THE RE-CHRISTIANISATION OF MALTA:
SICULO-GREEK MONASTICISM, DEJR TOPONYMS AND ROCK-CUT CHURCHES

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The Re-Christianisation Process
In 1896, A. Mayr argued convincingly for a bishopric of Malta in 1156.1 There is, none the less, no secure mention of a bishop until June 1168 when Johannes, Bishop of Malta, petitioned the Royal Exchequer in Palermo for the grant of approximately a quarter of an acre of arable land to set up an endowment in favour of the newly built church of the Saviour at Capizzi, near Cefalù.2 Johannes can be documented in Sicily until 1212,3 but nothing is known of his Maltese activities. The unnamed bishop of Malta mentioned on 1st December 1217, in the registers of Pope Honorius III, could have been Johannes’s successor.4 A mention in 1244, in a diploma in the Archivio Capitolare of Palermo, of a Johannes Zafarana Malensis canonicus,5 may suggest an organized diocese, but this cannot be confirmed until around 1270 when Malta had passed under Angevin rule.6 The ecclesiastical establishment seems to have consisted of a Latin-rite Sicilian clergy based at Mdina where there was certainly a cathedral church by 1299.7 The presence of Latin Christianity is also apparent at the Castrum Maris on the Grand Harbour, where a Latin-rite church of Santa Maria is documented in 1274,8 and in the Gozo castello where the miles Guillelmus de Malta, nephew of Andrea, Count of Malta, lay dying in 1299.9

2. S. Cusa, I Diplomi Greci ed Arabi di Sicilia Pubblicati nel testo originale, tradotti ed illustrati, Palermo 1868 (reprinted in 1982 by Böhlau Verlag, Köln Wien), 484. The church had been donated to the diocese of Cefalù, and the petition was, in fact, also signed by the Bishop of Cefalù.
4. C. Eubel, Hierarchia Catholica Medii Aevi, Münster 1913, i/xxix, Malten.
5. Collura, 129-30. Zafarana is an Arabic suggesting that the canon was either of Sicilian Muslim origin, or a native Maltese.
It seems probable that in Malta, as on the island of Pantelleria, the three-pronged programme of Christianisation and Latinisation, linguistic assimilation, and cultural acclimatisation, was, in comparison with Sicily, unduly delayed.10 Until the forced expulsion of the Muslim community, which has recently been tentatively relocated to the period 1221–1225,11 their inhabitants were "..."12 The available evidence suggests that Christianity was defiantly resisted by the Muslim natives many of whom, as in Sicily, found refuge in the countryside where they could perpetuate their religion and cultural traditions with less molestation.13 It is unclear if the policy of religious toleration encouraged by the Norman Court at Palermo was practiced in Malta. The isolated reference, in an official diploma of 1198 to a collective fine imposed on the Christian community for the murder of a Muslim,14 is open, as shown by C. Dalli, to different interpretations.15 The Muslim population seems to have formed a distinct class and, perhaps, as happened on Pantelleria, had some sort of local council based on Islamic customs.16 There is reason to believe that their status was inferior to that of the Latin Christian community, and that this state of affairs continued to be reflected long after 1225 when fear of exile to Lucera, in Apulia, coerced an apparently substantial number into accepting baptism.17

A measure of social inequality was also apparently manifest between the Latin and Greek clergy present in Malta in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.18 There is as yet no conclusive documentary evidence of the activities of a Greek monastic network,19 but its presence is reliably indicated by a number of eloquent non-written

architectural influence seems, in particular, to receive a measure of support from the eighth century *Vita of SS. Alphio, Philadelphius, and Tecla* that tells of three Syrian master masons who arrived unexpectedly to build a church founded by Tecla at Lentini, where their arrival was regarded as miraculous because of the absence in Sicily of competent architects. \(^{23}\) The predilection for cave-heritages is similarly corroborated by the *Lives* of other Sicilian-Greek saints, such as Gregorius Decapolita, and Calogero, who followed the example of Philip of Agira and went to live in a cave. \(^{20}\) Philip of Agira, whose father was allegedly a Syrian animal merchant, \(^{27}\) was a central figure to Sicilian-Greek monasticism and the famous monastic establishment on the slopes of Mount Etna, founded on the site where according to a legend already current in the eighth century, \(^{28}\) the saint had performed his most spectacular miracles, remained a point of reference throughout the Muslim period, and the Norman government that succeeded it. His cult in Malta, which may be the only one outside Sicily and the Calabria, is, in spite of its uncertain origins, of notable significance. \(^{29}\)

