

A possibly Christian burial of the late Roman period discovered in a quarry at Ta' Sannat, Gozo

George Azzopardi

According to the Museum Annual Report for the years 1928-9, the Police Occurrences Register for the period 20/12/1928 – 9/4/1929, and Public Works correspondence for the period 5/9/1928 – 3/4/1929, a burial was discovered in a quarry at Ta' Sannat on 7th January 1929. The report of the discovery was initially received by Mr Edward Borg Cardona, the District Engineer Public Works Department (Gozo). Together with Supt. E. Galea, he immediately visited the site and gave instructions to halt works and for the site to be kept under police supervision. A report was

also submitted to the Director of Museums. The burial yielded a small jar, an *oenochoe* (wine-jug), and a red clay lamp close to a heap of human bones. This is probably what was seen by Prof. Temi Zammit, the Archaeology section curator, when six days later (on 13th January), accompanied by Mr Edward Borg Cardona, he examined the site and the finds that had been lifted from the tomb. The Museum report, written by Zammit, describes the lamp: on its (dished) top, it carried two small oil-holes between which a dove with spread wings was shown in relief. It had a straight



Fig. 1. Detail of Map of Gozo showing the area of Ta' Sannat and (inset) location of the tomb findspot

(vertical) solid handle while a large capital 'B' was engraved/stamped on its base.¹ This was probably the manufacturing workshop's stamp or the potter's personal one (in that case, perhaps his initial) as manufacturers in these workshops/factories did sometimes stamp their products in this manner.²

Location and circumstances of the find

The quarry (now reverted to an agricultural field, though smaller than before) was located towards *Ta' Xaman* or, more precisely, in the area known to the local farmers as *Tas-Seqer* between *Ta' Randu* and *Ta' Marziena* (Fig. 1). It belonged to Frangisku Grima, known as *Il-Gabillott*, from *Ta' Sannat* but was on lease to Frenč Mercieca, known as *Ta' Furtun*, also from *Ta' Sannat*. The latter operated the quarry and discovered the tomb on 7th January 1929, when he was 36 years of age.³

Like the majority of the quarries, this one had previously been an agricultural field. As an initial step in the process of stone extraction, the topsoil from a designated part of the field was removed, exposing the rock surface beneath. The topsoil was usually heaped on the sides of the field to be re-spread over the same area once stone extraction (from that area of the field) was completed. The process was similarly repeated on other areas of the field earmarked for stone extraction.

On exposing the rock surface following the removal of the topsoil in preparation for quarrying in the south-eastern part of the field (as it is today), a tomb was discovered. It was cut in the rock surface below *ca.* 2.5/3 feet of topsoil. It was also found that rock-cutting had already taken place there sometime earlier.

The tomb

The tomb consisted of a shallow rectangular pit/trench – somewhat irregular in shape – of a type known in the Roman world as *fossa*. As it was cut on the horizontal rock surface, it must have been an open-air tomb (Fig. 2). It measured *ca.* 6 feet (length) by *ca.* 2 or 2.5 feet (width) by *ca.* 1.5 feet (depth) and was orientated North/South. The tomb was also completely full of soil up to its edges.

Salvinu Mercieca, *Tal-Ġermaniż*, who kindly indicated the burial site to me and supplied the information, clearly remembers

the discovery of the burial as he was then aged 16 years. At that time, he was employed in his father's quarry situated near the one where the discovery took place. He does not remember whether there were any tool marks visible on the internal rock surface of the tomb but he is convinced that it was definitely not a natural depression. He remembers, however, that there was no rebate cut round the edge of the tomb enabling it to be closed by a horizontal stone slab or slabs on the same level as the rock surface surrounding the same tomb.⁴

A tomb of this type could have been closed in different ways. A common way of covering *fossa* tombs – particularly those like that of *Ta' Sannat* where the rebate for horizontal sealing slabs is absent – could have been by way of clay tiles (*tegulae*) set gable-wise (Fig. 3). Carved and hollow roofing tiles (*imbrices*) were sometimes added along the ridge. *Fossa* tombs covered in this manner can be seen, for example, at *Isola Sacra* necropolis north of Ostia, the port of Rome,⁵ while certain burials among those discovered in St Francis Square in Victoria,



