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The Maltese Early Christian Cemeteries. An Overview

The Early Christian cemeteries of the Maltese Islands are among the most important south of Rome and have significant archaeological and art historical interest. It is the aim of this paper to assess the archaeological evidence and to establish a context for a meaningful study and interpretation.

An essential characteristic of the Maltese cemeteries is their compactness and intimate proportions. The labyrinthine complexities that mark the major cemeteries of Rome, Naples, Siracusa and Hadrumantum are entirely absent. The most extensive cemetery, that of St Paul, covers an approximate area of 2166m (fig. 8.1), while the nearby St Paul's Grotto Hypogeum is only 28m. There is, on the other hand, a more diversified typology of tomb architecture, and an unexpected richness of detail. The Maltese cemeteries are, as a matter of fact, best understood as the product of a particular environment and cultural tradition that was only superficially affected by external influences that came by way of Sicily and North Africa. They are greatly indebted to the Phoenician and Romano-Punic shaft-and-chamber-tomb, and are, as a matter of fact, an elaboration and multiplication of their spatial and architectural idiosyncrasies.

The Ta' Marcell Field¹ at Ta' Caghqi, Rabat, investigated between March 1906 and October 1907, provided Themistocles Zammit with a plausible explanation of the way in which the Romano-Punic tomb developed into the Late Roman and Early Christian hypogeum or miniature catacomb. The more than one hundred shaft-and-chamber tombs that made up the site, were so tightly clustered that their chambers, in many instances, opened into each other, suggesting to Themistocles Zammit that 'this may have led to the grouping of tombs served by a common shaft' (Zammit: 1931). It was hardly a coincidence that the site also contained a single galleried-tomb (fig. 8.2) consisting of burial-chambers aligned on either side of the long axis of a narrow north-south corridor (Zammit nb.2, 1,29, 32, 112-113; M.A.R. 1907-1908, 6-7). Similar single-galleried hypogea are encountered in the Maltese countryside and possibly provided a prototype for most of the subsequent

¹ The site received its name from the owner of the land, Marcell Mizzi.

underground cemeteries.

With a few apparent exceptions, the cemeteries experienced an organic growth with accretions being added as the need arose. The original gallery was sometimes elongated along its long axis, but in most cases, enlargements took the form of new galleries that branched off from it at right angles. In the larger and more important ones (fig. 8.3), the galleries sometimes opened on finely proportioned halls where the space is fragmented by canopied- (or *baldacchino*-) tombs. Parallels can be drawn with some of the minor catacombs of the Sicilian countryside particularly those in the respective neighbourhoods of Palazzolo (Intagliata, Intagliatella), Ispica (S. Marco, Lardereria), Rosolini (Stafenna), and Noto (Grattaluri), on the Iblea Highland (Agnello 1970). In what appears to be a late development, the galleries are eliminated and the open spaces are split up into a grid of intersecting corridors by free standing canopied-tombs. The most notable examples are Abbatija tad-Dejr I (fig. 8.4) and SS. Paul/Agatha 16. In Sicily a similar development can be noticed in the Catacomb of Sinibardo, in Palazzolo, and in those of S. Elia, Cozzo Guardiole and Ferla in Canicattini.

The canopied-tomb (fig. 8.5) is a rock-cut sarcophagus with arched corner pilasters that link up with the ceiling to form a canopied super structure. Its origin is not known, and it is not apparently rooted in Malta's Punic culture. Similar tombs frequently occur in the minor catacombs of rural Sicily and like the *arcosolium* it is probable that it reflects Sicilian influence.

In spite of its indebtedness to Sicily, the Maltese *arcosolium* has idiosyncrasies of its own. It is, to start with, never deeply tunnelled into the rock face and it generally contains only two, or at times, three burial-troughs. The largest known example, at St Paul Catacombs, has six troughs, but this is an exception to the general rule (fig. 8.6). The restrictions of its size differentiates the Maltese *arcosolium* from the large Sicilian prototypes that are one of the essential features of the great catacombs of San Giovanni and Vigna Cassia. There is, in addition, a seemingly native variant with a very flattened arch, in which the burial-troughs are replaced by mortuary-couches, *ca.* 80 to 100cm above ground level, that appear to be an elaboration of the burial-platform of the Romano-Punic grave.

The most common Maltese tomb-type is the window-tomb (fig. 8.7). Its name was coined in 1911 by the German archaeologist E. Becker (Becker 1913), but its uniqueness and interest were only adequately highlighted in 1949 by Padre A. Ferrua S.J. of the Istituto Pontificio di Archeologia Christiana (Ferrua 1949). In the countryside this is, in most cases, the exclusive tomb-type. So called because of its 'window'-entrance to a usually oval chamber, the tomb seems to be essentially

Maltese and is, in many ways, a Late Roman re-interpretation of the burial-chamber of the Romano-Punic tomb, the essential idiosyncrasies of which it managed to retain. The 'window' is located *ca.* 80 cm to 100 cm above floor level and is often cut at the back of an apsed recess that may be decorated with crisply carved corner pilasters and, on rarer occasions, with a scallop-shell motif.

