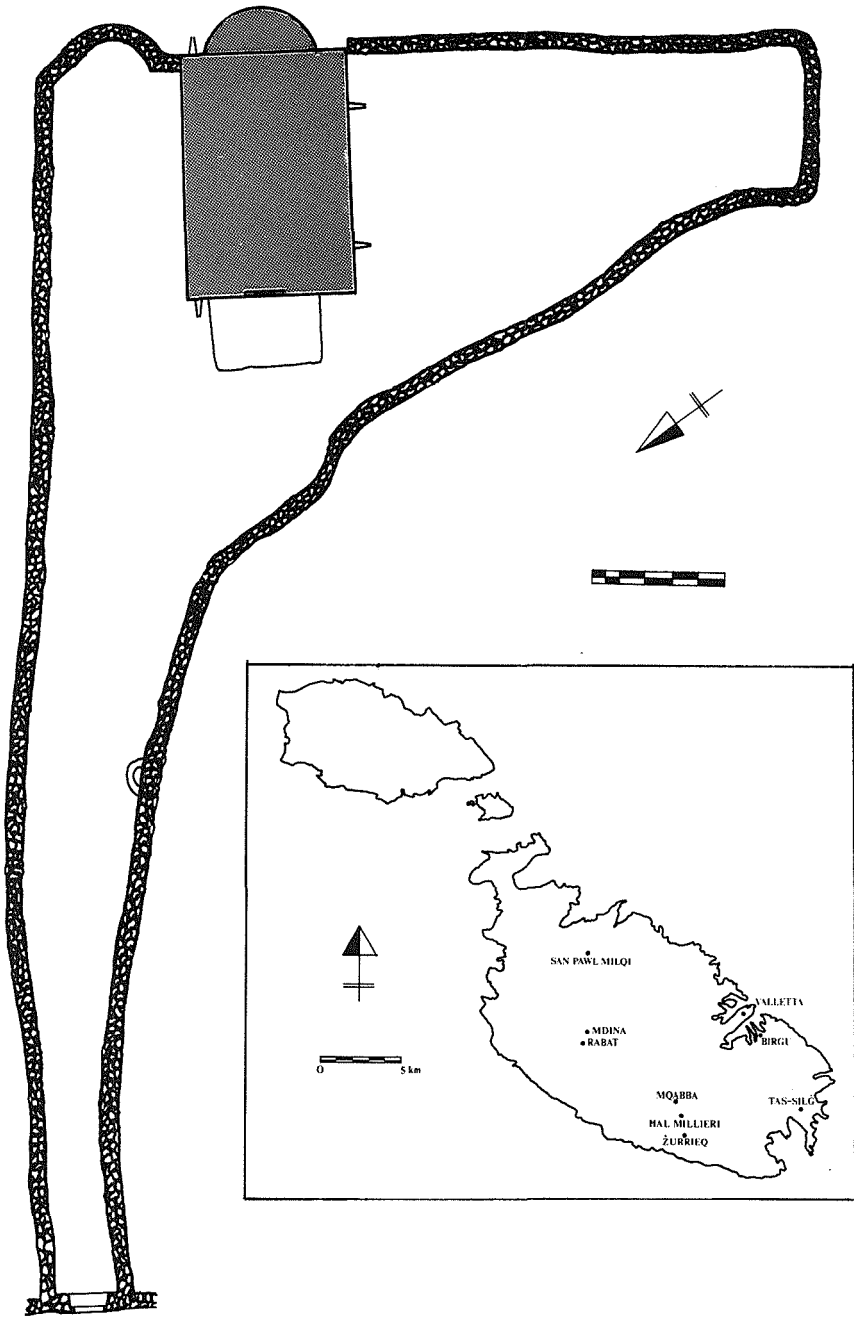
2. Text *ibid.*, 141.