Plate 1. The rock-cut open-air fossa tomb similar to the one at *Ta' Sannat* but discovered at *Marsalforn* on 26th March 1936. (Photo courtesy: Lawrence Zammit Haber)

Gozo also appear to have been covered in a similar manner.⁶

Salvinu Mercieca remembers that the internal rock surface of the tomb, like the rock surface surrounding the same tomb, bore a dark reddish patina: apparently, soil patina. He also remembers that the bottom of the tomb was rather uneven and quite unlevelled with the southern end being slightly deeper than the northern one but this could have been merely accidental. Furthermore, he remembers a small concave hollow cut into the rocky bottom of the tomb on its northern end. This hollow, which was rather shallow and was covered with the same patina covering the tomb interior, did not appear to be natural. Thus, it is very likely to have been a corpse head-rest but without any visible traces of a rock-cut 'pillow' where the head-rest stood, as one would normally expect to find in similar tombs of the same period.

During the soil clearance process, the tomb yielded the articles mentioned earlier, namely, the small jar, the *oenochoe*, the oil lamp, and the human bones which were disarticulated. All of these were mixed up with the soil in the tomb, indicating that the burial had been tampered with sometime earlier. This is not surprising considering the fact that rock-cutting had already taken place there in earlier times.

Close to the tomb were found other separate depressions resembling troughs cut in the rock surface. Some of them were quadrangular in shape while others were rather circular, but all of them were smaller than the tomb. Their internal rock surface was also covered with a dark reddish patina. They were as deep as the tomb itself, although some of them were shallower. These depressions were also full of soil but contained no complete ceramic articles or bones. They contained only ceramic sherds mixed up with the infilling soil. Sherds were also found within the tomb itself and the rest of the field. The nature and use of these depressions are unknown, although in no way do they appear to have been used for burials. Similar depressions were occasionally found in a quarry near the one where the tomb was discovered, but even these yielded only ceramic sherds mixed up with the infilling soil.

The investigations

On receipt of the report of the discovery,

Frenč Mercieca was instructed to halt works while the site was kept under constant police supervision. The police constable carrying out the night-watch took shelter in a small dry-stone hut which exists to this day in a nearby field. This hut was used as a tool-shed by Salvinu Mercieca's family to keep quarrying tools. Six days after the discovery, the site was inspected by Prof. Temi Zammit accompanied by Mr Edward Borġ Cardona. The finds were collected from Frenč Mercieca who was allowed to proceed with the quarrying while police supervision was discontinued. As a result of quarrying, it is very likely that the tomb was completely destroyed. However, it is not to be excluded that part of the tomb was saved as quarrying in that part of the field ceased when good quality stone was no longer found and, thus, that part was re-buried under the same soil unearthed previously. Eventually, with the exception of its north-eastern part (as it is today), the field was entirely quarried.⁷ It is not known either officially or unofficially whether other tombs have ever been found in that area or in the vicinity.

Similar tombs

The discovered tomb resembled the rectangular floor tombs found in Maltese Christian catacombs, like those of St Paul in Rabat, Malta and those of *L-Abbatija tad-Dejr*, limits of Rabat.⁸ But, more specifically, it resembled the open-air ones such as those near the Salina catacombs, limits of St Paul's Bay. Tombs of this latter category near the Salina catacombs amounted to around twenty five (today, fewer than that might survive) and were all shallow with a head-rest over a rock-cut 'pillow' for the head of the corpse. Another similar tomb was reported at *Ix-Xagħra tal-Magħlaq* near Qrendi. These appear to represent a late type of Christian tomb which probably developed at a time when burial in open-air cemeteries started to replace burial in underground catacombs.⁹

A rectangular open-air floor tomb at *Il-Wied ta' Kandja* (Malta) resembles the Ta' Sannat one in lacking any rebate for a horizontal sealing slab/s but it bears a head-rest over a stone 'pillow' for the head of the deceased. It measures 5.6 feet by 2 feet, reaching a maximum depth of 1 foot, and is aligned on a North-east/South-west axis.¹⁰