In the Norman period the Sicilian-Greek monasteries that had survived the long Muslim rule were more remarkable for their asceticism and piety than as centers of learning and theological study. The cultural poverty was, to an extent, the result of a diaspora of scholars and erudite clergy who, after the Islamic conquest, had sought refuge in more secure provinces of the Empire. Enclaves of Sicilian-Greeks in exile were, in this way, formed in Constantinople and the Peloponese, and, possibly, also in Rome. \(^{30}\) The most important exodus was, presumably, however, to South Italy, particularly the Calabria and Basilicata region. \(^{31}\) In Muslim Sicily, Christianity was tolerated, but the Christian community suffered injustices and was often discriminated against. \(^{32}\) The monasteries continued to exist but suffered harassment, and there is evidence for at least one martyrdom, that of the monk Argenzius which took place in Palermo in the Spring of 906. \(^{33}\) The hub of Greek

\(^{23}\) The document in Cod. Vat. Gr. 1591 (f.21) is quoted by V. von Falkenhausen, *Il Monachesimo Greco* 145. The story narrates how the three master masons had been sent by the Governor of Syria to Carthage, in North Africa, to construct a number of public buildings and how, on their return journey, they stopped unexpectedly at Lentini.

\(^{26}\) V. von Falkenhausen, *Il Monachesimo Greco*, 149.


\(^{29}\) The popular story that it was introduced in the late 14th century by a certain Philip, citizen of Catania, who founded his church at Zebbug (S. Ciappara, *Storia di Zebbug e sua Parrocchia con molte e svariate notizie riguardanti la stessa terra e parrocchia*. Malta 1882, 1) has all the appearance of an early modern fabrication. The cult may have arrived with the Normans.


\(^{31}\) ibid., 159 – 160, 165 – 166.


\(^{33}\) ibid., 162.

monasticism remained Eastern Sicily, particularly the areas round Syracuse, the Val Demone, and the Val di Noto where the ascetic and troglodyte traditions remained one of the essential characteristics. The intellectual revival that manifested itself at the turn of the twelfth century, in the wake of the Norman conquest, was in great measure achieved by the migration of Calabrian monks who sometimes carried valuable books in their luggage. \(^{34}\) These monks grafted on to the Sicilian-Byzantine tradition new devotional and religious idiosyncrasies, one of which was the cult of the obscure Irish saint Catald that centred round the Port city of Taranto. It was through this channel that Catald came to be venerated in Malta where a partially rock-cut church was built above an early Christian cemetery in Rabat. \(^{35}\)

**The Dejr Toponyms**

In 1647 Giovanni Francesco Abela argued for an early twelfth century Benedictine house on Malta on the basis of a notice in the martyrology of the Benedictine congregation of Pulsano in Calabria. \(^{36}\) It is, however, almost certain that the *Melita Insula* mentioned in the document was the nearby Dalmatian Island of Melida in the Adriatic that was owned by the monks of Pulsano who founded a monastery there in 1151. \(^{37}\) There is in fact no evidence for Latin monasticism in Malta prior to the late fourteenth century, \(^{38}\) and it is significant that in 1363 the Benedictines of San Nicolo l`Arena at Catania turned down a pious endowment for the setting up of a house on Malta on the principal pretext that the island had no buildings in which the brethren could conduct the monastic life of prayer, meditation, reading, and teaching. \(^{39}\) The other reasons included the fact that the language spoken by the natives was alien to the monks, and that the journey to the island was too hazardous.

