FOUR NEW LATE ROMAN and EARLY BYZANTINE BURIAL SITES IN THE ISLAND OF MALTA*

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This paper seeks to focus attention on four burial sites in the island of Malta which have so far escaped the attention of the specialist archaeologist. They are, none the less, of sufficient interest to warrant a study. For the purpose of this paper I have limited myself to a surface survey only. With the exception of Ghar Qasra, it is doubtful whether the present state of the sites permits a proper archaeological investigation. The Tar-Raghad Catacomb and the Has-Sajjiid Tomb were both despoiled at an unknown period and retain little worthwhile deposits, if any, while the Skorba Tombs have suffered extensive mutilation from natural erosion and human activity.

It is difficult to date the sites with any degree of precision but a time range between the first and the sixth centuries A.D. seems reasonable. Tar-Raghad has clear signs of a chequered history of recuttings and adaptations in late Roman and early Christian times while Ghar Qasra was reutilised as a troglodytic shelter in the late Middle Ages. The other two sites pose greater dating problems. Tar-Raghad offers indications of a Christian presence. The others present no distinctive features of a religious nature.

The Has-Sajjiid Tomb is located in the historic core of the populous market-town of Birkirkara, close to the centre of the island. No other Punic, Late Roman or Early Christian burials have to my knowledge been reported from the area (Buhagiar 1986; Said-Zammit 1997, 75-77). This enhances its significance and it should be regarded as an eye opener to the possibility of other archaeological remains in the neighbourhood. The three other sites are, on the other hand, found within the parish boundaries of the rural settlement of Mgarr in the west of the island. The area is rich in Punic tombs (Said-Zammit 1997, 75-77) and the important Late Roman/Early Christian cemeterial site of Ghieri il-Lhud lies in their close proximity (Buhagiar 1986, 272-293). They, therefore, help confirm the importance of the district in the period under review.

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GHAR QASRANA

The site, on the Mosta - Zebbiegħ Road, is situated precariously on the fringes of a hard stone quarry on the other side of the road from the San Anton - San Andrea Schools complexes (figs 1 - 2). It stands apart from the other known Maltese sites because the burial chambers are cut within a natural cave. Wilful mutilations and the friable nature of the rock, which has resulted in the erosion of precious details, make an interpretation hazardous, and some of the presumed tombs are of doubtful authenticity. The best preserved is a window-tomb ('a') located immediately inside the entrance to the right. It has a crudely cut oval chamber (max. ht. 78cm; max. width 61cm), with apsed head-and-foot-recesses. There is a rock-pillow with a single head-rest, while the wall facing the square-headed doorway has a lamp-hole and an arched pottery-niche. A second window-tomb ('c') is dug into the same flank of the cave, approximately 130cm from the present floor level. With internal measurements of 165 x 75 x 79cm it is more roughly cut than 'a' and lacks rock-pillow and head-rests. In the space between these two tombs are the probable remains of a child-loculus ('b'), 104cm long x 34cm high, while facing tomb 'a' on the left hand side of the cave, are the sadly mutilated remains of another tomb-chamber ('g') which was cut level with the floor and was presumably reached through a window-door. It has a roughly oval plan with approximate measurements of 155 x 106 x 79cm and there seems to be a slightly curved head-recess surmounted by a lamp-hole.

Three man-made recesses ('d'-e'-f'), excavated next to each other in the wall opposite the gaping mouth of the cave, could likewise have been burial-chambers, but there is no real evidence for sepulchral arrangements. Recesses 'd' and 'e' are raised above the present floor level by a thin bank of rock with a max. ht. of around 35cm, and have respective internal measurements of 193 x 111 x 95cm and 85 x 52 x 79cm. The crude rock-pilaster which separates them has a max. thickness of 27cm. A stockier pillar, 46cm thick, separates 'e' from recess 'f'. The latter is dug level with the present floor and has a roughly oval plan. The stone chips and accumulated rubbish which fill it almost to capacity make an investigation difficult, but it seems to have approximate measurements of 133 x 232 x 85cm. In the right hand wall are the apparent remains of a pottery-niche.