Another rectangular rock-cut open-air floor tomb – also of the *fossa* type but, this time, from Gozo – which could have likewise been of a late Roman date – was discovered at Marsalforn on 26th March 1936 (see Plate 1 showing the Marsalforn tomb on its discovery). It was discovered by workmen whilst widening a pathway (*Strada Passaggio*) joining *Strada Santa Maria* with *Strada Forno*. Its measurements (length: 7 feet, width: 2.4 feet, depth: 1.3 feet) and orientation (North-west – South-east) were also close to those of the Ta’ Sannat tomb, but it contained the skeletal remains of three individuals and was covered by three horizontal stone slabs resting on a rebate purposely cut round the edge of the grave. Apart from fragments of a Roman amphora and three pebbles, a complete vessel which might be an *aryballos* was found deposited next to the skulls on the north-western end of the tomb. At the bottom of the grave there was a relatively large and roughly circular cavity full of silt and covered with a flat stone slab.¹¹

Apart from the North-African red-ware lamp which is likely to have been an import, another possible North-African ‘import’ concerning the Ta’ Sannat tomb may have been the above-ground or open-air type of the tomb itself. Like the open-air ones near the Salina catacombs, the ones at *Ix-Xagħhra*

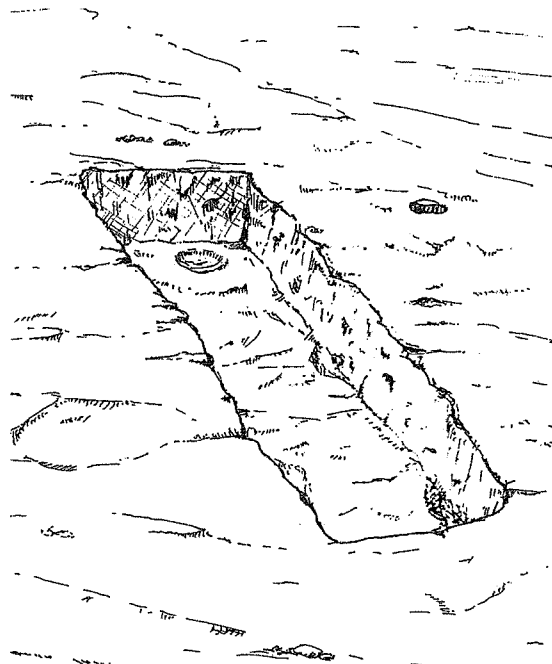


Fig. 2. An artist's impression of the tomb based on information kindly supplied by Salvinu Mercieca who remembers well the discovery. (Drawing: Joseph Calleja)

tal-Magħlaq near Qrendi and at *Il-Wied ta' Kandja*, and also the one at Marsalforn, the Ta’ Sannat tomb seems to resemble the majority but not all of the North-African burial places in being also above ground or in open-air.¹² Alternatively, however, the choice or need of a shallow open-air floor grave at Ta’ Sannat could have also been dictated by an emergency burial as, in such circumstances, the digging of an underground grave would have taken too long.¹³ But the possibility that the Ta’ Sannat tomb was a pauper’s burial – as apparently suggested by the simple form of the tomb –