There are five other tomb-types among which the ones most encountered with are the loculus and the *forma* (or floor-tomb). The remaining three, the bench-tomb, the table-tomb, and the burial-cubicle (or *cubiculum*), are less frequently found. The burial-cubicle shared common characteristics with the window-tomb deserves special consideration. Like the window-tomb, it is entered through a 'window'-door and is likewise indebted to the Romano-Punic tomb. Its most remarkable feature is, on the other hand, its spatial articulation which provides for three burial set-ups (Buhagiar 1986: 24).

Contrary to standard practice in the Italian and North African cemeteries, where it is the most common tomb-type, the Maltese loculus was first and foremost a child's burial arrangement. It is, as a matter of fact, characterised by its small size, and a considerable number of loculi were quite obviously intended for new born children. Less than twenty adult loculi have, as a matter of fact been identified.

The most noteworthy feature of the Maltese cemeteries is, the occurrence in many of them of a cylindrical rock-cut table that is usually incorporated in a low platform with sloping sides that seems to recall a *stibadium*, or reclining U-shaped couch (fig. 8.8). Table and couch are hewn out in one piece forming a single architectural unit located within a wall-niche or apse. This remarkable set-up is, in most cases, situated close to the entrance of the cemetery, either at the start of an important gallery, or in a hall that could have served for assemblies. The larger cemeteries sometimes have two or, on occasions, three tables that were carefully illuminated by lamps placed in pyramidal or arched holes. It is obvious that the tables served a cultic purpose. The principal tombs were grouped in their immediate neighbourhood and were often linked to them by small arched openings that pierced the walls of the apse. Table and apse were, in addition, carefully finished and normally rendered with a dark red, or light brown, stucco that occasionally served as a bed for painted decoration.

The most plausible explanation for these intriguing architectural units is that they were funerary-*triclinia* associated with the custom, widespread in the ancient and Early Christian world, of holding *refrigeria*, or commemorative meals, on or near tombs, on death anniversaries. *Triclinia* were a characteristic feature of the average Roman *domus* and it appears probable that the funerary-tables represent an

attempt to reproduce underground, in a rock-cut environment, *triclinia* of the *stibadium*-type that must have existed in Maltese buildings of the Late Roman Period, even though archaeological evidence for them is still lacking. In at least fourteen instances there are seats fronting the tables.

There is nothing comparable to the Maltese funerary-triclinia on mainland Italian and Sicilian cemeteries. The closest one gets are, perhaps, the reclining stone couches in front of a late second century A.D. burial-chamber in the necropolis of Porto at Isola Sacra. Equally distant is the large stone table outside the catacomb of Porta Ossuna, near Palermo. Approximately similar table set-ups have, on the other hand, been noted in largely above ground cemeterial contexts in North Africa and in other places, such as Sardinia and parts of Spain, that experienced the influence of the *Ecclesia Africana* (Buhagiar 1992: 152-161). The closest one gets is the table in the Adam and Eve Hypogeum,² at Gargaresc in the neighbourhood of Tripoli, Libya (fig. 8.9). There are nonetheless important differences. At Gargaresc, unlike Malta, the table and *stibadium* are two distinct units and, more importantly they are not rock-cut but built of drystone and rubble. The apsed niche is also missing (De Vita 1978: 198- 256).

The state of preservation of the Maltese cemeteries, and destructions resulting from human and natural agencies give a wrong impression of an aggressive austerity. Decorative programmes survive only on a few of the major sites, but the iconographic motifs and daubs of paint catalogued from many of the cemeteries (Buhagiar 1986: 410-422) suggest that tomb decoration was a diffused practice. Some of the countryside hypogea such as Salini (Buhagiar 1984: 1-18), Hal Resqun (Buhagiar 1986: 246-250), Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka (Buhagiar 1986: 252-254), Xarolla,³ and Paola Sammat Street (Buhagiar 1986: 324-326), are richly ornate. The cemeteries of Melite and the Harbour town of Marsa (Buhagiar 1986: 260-268) reveal, on the other hand, a greater decorative sobriety and decoration is often limited to a simple cross monogram or a straightforward iconographic motif. Even architectural ornament is handled with restraint. Window-tombs sometimes have scallop-shells and carry crisply carved pilasters and miniature columns; and, on a few occasions, a hood-mould with end-volutes articulates the arched openings of a canopied-tomb.

The surviving paintings are, with a couple of exceptions, limited to symbolic or essentially decorative motifs, and there are no known Old or New Testament scenes. One of more interesting paintings, in St Paul Catacombs, shows a seated

² So-called after an apparent 4th/5th century wall painting of the temptation of Adam and Eve.

