THE PHOENICIAN AND PUNIC NECROPOLEIS OF RABAT, MALTA

George A. Said-Zammit

Introduction
Rabat is one of the most extensive villages in central Malta and is located at an altitude of about 220 m above sea-level. The Rabat district has a total surface area of about 20.16 km² and comprises all the lands of Mtarfa on the north, Tal-Virtu, Buskett and Dingli on the south-east, south and south-west respectively, Ghajn Qajet, Ghajn Klieb, Nigret and Qallilija on the western and north-western parts, and Ta’ Vnejza on the northeast (Fig. 1).

Discoveries of Punic tombs in this area have been recorded since the times of Giovanni Francesco Abela, the Father of Maltese historiography. In the second half of the nineteenth century various other explorations were carried out by Annetto Antonio Caruana and Paolo Bellanti. During the last century a large number of Punic tombs in this area were explored by Themistocles Zammit, the first Director of the National Museum of Archaeology, Charles G. Zammit, Joseph G. Baldacchino, Francis X. Mallia and by the present staff of the National Museum of Archaeology. So far, archaeological explorations have brought to light 372 Punic tombs. Table I does not claim to illustrate the original number of tombs; there will be countless others still awaiting discovery or which have been clandestinely destroyed. Besides, there is also archaeological evidence that in the late Roman Period as well as in early Christian times several Punic tombs were apparently modified into small family hypogea or were even literally destroyed to make way for more extensive underground burial sites. Here, one can distinguish at least five major Punic necropoles: Ta‘-Čagħaki (156 tombs), Ghajn Klieb (40 tombs), Tal-Virtu (28 tombs), Nigret (19 tombs), and Ghajn Qajet (20 tombs). Fig. 2 conveys the distribution of known tombs and tomb groups in the Rabat area.

2. Buhagiar, M., Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and other related burial places in the Maltese Islands, Oxford 1986, 220-1.
SITE NAME | NUMBER OF TOMBS
--- | ---
Tač-Ċagħarri | 156
Għajn Klleb | 40
Tal-Virtu | 29
Nigret | 19
Għajn Qajjet | 18
Qallilija | 42
Busket | 9
Hal-Bajjada | 8
St. Dominic Square | 6
Maarfà | 15
Ċnien is-Sultan | 3
Għar Barka | 3
Il-Bur | 2
Dingli | 4
Ta’ Saghat | 2
Ta’ Vnejza | 10
L-Iżball | 1
Gebel Majn | 1
Razzarju Road | 1
Bujugirilla | 1
Areas not specified | 2
Total | 372

The Punic cemeteries are mainly located on the western and southwestern parts of Rabat, while they decrease in number towards the north and the south. On the eastern side of Rabat only one cemetery was brought to light. The Punic burial sites are all located within 3 km radius boundary from the centre of Rabat. The tomb distribution pattern suggests that most of these cemeteries were apparently related to an extensive Punic settlement, remains of which have been discovered in various parts of modern Rabat. This pattern, however, does not exclude the possibility of other rural hamlets in this area still undiscovered or which have been unknowingly built over.

The tombs were generally located in slope areas and were often cut in the Upper Coralline Limestone, which is the hardest type of stone prevailing on the surface of the Maltese Islands. They usually consisted of a shaft and chamber, although certain others had two or even three chambers to accommodate more interments. Other tombs consisted of either an open shaft, hence being chamberless, or of a burial chamber cut in the vertical face of the rock (the latter are usually referred to as cave tombs). Another 11 tombs consisted of a simple soil depression or of a rock-cut grave-pit. These were normally intended to accommodate cremation burials. The tombs pertaining to a particular cemetery generally followed a single orientation and were cut at roughly the same altitude. That the tombs were so elegantly cut and that they normally followed one orientation and altitude suggests professional grave-digging; apparently, the fossores studied various aspects of the land before cutting the tombs (slope, water drainage, etc.). To avoid accidental rain-water seepage, a trench was often cut just beyond the entrance or parallel to the longer axis of the burial chamber, particularly when this was rectangular in plan (Fig. 3). When the trench was cut just beyond the entrance, the floor of the chamber ended in a raised platform on which the body of the deceased person was laid to rest together with the grave goods. But when the trench divided the longer axis of the chamber the body was laid to rest on one of its longer sides. Hence, the dead person was laid to rest on the highest part of the chamber’s floor.