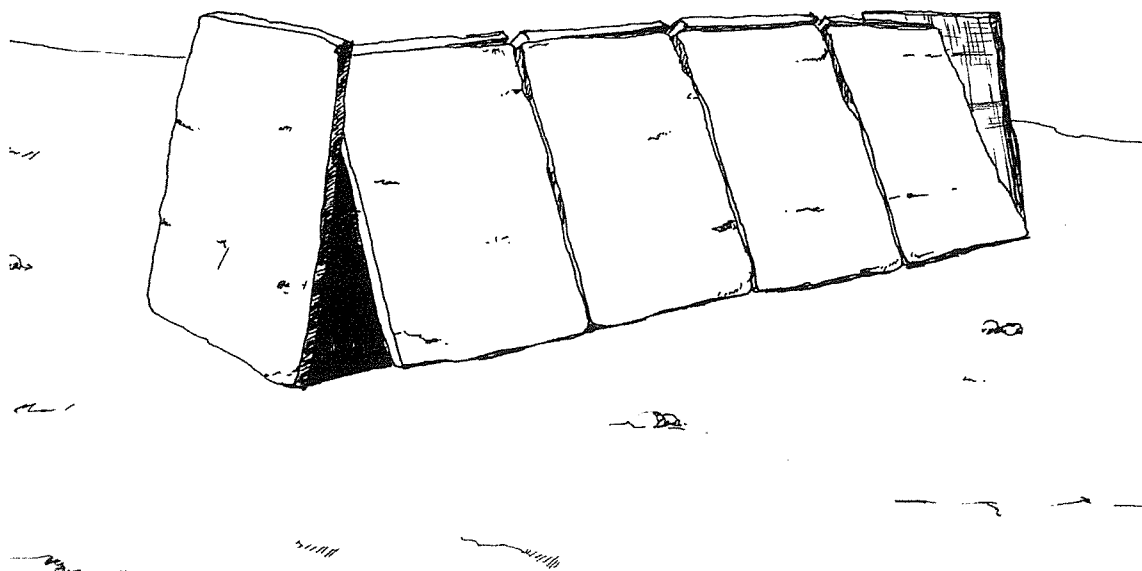


Fig. 3. A fossa tomb covered by clay tiles (*tegulae*) set gable-wise. Without excluding other alternatives, the Ta’ Sannat fossa tomb may have been covered in this manner, especially in view of the missing rebate for horizontal closing slabs (Drawing: Joseph Calleja)

does not seem to be much in consistency with the finds contained in the same tomb. The type of red-ware lamp, in particular, does not appear to be indicative of a poor burial, although not necessarily a rich one either.

The discovered articles

The *oenochoe*, like the one discovered in the tomb, was a single-handled jug, sometimes having a trefoil-shaped lip. As indicated by its Greek name, it was used as a receptacle from which wine was poured, but its use for other liquids like water and oil as well is not to be excluded either. On our islands, the *oenochoe* is to be found from Phoenician times but it remained in manufacture and use even as late as the late Roman period.

On the basis of the description provided in the Museum Annual Report, the discovered oil-lamp appears to have belonged to a type manufactured in North Africa from the 4th to the 6th centuries A.D. (Fig. 4). As lamps of this type were mould-made, they were produced in great numbers and were exported to various places around the Mediterranean, including our islands. However, such lamps could also have been produced locally from imported moulds or perhaps from locally-made moulds fashioned on imported examples.

Meaning of the dove

Without excluding the possibility of its having been simply decorative, the dove with spread wings on the lamp may also have been intended

as a Christian symbol. Having previously been an attribute of the deities of love like Astarte and Aphrodite/Venus, the white dove became (in Christian contexts) the symbol of the spirit of love or the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ But, in our case, its meaning should be sought more within a funerary context.

Pagan tombs already included doves – amongst other creatures – as part of their decoration. However, Titus Flavius Clemens, better known as St Clement of Alexandria (an early Church Father; *ca.* mid-2nd century – *ca.* early 3rd century A.D.) pointed out that certain artistic representations, like the dove or the fish, were particularly suitable for Christians.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, several of them, including the dove, became symbols in catacomb art, though bearing a new meaning. As a Christian import, the dove found its place on Christian sarcophagi and on catacomb walls as a symbol of peace and deliverance: deliverance from death and, hence, implying Resurrection, a concept of supreme importance in the Christian faith. It is with this meaning that the dove appears in scenes of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac whereby Isaac was delivered from death (by being sacrificed) through his father's faith in God, and in scenes of Noah in the ark whereby he and his family were delivered from the flood and, consequently, from death.¹⁶

Presumably carrying the same meaning, the dove appears also as a decorative motif on Christian burials in underground cemeteries in North Africa from where red-ware lamps like ours used to be imported. For example, one can mention the underground cemetery areas of Sousse/Hadrumetum in Tunisia which stretch over 1.5 km and contain over 10,000 burials. Each burial niche is often decorated with a dove or a fish motif, or a monogram and cross.¹⁷

The dove also makes its appearance – presumably also with the same meaning – on tombs in some of the Maltese Christian catacombs. For example, a canopied tomb (of the *baldacchino* type) inside one of the *triclinia*¹⁸ in St Paul's catacombs at Rabat (Malta) is decorated with two olive branches one of which seems to be carried by a dove. The *exedra*¹⁹ in the same *triclinium* carries traces of decoration which probably shows a palm branch and a dove carrying an olive