Hints of eastern monastic establishments may, on the other hand, be contained in the several *Dejr*-toponyms encountered in different parts of Malta but not,
apparently, on Gozo. Dejr (derived from the Arabic dayr) normally means a Christian monastic set-up, and G.B. Pellegrini records three Sicilian Dejr-toponyms which clearly refer to monasteries. It can, however, as G. Wettinger has pointed out, have other interpretations, foremost among them that of a sheepfold. The two meanings were, in fact, sometimes combined, as in the case of the Tunisian island of Galita where there is a late medieval reference to a convent known as the ‘Convent of the Sheep’. The issue at stake is whether the Maltese Dejr-toponyms derive from the presence of early post-Muslim monasteries, or whether they record the presence of sheepfolds. Wettinger who published his first pioneering study in 1974, has wisely cautioned prudence, and is sceptical of religious associations, arguing that the surviving toponyms have no apparent connections with either cloistered buildings or churches. His hypothesis is justified if considered exclusively in the context of Latin Christianity. With the significant exception of Abbatija tad-Dejr, there is, in fact, no evidence of a link with Latin monasticism, and some of the toponyms, such as Dejr il-Biet (first recorded in 1351), or Dejr Baqar, and Dejr Handun (both first recorded in 1399) were seemingly already well established when the Western Orders started making a presence in last decades of the fourteenth century. If therefore the Maltese Dejr were as a monastic building, as was the case in Sicily, an earlier and different type of monasticism would seem indicated.

**The Abbatija tad-Dejr**

The only Dejr-place-name with uncontested Christian associations is Abbatija tad-Dejr at Rabat where the site centres around an early Christian cemetery that is first described in 1647 by G.F. Abela who refers to it as a “Cimiterio nominato l’Abbatia”. The name which, at first sight, has the significance of being compounded of a Romance word and its Semitic equivalent, is of unknown antiquity, but the area can presumably be identified with the clausura ‘Ta l-Abbatija in contrata iddery’, mentioned in a deed of 1549 when it formed part of the landed property of the Benedictine nuns of St. Peter, at Mdina. The fact that the apppellative ‘Ta l-Abbatija’ does not feature in an earlier reference to the district, in an act of 1467, may arguably suggest that it was added to qualify property rights after they had been acquired by the nuns.

The place has notable archaeological and art historical significance and consists of an early Christian necropolis, made up of a main cemetery (Hypogeeum I) with sixteen freestanding baladacchino-tombs, and of three smaller hypogeae (II–III–IV), dug into the sides of a low hill that was quarried to enclose a quadrangular space. A colonnaded building with an opus sectile floor, fronted the complex, and Hypogeum I was in turn accessed through a rock-cut oratory. The dating evidence is insecure. A chi-rho monogram on one of the baladacchino-tombs excludes a date prior to the mid-fourth century, but burials were taking place around the 5th century, when a Latin inscription recording several deceased was painted in red ochre on a tomb in Hypogeum IV. Architectural and artistic considerations suggest that the site had a gradual development and a long life that spilled beyond the start of the Byzantine period around 535 A.D.

In the post-Muslim period the site was revitalized as a cult centre, and as a monastic (possibly anchoritic) station by an ascetic religious community whose Sicilian-Greek roots are indicated by the stylistic idiosyncrasies of their architectural interventions, and the wall icons that they painted. Both have a close affinity with the Basilian troglodytic coenobitic establishments that flourished in Sicily, and the Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria, regions in the Norman and Swabian periods.

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40. E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Beyrouth 1968, vol. iii, 931, translates it 'A convent or monastery of Christians', or 'the cloister or cell of a monk'.

41. G.B. Pellegrini, *Gli arabiomini nelle lingue neolatine con speciale riguardo all’Italia*, Brescia, 1972, 293-3: *Dayr sam Angulo bi milk* 'chieso di Sant’Angelo di Milto'.


47. On Latin Monasticism is Malta: G. Aquilina and S. Fiorini, *op.cit.*


between the late eleventh and the late thirteenth centuries. There is in particular, as noted by Aldo Messina, a close similarity to the Grotta dei Santi at Monterosso Almo, in the province of Ragusa where a Paleochristian hypogeum was likewise adapted to the needs of a monastic community. The monks squatted among the tombs and Hypogeum III was transformed into a monastic cell that preserves the sinopia of two haloed heads that probably belonged to an icon of two standing saints painted for the private contemplation of the resident monk. The oratory at the entrance to Hypogeum I was likewise decorated with icons that included a St John the Evangelist and a St. Michael the Archangel (known through nineteenth century photographs), and a probable Christ Pantocrator whose sinopia survives in a poor state of preservation. Greek crosses with forked finials, highlighted with red paint, were deeply incised on the walls.