The cemetery at Ghar Qasrana was badly mutilated and its deposits disturbed when the cave was utilised as a troglodytic station at an unknown period, probably in the late middle ages when cave-dwelling became widespread (Buhagiar 1993A, 319-320). Recesses 'd'- 'e'- 'f' might have been excavated at this time when the mouth of the cave was screened by a drystone wall, traces of which can still be made out. Also belonging to this period is a tethering-hole dug in the ceiling, in the approximate middle of the cave, next to a long, narrow cutting which perforates
the roof and could have served to ventilate and illuminate the interior. The cave was first noticed in 1947 by the Rev. John Farrugia who mistook it for an "underground chapel" (Farrugia 1947) and dated it incorrectly to the Byzantine period. It has since been entirely forgotten.

THE SKORBA TOMBS

This miniature necropolis was brought to my notice by my colleague, the late Mr. Michael Sant, in 1992. It is located at Zebbiegh at a distance of about a couple of kilometres from Ghar Qasrana (fig. 3). Close by are the well known prehistoric remains excavated and published by David Trump in the 1960s (Trump 1966). The site is made up of at least four burial-chambers ("a" - "b" - "c" - "d") and two possible child-loculi ("e" - "f"), dug into the sides of an ancient quarry which might hint at some form of building activity in the area in classical times (figs. 4 -5).

Accumulated debris and thick vegetation permitted the proper investigation of only "a" - "b". The farmer who tills the land informed me that these two burial-chambers were used as animal pens within living memory. Tomb "a" (fig. 5) was, as a result, extensively mutilated and its ceiling heightened to better accommodate the resident animals. The modern marks of a pick-axe can easily be made out. The doorway which has a boldly defined rebate to receive the sealing-slab, was, for the same reason, heightened and cut into a square-headed shape. The chamber, which has roughly rectangular proportions, shows no evidence for either rock-pillow or head-rests. Their absence is, however, compensated by a very fine, arched pottery-shelf, 30 x 10 x 30cm, next to which is a lamp-hole. An oblong, cupboard-like recess (60 x 25 x 50cm), dug level with the floor, is difficult to explain. To my knowledge it has not been reported from any other known site and it may, in fact, be a modern accretion, perhaps intended to contain fodder for the incumbent goat or other farm animal.

Tomb "b" (fig. 5) is better preserved and has a fine entrance arrangement consisting of a round-headed window-doorway recessed within a deep arcade which was at one time rendered with a rough-grained cement, patches of which have been preserved. A lamp-hole surmounts the doorway while two other lamp-holes are cut into the thickness of the arcade. The doorway was presumably blocked by a plaque-door of the type discussed in Buhagiar 1986, but no trace of it has survived. The chamber at its back is oval in plan and has a carefully apsed head-recess but the pillow with head-rests is once again missing. Facing the entrance is an arched pottery-shelf flanked by a lamp-hole.

Tomb "e" is almost completely obscured by thick vegetation and only the outlines of its entrance are visible. Tomb "e" (fig. 5) is more accessible and although it was not possible to take accurate measurements, the rectangular shape of its roughly cut chamber could still be made out. There is a lamp-hole in one of the short sides
The Skorba Tombs
The Skorba Tombs

but the characteristic pottery-shelf is apparently missing. The only interesting feature of this tomb is, apparently, its entrance arrangement which consists of a crudely arched doorway above which is a channel, grooved in rock-face, which presumably served the purpose of a drain to prevent rain water from dripping into the chamber. Similar draining arrangements are often observed in tombs that are similarly tunnelled into quarries and cliff-faces.

The two child-loculi (c' - d') are dug at respective heights of 40 and 35 cm above the present soil level, in the space between tombs b' and c'. They have approximate measurements of 65 x 23 x 40cm and 61 x 27 x 73 cm. Their only interest lies in their location in an open-air setting. To my knowledge, there are only a handful of other known examples of loculi similarly dug outside the precincts of hypogea or miniature catacombs. Those at Salini and Bingemma are the most significant.