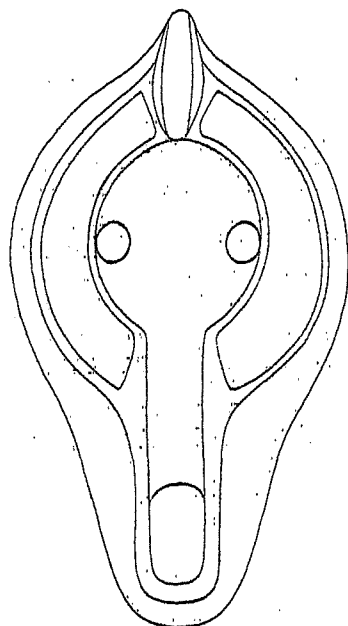


Fig. 4. The 4th – 6th centuries A.D. North-African red-ware lamp type which the Ta' Sannat lamp belonged to

branch. The façade of a tomb inside St Agatha's catacombs, also at Rabat, Malta, is decorated with two birds, one of which is possibly a dove. The same subject is found again on a fresco decorating a niche in front of a *triclinium* in the same catacombs. On a canopied tomb (of the *baldacchino* type) in St Catald catacombs, at Rabat, Malta, there are traces of two painted birds: possibly two doves. Another tomb inside *L-Abbatija tad-Dejr* catacombs, situated in the limits of Rabat, carries what appears to be an image of a dove on one of its sides. The dove also appears carrying an olive branch in its beak on a large fragment of a lamp found in St Agatha's catacombs. This lamp fragment is of the same type of lamp as the one found at Ta' Sannat.²⁰

Thus, looked upon within a funerary context like our burial, the dove on our oil-lamp may possibly indicate faith in deliverance from death/in Resurrection.

Alternatively, but also within a funerary context, the use of the dove may have also been intended as a symbol of the soul departing from the body of which it came to be a recognised symbol from the 4th century A.D.²¹

The other finds

On the other hand, the discovery of the *oenochoe* and jar in this possibly Christian context may recall the earlier Greco-Roman pagan custom of liquid offerings to the dead whereby wine was actually considered as life-giving, ensuring immortality, and substituting blood which appeases the spirits of the dead.²² This might be an indication of a belief in an afterlife and, therefore, in consistency with the possible meaning of the dove as expressed above.

The use of the dove symbol on the lamp and the deposition of the *oenochoe* and jar in our burial may thus be possible examples of syncretism whereby previously pagan representations and customs are adopted, often given a new meaning, and maintained by early Christians.

The apparent isolation of the burial

As already mentioned, lamps like the one mentioned in the Museum Annual Report did not make their appearance before the 4th century A.D. Moreover, the burial's apparently

isolated location may possibly reflect the prohibition of Christian burials amongst pagan ones. In such a case, apart from the fact that the burial does not appear to pre-date this prohibition, its isolation viewed in the light of the said prohibition may perhaps also confirm the mixed presence of Christians and pagans in Gozo at that time: a time of gradual transition from paganism to Christianity. The prohibition was addressed to the Christians by the Council of Laodicea (*ca.* 360) and by St Hilary of Poitiers (bishop and Church Father, *ca.* 315 – *ca.* 367) towards the middle of the 4th century A.D. Christians were even prohibited from visiting pagan cemeteries.²³ However, the burial's apparent isolation could perhaps be simply explained in terms of an isolated rural habitation in that area, or both. It is to be pointed out that graves – whether rich or poor – in the country districts of the Roman world could be found, more or less, isolated.²⁴

Dating and interpretation

In view of the above, the burial discovered in the quarry at Ta' Sannat does not seem to pre-date the 4th century A.D. (*terminus post quem*). Perhaps it does not pre-date the middle of the 4th century either. On the other hand, the discovered items and, in particular, their possible respective meanings in the light of their context and their being apparently in consistency with each other, taken together with the burial's apparent isolation which might be a reflection of the prohibition of burial amongst pagans, may be construed as a possible indication of a Christian context.