A paleochristian burial-chamber at right angles to Hypogeum I was meanwhile mutilated and transformed into a modestly proportioned oratory (3.20m x 2.89m) that was still in use as a church, under the dedication of the Nativity of the Virgin, in 1575. It has a flat ceiling supported by a rock-pillar (presumably re-cut from a baldacchino-tomb), and low, partially built benches along the side walls. The back wall has an apsed recess, 1.21m deep, with a Siculo-Byzantinesque mural that telescoped into a single scene the principal Christian mysteries of the Annunciation and the Crucifixion. Stylistic and iconographic evidence exclude a date prior to the late thirteenth century, and there is an evident stylistic relationship to a thematically related painting in the, already mentioned, Grotta dei Santi at Monterosso Almo, in Ragusa. On the rock-pilaster were two armorial shields one of which carried the arms of the Kingdom of Sicily, and the other had a white cross on a red field that looked suspiciously similar to the standard of the Knights of St. John. Both are presumably late additions and may in fact belong to a post-1530 period.

54. On Sicily see especially the contributions of A. Messina, op.cit. (supra, n. 23); The troglodytic hermitages and churches of the heel of Italy are insufficiently studied but ‘Circolo La Scalaletta’, Le Chiese Bizantine di Matera, Rome 1966, is well illustrated and provides an excellent basis for future investigation.
57. The mural has lamentably been detached, transferred to a fiberglass support, and put on display at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.
58. They have similarly been detached and taken to the National Museum of Fine Arts.

The Eschatological Dimension of Troglydatic Monasticism

Abbatija tad-Dejr is an important example of the widely diffused phenomenon of rock-cut churches and troglodytic monasticism that manifested itself in many places of the Mediterranean littoral during the Middle Ages. Peter Brown has perceptively categorized it as an important aspect of an early pan-Mediterranean monastic culture that bore witness to the horizontal unity of the Middle Sea because it was unaware of any distinction between East and West. The practice may have stemmed from the East where it had an eschatological significance because of its symbolic association with the tomb and, therefore with death that man must undergo to wake up to eternal life. Michael Gervers sees in it an allegorical image in monumental form of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of Christ’s Resurrection and Christendom’s most hallowed shrine, with which Christians who could not make the journey to Jerusalem could associate themselves in absentia. One may also postulate a symbolic expression of Christ’s birthplace in a grotto that could be read as a prefiguration of the Entombment and Resurrection. The rock-cut church came therefore to represent the great mystery central to Christian belief of the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is possible to detect in this Christian fascination with caves a debt to Oriental (particularly Zoroastrian) cosmology which saw in grottoes places that were “proper to genesis and departure from genesis”, and according to whose mythology Mithras was born miraculously from a rock in a cave.

The first great centre for the diffusion of Christian troygodytic architecture was the Nile Valley where an ascetic, and often anchoritic, quality of early Christianity received inspiration from the Desert Fathers who fled civilization to set up monastic communities in the ‘huge silence’, silentium ingens, quietes magna, of the African desert. Caves, both natural and man-made, and, when available sepulchers and cemeteries became in this way desirable sites for hermitages. The missionary activities of Coptic, Egyptian, and Syrian monks popularized the practice in Ethiopia, and all over Asia Minor from where it was adopted by the later Roman Empire, and, more especially, in those regions dominated by Greek Christianity.