Like in all the other parts of the Maltese Islands the grave goods found in the Rabat area tombs consisted largely of coarse ceramic utensils. Wealthier interments sometimes also contained finer ceramic vases and even some personal ornaments, like rings, earrings and bracelets. Glass vessels, like unguentaria, started to appear in the tombs from about the late fourth century BC. A large number of tombs found in the Rabat area were re-utilized for successive interments. When a tomb had to be re-utilized, the grave goods pertaining to earlier interments, together with the osseous remains, were usually removed into one of the corners of the chamber.

The major necropoleis

1. Tač-Ċagħarri

In this locality archaeological investigations have brought to light 156 Punic tombs. Except for 4 shaft tombs and 2 grave-pits, the tombs identified in this area all consisted of a shaft and chamber; 111 tombs had a single chamber, while another 39 were double-chambered. These tombs generally had a rectangular shaft and a rectangular or oval chamber. These tombs were located at an altitude of about 200m above sea-level and were oriented either north-eastwards or south-westwards.

One of the most ornated graves was explored by Themistocles Zammit in 1910. On the back wall of the burial chamber he found a rock-hewn bust painted in red ochre which represented the facial image of a male human being. The chamber was white washed and a continuous red narrow band decorated the walls few centimeters below the ceiling. The latter was decorated with a rosette consisting of 16 leaves painted alternately in red and white colour.

The archaeological evidence revealed that these tombs were utilized both for inhumation and cremation burials. There are also indications that most of the tombs were re-utilized for successive interments. Archaeological investigations revealed that this cemetery was utilized during the Punic-Hellenistic Period. The earliest interments seem to have taken place towards the end of the fourth century BC, while the latest burials probably took place in the first half of the first century AD. Most of the ceramic vases found in these tombs are of a typically local imparp, but certain others, for example the Hellenistic kylikes with an extended flat base, were probably imported.

This Punic cemetery was probably one of the latest burial grounds in the Rabat area. Archaeological investigations revealed that this same area continued to be utilized for burial purposes in the Roman Period as well as in early Christian times. A large number of tombs found in this area were covered over to make way for a new State elementary school.

2. GHAIN KLIBE

This is one of the major Punic necropoleis which still survives in its natural environment. In this area more than 35 tombs have been identified so far. The majority of these tombs consisted of a shaft and chamber, but one of them consisted of a rock-cut grave-pit; access to another tomb was via a low entrance cut in the vertical face of the rock (hence this tomb was without a shaft). To accommodate more interments, 4 tombs were double-chambered. The shafts and chambers varied in form and size; the shafts were normally rectangular or squarish in plan, while the chambers were either rectangular, or squarish, or even oval. The tombs found at Ghain Klibe were located at an altitude of about 190m above sea-level. Certain tombs had been rifled before these were explored by the Museums Department.

Personal ornaments were identified in only two tombs. However, the cemetery of Ghain Klibe is one of the burial places in the Rabat area which has provided a good number of gold personal ornaments. One of the interments was furnished, apart from a large number of ceramic vases, with fragments of gold foil and a gold amulet. The latter is approximately 2.50 cm high and represents the two Egyptian deities Horus and Anubis joined back to back. These were dated to the late seventh century BC.

In another grave, Caruana discovered an interesting set of personal ornaments which consisted of 5 hollowed gold beads, probably being the constituent parts of a necklace, fragments of gold foil, a plain gold ring and a silver bracelet covered with gold foil. These ornaments were also dated to the seventh century BC. The bracelet is embossed with a typically Punic motif of two rampant griffins flanking a multiple palmette surrounded by a winged solar disc.

The grave goods found in these tombs indicate that this cemetery was practically utilized during the entire Punic Period; the earliest grave goods were dated to the late eighth century BC, while the latest have been ascribed to the first half of the first century AD.