TAR-RAGHAD

This site (fig.6) is more complex and of greater interest than either Skorba or Ghar Qasrana. It gets its name from a wasteland in the district between Zebbiegh and Mgarr where it is located on the fringes of a social housing complex built in the early 1980s. It was cleared of accumulated debris in 1985 - 1986 by the members of an amateur archaeological group under the direction of Mr. Vincent Zammit who published a brief cyclostyled report and a plan (Zammit 1987). The hypogaeum (fig.7), which in its present form consists of two narrow ambulacra, or corridors (A' - B'), served by a common shaft is situated within the precincts of a Romano-Punic burial ground. The mutilated remains of two apsed head-recesses (a' - b') with rock-pillow and head-rests, suggest a history of enlargements and recuttings and I wish to suggest, by way of hypothesis, that a Romano-Punic tomb was modified and reutilised by an early Christian community before it was recut into the miniature hypogaeum which we see today. Apsed-recess a' is the more interesting because of the presence of a drilled hole, to serve as a stand for a spindle bottle, to the left of the surviving head-rest. Such holes, several examples of which are cited in Buhagiar 1986, are usually indicative of a late date and are normally associated with Christian burial.

The hypogaeum is served exclusively by window-tombs. There are eight such tombs (d'-e' -f' - g' - h' - i' - j' - k') in corridor A', and three (t' - m' - n') in B'. A twelfth tomb (c') is tunnelled into the wall of the shaft at the opposite end of the entrance arrangement. The shaft has been extensively disturbed and there is no secure indication of the means of access. A flight of steps would, however, seem likely.

All tombs have the characteristic oval chamber with roughly carved head- and foot-recesses but only five (c' - d' - e' - f' - m') are provided with rock-pillow and
The Tar-Raghad Hypogeum
head-rests, and with pottery-shelves and lamp-holes. The chambers of 'h' - 'j' - 'k' - 'l' - 'm' are austerely plain and rather roughly cut. Chamber 'o' might be another relic of the original Romano-Punic tomb because just inside the window-doorway is an antechamber with an oblong floor-trench meant to contain the funerary furniture. Such trenches are a recurrent element in Romano-Punic burials (Buhagiar 1986, 14-16). A breach in the back wall of the chamber, at some time enlarged and recut into a regular port-hole, connects it to an adjoining tomb with an independent shaft entrance to the immediate north-west of the hypogeum.

A Greek Cross is carved in bold relief in the conch of the apted head-recess of the chamber of tomb 'i'. This is not only a sure indication of a Christian presence but also a valuable dating consideration. Crosses do not start featuring as an element of sepulchral decoration until after the Peace of the Church in A.D. 314 and they only became widespread in the later fourth century. Moreover, the earlier known examples were in the form of Constantinian and Chi-Rho monograms. The regularity of the Tar-Raghad cross would suggest a later date.

Zammit (1987) refers to, and reproduces a drawing of, graffiti of a sailing boat allegedly incised above the entrance to chamber 'm'. I examined this chamber under different lighting conditions but was unfortunately unable to locate the graffiti. Without entering into a discussion as to whether it actually exists or is, in fact, the result of accidental tool-marks, I wish nonetheless to emphasize that Zammit is wrong in his claim that it should be taken as another indication for Christianity. In Malta, as elsewhere, representations of ships have been reported from both non-Christian and Christian contexts. The graffiti from the Hal Far 3 Romano-Punic tomb (Buhagiar 1986, 240-3, 400) and the carving on the second/third century A.D. Elvius Titus stele from Marsa (Buhagiar 1986, 265-6, 401) are sufficiently eloquent examples.