³ The Xarolla Hypogeum, limits of Safi and Żurrieq still awaits publication.

person, of undetermined sex, accompanied by a simple farewell message and the anchor symbol of hope (fig. 8.10). This is one of the two recorded figure paintings. The other, an apparent Orant, is known only through a rapid sketch by Themistocles Zammit. It was painted on a canopied-tomb, in a now destroyed hypogeum close to the church of San Catald, at Rabat, and formed part of a decorative programme that echoed the elegant linear style of wall-decoration fashionable in the Late Roman period (Buhagiar 1986: 164-166). A canopied-tomb in the St Agatha complex is similarly decorated but the human figure is replaced by allegorical birds. Two other birds, possibly turtle doves, feature prominently on a painted niche fronting a mutilated funerary-triclinium in another hypogeum of the St Agatha complex (fig. 8.11). They each carry a flowering twig and approach two drinking vases in-between which is a chi-rho monogram. The rest of the decoration is taken up by a large scallop-shell and by delicately rendered leaves and flowers that are possibly meant to represent the heavenly paradise where the soul finds its *refrigerium*. Certain stylistic idiosyncrasies and a fascination with leaves and flowers seem to suggest an affinity with the painted decoration in the Catacomb of Vigna Cassia, near Syracuse. The style was, however, widely diffused and influences were probably far ranging.

A number of incised drawings point, on the other hand, to North Africa. The most significant come from Hal Resqun where two pelicans, above the entrance-door, are busily engaged in the act of feeding a fledgling. In the conch of the framing niche of an elaborately decorated window-tomb there are, on the other hand, three schematised Orant-figures who share the crammed space with animals, birds and fish (fig. 8.12). A stylistically related carving at Xagħar ta' Santa Duminka shows another Orant figure who emerges from a scallop shell (fig. 8.13). These two scenes share the same idiosyncrasies. There is the same naïve schematisation and a similar iconographic economy. The approach is strictly minimalist and the Orants have a head and two hands but no body. The head has a large mouth and two saucer eyes but there is no nose; and the number of fingers varies from one hand to the next. These and other incised drawings (Salini, SS. Paul-Agatha 3, Hlantun and elsewhere) share stylistic idiosyncrasies with the symbolic birds (fig. 8.14) and animals from the above ground cemetery of Ghajn Zahra, in the neighbourhood of Tripoli, Libya (Aurigemma 1932).

Crosses and cross-monograms feature with notable frequency, while seven-branched candlesticks brand a small nucleus of Jewish hypogea dug in the same burial-ground as the Christian cemeteries of Melite. They testify to the presence of a community of Jews of the Diaspora, and a Greek inscription), in one of the hypogea commemorates the head of the *gerusia*, or Jewish Senate, of Melite, and his wife Eulogia who is intriguingly called a 'priestess'.

A total of 39 inscriptions, often very fragmentary, have been identified and catalogued. The greatest number (18) are Greek reflecting the Hellenistic cultural bias of Late Roman and Early Christian Malta. Of the remaining texts, fifteen are Latin and six Neo-Punic. They are normally scratched on the cement rendering of tombs or else scribbled in red ochre paint on sealing slabs, but there are also four marble plaques and one lead tablet. They are not very informative. The Christian texts cover a time range from approximately the late 4th to the late 6th or early 7th centuries. Most only give the name and the age, but we also get notice of a “kindly Christian doctor” named Domesticus, and of Zostimetis and Anicetos who sold a cemetery located in the Grand Harbour area.

The most eloquently Christian inscription comes from a small hypogeum in St Thomas Bay, in the south of Malta, and is in the form of a prayer invoking Christ. The first six lines show a familiarity with Acts III, 6-7; but the chief interest of the text lies, as pointed out by Cabrol and Leclercq, in the invocation that follows which re-proposes a prayer formula current in Early Christian Numidia.

The occurrence in many of the sites of the chi-rho and the Constantine cross monogram, buttresses the epigraphic evidence for a post 4th century date for the Christian cemeteries. A late date is, in addition, suggested by other considerations. The layout of several of the hypogea consisting of rectangular halls with *baldacchini* finds a parallel in the small catacombs of rural Sicily where one at Trepiedi, in the province of Modica, has been dated on epigraphic evidence to the turn of the 4th century. The few fragments of painting suggest familiarity with some of the post-Constantinian murals of the catacombs of Siracusa, notably Vigna Cassia. Decorative, and architectural idiosyncrasies, such as the blind arcading at the back of the *triclinium*-room in Hypogeum 3, in the St Agatha Complex, may finally be indicative of a Byzantine rather than a Late Roman origin. An approximate time range from the 4th to the 7th centuries A.D. seems likely. Another consideration is the presence of the North African red ware lamp (Hayes Type IIA) that is frequently reported from the cemeteries and which belongs to a type which does not seem to have been produced before 400 A.D. There are also indications of a protracted utilisation. A gold coin of the early 7th century Byzantine Emperor Phocas is reported from the close neighbourhood of the Salini Bay cemetery while the wilful mutilation of the triclinium tables suggests that burials continued to take place after the practice of the funerary meal had fallen in disuse.

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