3. Tal-Virtu

At Tal-Virtu archaeological explorations have identified 28 Punic tombs. These were all discovered during building operations; except for half a dozen tombs presently located in private property, all of them were covered over between 1955 and 1969. Only two tombs were found intact, while the others had all been rifled before the authorities concerned took the necessary precautions to preserve the grave goods and the human ossesous remains. Twenty-seven tombs consisted of a rectangular shaft and chamber; two of these were double-chambered, while another two were each provided with three chambers. The remaining tomb was chamberless and consisted of a rectangular shaft.

The archaeological evidence indicates that this Punic cemetery was also utilized over a long period of time. The earliest tomb belonging to this necropolis has been ascribed to the first half of the sixth century BC. The dating of this grave has been corroborated by the presence of a bronze amulet container and of a two stone thymiataria which all belonged to this particular period. The amulet container is very egyptianizing in style and its cover represents the head of the falcon deity Horus. It is approximately 4.85cm high. In this amulet there was a rolled-up piece of papyrus which contained a Punic script and an image of the goddess Isis (Fig. 4). The script illustrates the words of Isis and has been interpreted as follows:

Laugh at your enemy O valiant ones,
scorn, assail and crush your adversary.
... disdain [him], trample [him] on the waters;
... moreover prostrate [him]
... on the sea, tie [him], hang [him]!9

On the other hand, the archaeological evidence revealed that the latest interments in these tombs took place towards the middle part of the first century AD.

In the early Christian Period this area continued to be utilized for burial purposes. However, by the end of the fifteenth century the catacombs found at Tal-Viruth had already been rifled, while their respective grave goods appear to have been lost or to have ended in a private collection.

4. NIGRET

In this area 19 Punic tombs have been discovered. Three tombs consisted of a shaft and chamber, another tomb was triple-chambered, yet another one consisted of a simple soil depression, while the excavation reports did not provide a description of the other 15 graves. Only one tomb was found intact; the grave-pit had been already rifled, while the other 17 appear to have been looted by grave robbers before being explored by the Museums Department.

The intact grave was explored in 1926. In the chamber there was a single inhumation burial. In association with the skeletal remains, which pertained to a male adult, there were some ceramic grave goods; these consisted of an amphora, a blychnes lamp, a plate, an oenochoe and 2 aryballoi. Together with this ceramic kit there were also 2 tin rings, on one of which there was engraved the name SEBEKHETEP in hieroglyphic characters. The grave goods, including these two rings, were dated to the early sixth century BC. In this grave there was no evidence of other burials, indicating that this tomb had apparently never been re-utilized.

The present archaeological evidence does not provide much knowledge about the period of utilization of this cemetery. However, the burial identified in the intact grave suggests that this area was probably already utilized for burial purposes since the early sixth century BC. On the other hand, the triple-chambered tomb suggests a very late date (late first century BC or even later). Hence, it seems that this cemetery was in use between the first half of the sixth century BC and the first century AD. None of the tombs found at Nigret still survive since in the 1970s this area was completely built over by new houses, roads, and Government apartments.

5. GHAIN QAJET

This is one of the most fertile agricultural districts in the western part of Rabat. Archaeological explorations at Ghajn Qajet have brought to light 20 Punic tombs. Eight tombs were found already rifled, another 7 were found completely void of any grave goods, while the other 5 tombs were found intact. They were all single-chambered and most of them consisted of a rectangular shaft and a rectangular chamber. One of the tombs presumably had a very deep shaft (more than 3m) since access to the chamber was by a series of 21 foot-holes cut in one of the longer sides of the shaft.

The ceramic grave goods unearthed from these tombs covered more or less the entire Punic Period. The earliest grave goods (pottery and personal ornaments) were ascribed to the second half of the eighth century BC, while the latest interments appear to have taken place in the first century BC. In one of the earliest graves were unearthed two Greek imported ceramic vases: one of them consisted of a Proto-Corinthian kotyle of the late eighth century BC and the other consisted of an eastern Greek "bird" bowl datable to the late eighth or the early seventh centuries BC. The early date of this cemetery was also corroborated by the presence of a number of locally made cooking pots datable also to the second half of the eighth century BC.