61. The quote is from Porphyry’s De antro nympharum composed in the second half of the third century, as cited in M. Gervers, op.cit.
and their border (and border-influenced) zones. In Western Europe the two area of major proliferation were Sicily and the heel of the Italian peninsula, both of which were provinces of the Byzantine Empire. Vasiliyev has shown how during the Iconoclastic crises of 726–843 A.D., a huge number of monks, perhaps as many as 50,000, fled persecution within the Empire and sought asylum in Italy.65 Many found refuge in Rome, where the Popes did not admit Byzantine control and were anxious to stress their disapproval of the heretical attitude of the eastern emperors, but the majority seem to have preferred the desolate South Italian countryside where the rock-cut churches bear striking similarities to the rock-cut monasteries of Cappadocia.66 There was another diaspora of monks into the central Mediterranean in 1071, after the battle of Manzikert, when some of the monks presumably found their way to Sicily, and some might have reached at Malta.

The date of Malta’s rock-cut churches cannot be securely documented, but in the light of the available evidence the early post-Muslim period seems best indicated. This does not exclude the existence of pre-Muslim establishments, particularly in association with hypogeae and other cemeterial sites.67 The fact remains, nonetheless, that iconographical and architectural considerations seem to anchor the great majority of Maltese troglodytic churches in the late Middle Ages. This would make them coeval to most of the rock-cut churches in the Sicilian and South Italian countryside to which they have a close artistic and liturgical affinity. It is their relationship to the Christianisation of Maltese Muslims by Sicilian-Greek monastic communities who might have used them as nuclei of evangelization that remains to be ascertained.

Interpreting the Dejr Toponyms

In addition to Abbatija tad-Dejr, Wettiger68 has noted the following other dejr toponyms:

1. Dejr Baqar 5. Dejr Handun 9. Dejr is-Safaf
3. Dejr il-Buzbiez 7. Dejr il-Ibara 11. Dejr is-Saf
13. San Gwann tad-Dejr

68. Wettiger, Place-names.
but it is interesting to note that it had an association with the monks of San Nicolò I’ Arena of Catania because it belonged to the endowment they received in 1363. The monks were, as a result bound to celebrate the feast of St. George with mass and vespers.78 Equally significant is the presence on the site of a small necropolis of Early Christian sepulchers.79 Their presence was, perhaps, a bigger attraction to anchoritic monasticism than the classical ruins at ta’ Zuta, but the topography was less hospitable.

Dejr is-Saf, which is recorded as a viridarium in 1496, may derive from the Arabic personal name Saf. The site is identified with Tabrija (della tabria sita di deyr asaf contrata) in 1525, which presumably means that it was a district of this extensive royal fief, west of Siggiewi. Its approximate location in the neighbourhood of Buskett, at Ta’ Xwejja, near a church of the Virgin, is indicated in a 1548 document (ta deir isaf viridarium in contracta S. Maria ta xexe). A later 1557 document refers to the place as sancta maria di deyr saif.80 The church, which in 1575 celebrated the feast of the Purification of the Virgin,81 stood on high ground and was a prominent landmark visible from miles around. It was rebuilt in the seventeenth century, but is now a sad ruin. Its origins are unknown, but irrespective of its real significance, it is worth noting that the surrounding lands had by the time of the church’s first mention become ecclesiastical property and an important part of the mensa vescovile, which fact is diligently noted in the 1575 report.82

Dejr lil-Marina presents a more interesting case study. It seems possible that it is similarly derived from a Semitic personal name, and a Basilissa Limara cives Mellie is mentioned in a 1324 document.83 His name may suggest a Greek-Rite Christian of Muslim descent, but the word can have other meanings. Wettinger seems to be more inclined to translate it as “Dejr of the commanders” or “the admirals”,84 and it should be emphasized that even if originating from a personal name, there is no justifiable reason why it should be associated a Muslim convert to Greek Christianity. The name is common and continues to be recorded in Malta until the early modern period.85 If the site does have a Christian significance it might prove more profitable to look for clues on the site itself. The topography of the place does not favour cave-dwelling, and if there was a monastery, or anchoritic station, this was presumably built rather than rock-cut. Traces of ‘Norman’ buildings, supposedly including a church, and various rooms grouped round a courtyard, were diagnosed by the Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta, in the late 1960s, among the classical and paleohristian remains at Tas-Silg,86 on the high ground that marks the start of the Delimara peninsula. These scanty and highly problematic remains were interpreted as a possible monastic establishment. The dating was based on a scatter of glazed pottery with a hatching of brown lines on a creamy-white ground, that were thought to be Norman, but the typology seems to fit a wide arc of time between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, or even earlier. There was on the site a built trough-tomb that was vaguely dated to a post-1100 A.D. period.87 It is possible that a community of Greek-rite monks lived among the classical and Early Christian ruins of Tas-Silg. Dejr l-Imara may therefore be another case of a Greek-rite community rooting itself on a site where Christianity had known a vigorous early tradition interrupted by the Muslim invasion of 870 A.D. The Mission’s archaeological interpretations must, however, be treated with caution.88