It was decided not to excavate outside the Annunciation church in an area known to have been a cemetery last used in the nineteenth century³ and likely therefore to have been considerably disturbed. For the same reason, the area outside the west wall of the Visitation church, once it was uncovered, was only explored to a very limited extent (Fig. 2).

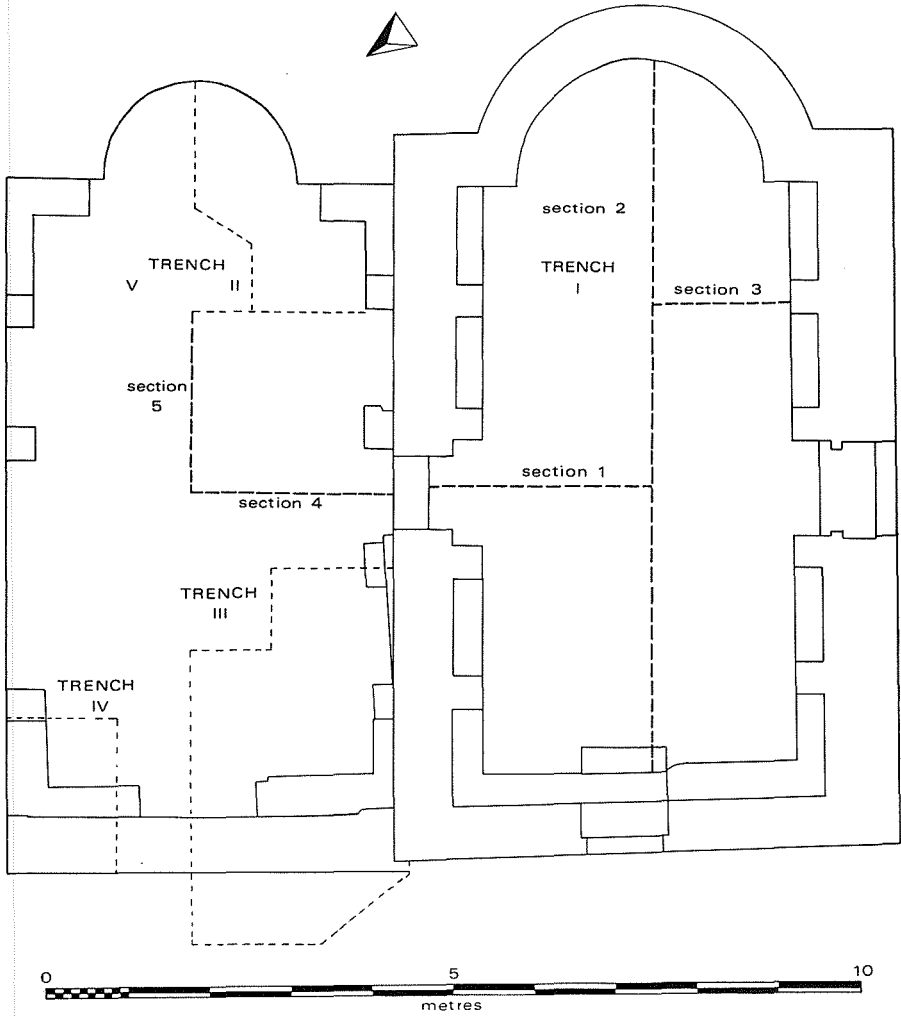
The surviving structure of the Annunciation church imposed a natural division upon the planning of the excavation, and it is convenient to follow this division in the initial presentation of the results. The excavations of the Annunciation and Visitation churches are therefore described separately. Conclusions affecting both parts of the site are presented in the final discussion, and subsequent reports on the finds, other specialist matters, and the historical and architectural postscript all deal with the excavation and its material as a whole.

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3. *Ibid.*, 123.



1. Hal Millieri: the precinct of the Annunciation and Visitation Churches, with location map (inset).



2 Plan of the Churches of the Visitation (left) and Annunciation (right) showing the positions of excavation trenches and sections.