Personal ornaments were identified in only two tombs. In the first one, discovered in 1934, Zammit identified a brass buckle, while in the other, opened in 1950, Baldacchino discovered 7 bracelets, 3 rings, and a microline feldspar. In the latter Baldacchino also identified the upper part of a bronze torch-holder; this has been dated to the early seventh century BC and is of a well-known Cypro-Phoenician type. Similar torch-holders were identified in Sidon, Cyprus, Rhodes, Sardinia, and Caere.

The dating of the grave goods suggests that this area was utilized for burial purposes since the second half of the eighth century BC. During the Punic Period this necropolis appears to have flourished and continued to be utilized up to the first century BC, at a time when Malta was already a Roman dependency, but its culture was still basically Punic.

The minor necropoleis

6. QALILJIA

In this area archaeological explorations have so far brought to light 41 Punic tombs which were spread into at least four different clusters. They were located at an altitude ranging from 150-200 m above sea-level. Thirty-four tombs consisted of a shaft and chamber, while another 5 were double-chambered. Another tomb consisted of a rock-cut grave-pit, while the other one consisted of a burial chamber cut in the vertical face of the rock. The shafts and chambers varied in form and size. However, most of the tombs consisted of a rectangular shaft and of either a rectangular or an oval chamber.


A double-chambered tomb, discovered in 1918, had an unusual feature. On one of the sides of the left chamber there was a rock-cut raised platform ornamented with a relief of a grotesque mask-like face of a human being.\(^{13}\) Such sculptural decorations were possibly intended to scare away the evil spirits of the dead (Fig. 5). On this platform were identified the remains of an adult human skeleton.

The grave goods found in the Qallilja area tombs covered most of the Punic Period. There are indications that these cemeteries were utilized from the late seventh century BC to the early first century AD.\(^{14}\) The dead were accompanied by various grave goods which generally consisted of coarse ceramic vases. Sometimes, pottery of a much finer quality and personal ornaments were also found. A unique tin ring, which was discovered in 1916, had a bluish grey stone and apparently served as a seal.\(^{15}\)

It is possible that the cemeteries of Qallilja were related to a small rural hamlet. Considering the problem of distance, it was presumably impractical for the inhabitants who lived in the Punic settlement of Rabat to bury their dead over such a long distance. Moreover, archaeological investigations carried out in this area have brought to light the remains of what appears to have been a small rural hamlet.\(^{16}\) Besides, in a recent systematic survey the author also observed a system of interconnecting caves which appear to have been ideal for habitation. In these caves, as well as in the area nearby, several Punic topsoil potsherds were noted.

7. **Buskett**

This is one of the most fertile agricultural districts in the southern part of Rabat. In this area were discovered 9 Punic tombs, five of which consisted of a shaft and chamber, another two consisted of a grave-pit, while the other two consisted of a burial chamber cut in the vertical face of the rock. Only two tombs were double-chambered, one of which was discovered in 1918, while the other in 1925. Except for the two burial-pits, the tombs found in this area had all been rifled before being explored by the Museums Department.

The archaeological evidence revealed that seven tombs were re-utilized for successive interments, but the two burial-pits were each utilized for a single cremation. The dating of the grave goods revealed that this area was utilized for burial purposes during most of the period under study. In fact, the earliest grave goods were dated to the first half of the seventh century BC, while the latest were ascribed to the late second/early first centuries BC. The cremation identified in one of the burial-pits was accompanied, apart from a wide selection of ceramic vases, by a set of silver personal ornaments consisting of 2 rings and 2 earrings.

8. **Hal Bajjada**

At Hal Bajjada archaeological explorations have brought to light 15 Punic tombs which consisted of a shaft and chamber; to accommodate more interments 4 of these tombs had two chambers. These tombs were found rifled or completely devoid of any grave goods, while one of them was also found partly mutilated. The shafts and chambers were all rectangular in form.

On the basis of the present archaeological evidence it was not possible to obtain a reliable dating for this cemetery. But from a small number of grave goods recovered from some of these graves it seems that this cemetery was in use during the late Punic Period; the latest interments appear to have taken place in the late first century BC or in the early first century AD.