Notes

- 1 N(ational) A(rchives) G(ozo) / P(olice) D(epartment) / 1 (Police Occurrences) / 194, 38v – 40r. 45v – 46r, *M(useum) A(nnual) R(eport)*, (1928-9), V, and NAG / P(ublic) W(orks) / 02 (Correspondence) / 13, 260. Another lamp (marked: SAC / 20.7.1992) of the same type and also carrying a capital 'B' on its base is to be found at St. Agatha's museum in Rabat (Malta). This had been found in St Agatha's catacombs (adjacent to the museum) on 20th July 1992. This lamp and the one from Ta' Sannat may have possibly originated from the same workshop and perhaps even manufactured by the same potter (see reference 2 below).
- 2 D. M. Bailey, *Greek and Roman Pottery Lamps*, (London. The Trustees of the British Museum, 1963), 23-24.
- 3 NAG/PD/1/194, 38v – 39r and NAG/PW/02/13, 260.

Also, verbal communication from Salvinu Mercieca, known as *Tal-Ġermaniż*, from Munxar. At the time of the discovery of the burial, which he remembers well, Salvinu, then aged 16 years, was employed in his father's quarry situated near the one where the burial was discovered.

- 4 Verbal communication Salvinu Mercieca .
- 5 J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, (Baltimore. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 66 (pl.19), 69 (pl.24), 87, 101-102.
- 6 A.A. Caruana, *Ancient Pottery from the Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta*, (Malta. Government Printing Office, 1899), pl. XXI (5).
- 7 Verbal communication Salvinu Mercieca
- 8 M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*, BAR International Series 302, (Oxford. Archaeopress, 1986), 24, 56, 61 (Fig.14a).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 24, 338, 340, 350, pl. 28b. See also: G.H. Musgrave, *Friendly Refuge*, (Sussex. Heathfield Publications, 1979), 77. 91.
- 10 Bugeja A., 'Floor Tomb at il-Wied ta' Kandja', *The Oracle*, issue 1, (2000), 38.
- 11 *MAR*, 1935-6, XXV.
- 12 M. Buhagiar, 'Early Christian and Byzantine Malta: Some Archaeological and Textual Considerations' in V. Mallia Milanes, (ed.) *Library of Mediterranean History*, 2 vols. (Malta. Mireva Publications, 1994), I, 110.
- 13 Musgrave, 100.
- 14 Keel O., 'Animals in the Bible and the Ancient Near East', *Minerva*, vol. 13 no. 1, (2002), 25.
- 15 T. Flavius Clemens, *Paedagogus*, 3.11.16.
- 16 J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered monuments of early Christianity*, (London. Thames and Hudson, 1978), 55, 58, 60, 67-68.
- 17 N. Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, (Gloucestershire. Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2002), 53.
- 18 The *triclinium* (plural: *triclinia*) was the place in catacombs where funerary meals were held around an agape table when someone died or, else, on his/her death anniversary. But here (i.e. in funerary contexts), the term *triclinium* was borrowed from the Roman secular world where the *triclinium* was the dining room to be found in a Roman house and wherein the diners reclined on couches (*klinai*) to eat. Reclining to eat was and still is a nomadic habit. Borrowed from the east, the practice of reclining on couches was to become a normal feature of the Greek symposia and, later, was to determine the design of dining rooms (J. Boardman, *The Greeks Overseas: Their Early Colonies and Trade*, 4th edn, [London. Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1999], 83).
- 19 The *exedra* was a curved space or wall resembling a circular apse. In Roman urban architecture, *exedrae* were furnished with circular marble benches providing place for discussion and conversation.
- 20 Buhagiar (1986), 57, 74, 78 (Fig.20b), 80, 214. See also: id., 'The Maltese Paleochristian Hypogea – A Reassessment of the Archaeological, Iconographic and Epigraphic Source Material' in R. Ellul Micallef and S. Fiorini, (eds.), *Collegium Melitense Quatercentenary Celebrations (1592 – 1992) – Collected Papers Contributed by Members of the Academic Staff of the University of Malta*, (Malta. The University of Malta, 1992), 166-167.
- 21 S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist*, (New York. Doubleday, 2004), 64.
- 22 A.C. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity*, (Washington, D.C. The Catholic University of America Press, 1941), 115-116, 118-119.
- 23 Stevenson, 10.
- 24 Toynbee, 73.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Joseph Calleja who kindly produced the artistic impressions. The one showing the discovered tomb is based on the information kindly supplied by Salvinu Mercieca, 'Tal-Ġermaniż', from Munxar, who, as shown earlier, remembers the find well. The author is also greatly indebted to him.