Window-tombs 'j' and 'k' are dug into the apted wall at the back of a funerary triclinium. Situated at the entrance to corridor 'B', the triclinium is the most important feature of the hypogeum. The history and significance of the funerary triclinia of the Maltese catacombs are discussed in detail in Buhagiar 1993B, and in Camilleri and Gingell-Littlejohn 1997. Here I only wish to reiterate that, as in the case of the sailing-boat, the triclinium cannot be used as an argument for a Christian presence. In a general sense the triclinium here conforms to the standard Maltese typology in so far as it consists of a rock-cut table that forms a single architectural unit with a U-shaped couch, or stibadium, which is similarly rock-cut. The cramped conditions did not, however, permit the customary fine architectural proportions and there are some important differences. The usual cylindrical form for the table is, to start with, here replaced by a horse-shoe shape. This does not make it unique since other examples of this shape have been recorded. More important is the fact that the rim, or low ridge, which partially frames the flat table-top, is constructed of a cement conglomerate of crushed pottery and lime. Normally it is hewn out of the rock in one piece with the table. To my knowledge the only other recorded example of a similar rim comes from the table in St Paul Hypogeum II, at Rabat (Buhagiar 1986, 64; Camilleri and Gingell-Littlejohn 1997, 43). In both cases the rim is carefully stuccoed and cemented in place with a fine grained plaster which is used as a rendering for both table and stibadium.

**THE HAS-SAJJIED TOMB**

This provides us with an interesting example of a Romano-Punic tomb undergoing modification and enlargement. It seems to mark the start of a process whose end-results were miniature catacombs of the Tar-Raghad type. It is difficult to give a date to the tomb but, basing myself on certain features, such as, for example, the shape of the head-rests, I feel that a time bracket around the first century B.C. and the first/second centuries A.D., would be a fair approximation. I emphasize, however, that stylistic considerations are by themselves of dubious dating value. Maximum caution is, therefore, necessary in this regard.

The tomb (fig. 8), despoiled at an unknown period, was discovered by Prof. Albert Borg who cleared it of soil and accumulated debris, under the supervision of the Museum of Archaeology, in 1997-1998. It consists of two burial chambers, 'A' and 'B', reached down a deep shaft. A deep cutting 'c' in the side of the trench facing the entrance to 'B' suggests the start of a projected third chamber. Both chambers are reached through porpholes, (measuring respectively 45cm sq. and 61cm sq.) and share common features. They are bisected longitudinally by a trench flanked on either side by a mortuary couch.

In chamber 'B', which is entered down a single step, the trench is 24cm deep x 36cm wide while the couches have a respective width of 89 and 76cm. The height between the flat top of the mortuary couches to the ceiling of the chamber is approximately 100cm. There is a lamphole above each of the couches which, however lack a pillow. One of couches is nonetheless provided with a head-rest. This is the chamber's most interesting feature and its typology calls for comment. Instead of the usual inverted U or horse-shoe depression, the incision is here wedge-shaped. Such head-rests have only been recorded from a handful of sites belonging to the transition period between the Romano-Punic and late Roman tomb. The most important example comes from Hal Far Tomb 3 (Buhagiar 1986, 240-243), which I have already referred to above, and which produced an inscription dated by J. Ferron to une époque voisine du début de notre ère (Guzzo-Amadasi 1967, 43-44).

Chamber 'A', which is entered down two steps, is better proportioned and its mortuary couches were originally placed beneath flattened arches. This made them similar to the troughless arcosolium found in the later late-Roman and early Christian hypogeas of the Rabat area (Buhagiar 1986, 20-24). What one sees at Has-Sajjied is the embryonic form of a typology of arcosolium that is essentially Maltese. Only
jambs of the arches have been preserved but their profile can still be made out. The
chamber has, unfortunately, suffered from quarrying and mutilation some of which
might have been connected with a reutilisation programme.

The trench in the middle of the chamber is 38cm deep and has a maximum width
of 56cm. The couches are respectively 95 and 89 cm wide and there is an average
height of 93cm between them and the ceiling. The head-rests they carry are of the
more standard type. A further proof of reutilisation is provided by the fact that one
of the couches, which has a shallow coffin-like depression cut longitudinally across it,
carries a head-rest at either end. This suggests a new burial with a different
orientation of the head.

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