The Hal Bajjada area continued to be utilized for burial purposes up to late Medieval times. It is here where we find the most elaborate system of early Christian catacombs in the Rabat area.

9. **St. Dominic Square**

In St. Dominic’s Square were unearthed a number of Punic-Hellenistic graves and early Christian hypogea, indicating that this area was utilized as a burial-place for a relatively long period of time. However, in the first half of the twentieth century most of these tombs and hypogea were covered over to make way for a new piazza and houses. In this area archaeological explorations have brought to light 6 Punic tombs which were opened between 1906 and 1938.

Two tombs consisted of a shaft and a single burial chamber, another two were double-chambered, but no information was acquired from the Museum Annual Reports regarding the form of the other two.

Two tombs were found to have had a deep shaft (approximately 5.5m), while their burial chambers had a common back wall. One of the shafts of these tombs was roofed by 8 rectangular stone slabs and in the central part of its floor there was a rock-cut cavity which was about 2.5m deep. The other tomb did not have any particular features, but the sealing slab of the chamber was found in situ. At a certain period of time a part of the common back wall of one of the chambers was hewn off to provide access to the chamber of the other tomb; apparently, the objective was to convert these two Punic tombs into a single burial complex. However, one cannot yet ascertain when the demolishing of this wall occurred since the two tombs were found completely void of any grave goods. Even the purpose of the cavity hewn in the floor of the shaft of one of these tombs has not yet been determined; it may have been used as an ossuary in which the remains of previous interments could have been ultimately deposited.
Only one of the double-chambered tombs yielded some ceramic grave goods. Hence, on the basis of the present archaeological evidence it seems premature to provide a tentative dating for this cemetery.

10. Mtarfa
This area is located at about 1 km northwards from the centre of Rabat. So far were identified 22 Punic tombs in various parts of this area. They were all identified during building operations; the earliest discoveries were recorded in the late nineteenth century, while the latest discovery took place in the late twentieth century. Only four of these tombs were found intact. The distribution pattern suggests that these Punic tombs probably belonged to several small clusters.

Seventeen tombs consisted of a shaft and chamber, another four consisted of just an open circular shaft (these are known as silo-shaped graves), while the remaining tomb was shaftless and consisted of a chamber hewn in the vertical face of the rock. Only one of these tombs was double-chambered. Shafts and chambers varied in form and in size; they were often of a rectangular form, although certain chambers were either circular or oval in plan.

The archaeological evidence indicates that this area was utilized for burial purposes over a relatively long period of time. The earliest ceramic grave goods have been dated to the first half of the seventh century BC, while the latest pottery has been ascribed to the first century BC. In the shaftless tomb, discovered in 1927, Zammit unearthed, apart from a wide selection of ceramic vases, a Proto-Corinthian skyphos of the first half of the seventh century BC. Certain burials were also provided with some personal ornaments.

Unfortunately, most of the Mtarfa area Punic tombs have not survived since in the first half of the twentieth century they were covered over by new roads, a hospital, and military apartments.

11. Gnejn is-Sultan
This area is situated at about 500 m away from Ghajn Qajjet and is located at approximately 1.2 km from the centre of Rabat. Like Ghajn Qajjet, this area is one of the most fertile agricultural districts in the western part of Rabat. In 1925 Themistocles Zammit explored 3 Punic tombs, one of which consisted of a shaft and chamber, while the other of just an open circular shaft. These 3 tombs were all found rifled.

The shaft and chamber tomb appears to have been re-utilized for three successive interments. The first burial was deposited towards the end of the seventh century BC, the second interment in the early fourth century BC, while the third one probably in the early first century AD. In one of the silo-shaped graves Zammit identified some late Punic ceramic vases, dateable to the third century BC, and 5 glass unguentaria. In the other tomb Zammit found, apart from some late Punic ceramic vases, an Arab lamp. The latter indicates that this grave was apparently utilized in the Middle Ages.

On the basis of the present archaeological evidence it seems that this area was also utilized for burial purposes over a relatively long period of time, approximately from the late seventh century BC to the early first century AD.

12. Ghar Banka
This area lies on the south-western part of Rabat, about 600 m away from the centre of the village. Archaeological explorations in this area have brought to light 3 Punic tombs, all of which consisted of a shaft and a single chamber. Two had a rectangular shaft and chamber, but no information was acquired from the available sources regarding the form of the other tomb.

It seems that Ghar Banka is the only site in the Rabat area that has yielded burials in terracotta sarcophagi. The first sarcophagus was discovered in 1624 by Abela (Fig. 6), while another three, one of which was non-anthropoid, were unearthed towards the end of the eighteenth century. Apparently, only two of these sarcophagi still survive. One of the anthropoid sarcophagi found towards the end of the eighteenth century is 1.56 m long and has been dated to the early fifth century BC. The style of this coffin is egyptianizing, but the modelling of the head shows a marked Rhodian-Ionian imprint. The other sarcophagus, which is non-anthropoid, consists of a rectangular case and measures approximately 1.65 by 0.75 m. It has been dated to a period ranging from the late fourth to the middle part of the third centuries BC. There are stylistic indications that this sarcophagus was probably of a local manufacture. These two sarcophagi are both conserved in the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta.

On the basis of our present evidence it seems that the Ghar Banka cemetery was utilized between the early fifth and the late third centuries BC. It is quite likely that this cemetery, given the fact that terracotta sarcophagi have been identified only in this area, was intended for the interment of noble people or wealthy landowners.

13. Il-Bur
This area is situated on the south-western part of Rabat between Ghar Banka and Hal Bajjada. In 1925 Themistocles Zammit explored 2 Punic tombs, only one of which was found intact. Both tombs consisted of a rectangular shaft and chamber.

In the intact grave Zammit identified 5 successive interments; the two cremations, at least judging from the typology of the cinerary urns, apparently took place between the late fourth and the early second centuries BC.

17. Abela, 153; Bres, 127-128; Anon., Sacrofigo antichissimo trovato in un luogo vicino la Città Notabile detta Ghar Barca, nel mese di marzo 1797, f. 1.
14. Dingli
This is a small neighbouring village situated at about 3 km on the south-western part of Rabat. Here, archaeological explorations have so far identified 4 Punic tombs. One of them consisted of an oval shaft and an oval chamber, but the excavation reports did not provide any information regarding the shape of the other three; we are simply informed that the latter consisted of a shaft and chamber. Three tombs did not contain any grave goods probably because they had been emptied before being explored by the Museums Department. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence revealed that the first tomb had been re-utilized for three successive interments between the late seventh century and the late third century BC.

15. Ta' Saghat
This area lies on the north-eastern part of Rabat, about 1 km away from the centre of the village. In 1984 were brought to light 2 Punic tombs, one of which was double-chambered. The report states that these two tombs were of the shaft and chamber type, but it fails to describe them. In the double-chambered tomb were identified 5 successive cremations, while the other tomb appears to have been utilized for a single inhumation burial. There are archaeological indications that the double-chambered tomb was utilized between the middle part of the sixth and the late third centuries BC.

16. Ta' Vnezja
Archaeological investigations at Ta' Vnezja have brought to light 10 Punic tombs, one of which consisted of a rock-cut grave-pit. The shaft tombs were all single-chambered, except for one which had two burial chambers. The shafts and chambers were all rectangular in form.

On the back wall of one of the chambers of the double-chambered tomb there was a carving in relief representing the facial image of a male human being; it was very egyptianizing in style and measured about 37 cm in height and 28 cm in width. This was meant either to represent the facial image of one of the interred individuals, possibly the ancestor of a family, or else served apotropaic purposes to scare away the evil spirits of the dead. This carving has been ascribed to the early sixth century BC.

The archaeological evidence revealed as well that the tombs of Ta’ Vnezja were re-utilized for successive interments between the first half of the sixth and the late second century BC. Soon after their exploration these two tombs were all covered over.

17. L-Iżball
In 1910 Themistocles Zammit explored a Punic tomb in a locality known as L-Iżball, lying on the north-eastern part of Rabat. The tomb consisted of a shaft and chamber; access to the latter was by a flight of 5 rock-cut steps hewn in one of the longer walls of the shaft. This tomb was utilized for two successive interments in the second century BC.

18. Gebeł Main
This tomb, which consisted of a shaft and chamber, was discovered in 1934. The archaeological evidence revealed that this grave was utilized for three successive inhumation burials. Unfortunately, from the available information it was not possible to determine when these interments took place exactly. However, there are indications that this tomb was re-utilized in the Roman Period.

19. Ruzzari Road
This Punic tomb was discovered in 1950 during building operations. It consisted of a shaft and chamber; the latter was rectangular in form, while the form of the shaft could not be made out since it had been already destroyed by a mechanical excavator. Osseous analyses revealed that this tomb was utilized for six successive inhumation burials. However, no ceramic grave goods were identified because the tomb had been looted before being explored by the Museums Department. Therefore, this tomb could not be dated precisely.

20. Busugrina
This double-chambered tomb was discovered in 1970; the shaft and the two chambers were all rectangular in form. It was re-utilized for successive interments between the third and the second centuries BC (however, the excavation report did not specify the exact number of burials found).

Areas not specified
The precise location of another 2 Punic tombs found also in the Rabat area was not provided in the excavation reports. One of these tombs was discovered in 1903 and

consisted of a shaft and chamber. However, no information was furnished about the grave goods and, therefore, the tomb could not be dated.25

The other tomb was explored in 1908. It also consisted of a shaft and chamber, but the excavation report did not provide any information about its form. The archaeological evidence revealed that this tomb was utilized for three successive interments, the earliest one of which was apparently deposited in the seventh century BC.26 In this grave Zammit identified a gold medallion, 2 gold rings and 2 silver bangles.

**Conclusion**

The distribution of the Punic tombs in the Rabat area revealed that in the Punic Period this was apparently the most inhabited region of the Maltese islands.27 The geomorphology of the region and the presence of Upper Coralline Limestone not only allow the presence of perennial water springs, but also the presence of fertile agricultural lands. Western and central Malta consist of a series of high ridges and deep valleys and, as a result of this geological formation, the fields in the valley areas are irrigated throughout the whole year. Perennial water channels are largely situated in the Rabat area, diminishing in number towards the northern and eastern parts of Malta. The valleys surrounding Rabat are very productive in terms of crop cultivation and are still extensively cultivated nowadays. Given the geological pattern of this part of the island as well as the favourable conditions already described, one might expect that in the Punic Period the valley areas around the Punic settlement of Rabat were also extensively cultivated.

There is archaeological evidence that the earliest Punic cemeteries were located in the western and north-western parts of Rabat, namely those of Ghajn Qajet, Ghajn Kieb, Qallilija, Mtarfa and Gnien is-Sultan. By the middle part of the fifth century BC the number of tombs in the western and north-western parts of Rabat increased, while other cemeteries spread to various other parts of this area. By the end of the Punic Period the Rabat area was dotted with several late Punic necropoleis. Although it seems that these cemeteries were related to a single settlement, yet one cannot exclude the possibility of some rural hamlets in this area still undiscovered.

Most of the Punic tombs found in the Rabat area have not survived since they were covered over to make way for new roads, houses, apartments, and other structures. Unfortunately, today most of the surviving tombs are prone to all kind of vandalism. It is hoped that the surviving tombs found at Rabat as well as in all the other parts of the Maltese islands will be protected as soon from all sort of vandalism and that they will be truly considered as part of Malta's rich national heritage.

---

Fig. 2 Distribution of Punic tombs in the Rabat area.

Fig. 3 Plan and section of two Punic tombs. The trench of (A) is cut just beyond the entrance of the chamber, while the trench of (B) is cut parallel to the longer axis of the chamber. (Zammit, 1928).
Fig. 4 A piece of papyrus found in an amulet container at Tal-Virtu. (Gouder and Rocco, 1975).

Fig. 5 Plan and section of a Punic tomb found at Qalilija. The grotesque mask-like face appears on the right-hand side of the left chamber. (From an unpublished manuscript by Themistocles Zammit held at the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta).
Fig. 6. The terra-cotta sarcophagus discovered by Abell in 1924 at

George W. Sadie, Zemanu