Dejr il-Hmir seems to present an analogous case. The toponym can likewise be associated with a Muslim personal name (Humir), but it can also be interpreted as “Dejr of the donkeys”. Its first known mention is in a deed of 1500 where it is located in a place called Nadur Ghasja, in the district of rahal antun (Hlantun).89 This late medieval settlement, which had been deserted by the first three decades of the fifteenth century,90 was named after a church of St. Anthony the Abbot,91 whose remains, consisting of a wall built of small, square ashlars blocks of the type used in late medieval buildings, could still be identified in 1970 when I took a measured drawing.92 The church may already have been deconsecrated by 1575 and does not seem to be mentioned in the Dusina report of that year.93 Like Tas-Silg, the place has notable archaeological significance, but its monuments are still largely unstudied. They include at least two late Roman round towers, namely Ta’ Gawhar, and Ta’ Torrijiet,94 and, at least, five paleohristian hypogea, besides a

78. Supra, 257, and Dusina, ff.168v-169, 170.
79. Buhagiar, Roman and Byzantine Catacombs, 327 – 34.
80. Reference in Wettinger, Place-names, 110, 513.
81. Dusina, f.162.
82. Ibid, sita est in confines terrarum Episcopatus.
84. Wettinger, Medieval Place-names, 20, and Place-names, 109.
85. For a seventeenth century example see NLM, AOM 476, f.198v.
89. Wettinger, Place-names, 109, 410.
91. Anthony of Padua does not seem to have enjoyed a cult in late medieval Malta and there are no records of a church to him in 1575.
92. They are now inaccessible.
93. There is a mention of a church of St. Anthony (Sancti Antonij), in an apparently good state of repair, near the church of the Virgin of Loreto at Gudja (Dusina, f.84), but this is about 3km distant from the site.
number of isolated rock-tombs. Among them the Tal-Liebru Hypogeous is worthy of attention on account of its carvings of several cross monograms some of which may, in fact, be late medieval rather than paleochristian.

Dejr iz-Zara should presumably be identified with Dar iz-Zara, at Ta’ Qali, at the foot of the Saqqajja plateau, where a church of the Nativity of the Virgin, was reportedly built in 1431 on a prebend of the Chapter of the Cathedral. A 1571 document which describes the site as terrae in contrata ta salib ta San Jacoubo, suggests the existence of a second church in the area.

Dejr il-Bujet, which can mean either “Benet’s Dejr”, or, more improbably, “Dejr of the girls”, was the name of a Crown field that is first reported as a viridarium in 1351. The site borders on the late medieval settlements of Tartarni and Dingli whose church of S. Dominica was a cappella, or parish church, in 1436. The dedication is of interest because of its South Italian and Sicilian Greek-Christian associations. Dominica is the Latinised version of the Greek Kyriaca, a martyr of the Diocletian persecution who enjoyed a cult in the city of Tropea, in the Calabria, where her relics were translated at an unknown period in the Early Middle Ages. As in the case of Catald, and Philip of Aggira, it is probable that her cult reached Malta with the Normans.

Dejr Baqar seems to have been located close to Dejr is-Safir in the fertile Girgenti Valley, no far from the Crown field of Tabrija and Il-Wied ta ‘l-Isoq. A field of that name at the foot of Tal-Ghola Hill, at Siqgiewi, presumably indicated its approximate location, while an orchard, which in 1506, was known as ta bebe Jdeir, could have marked some sort of landmark on the site. Situated in a sheltered, eastward-facing valley, with a good supply of fresh water, it had all the makings of an ideal setting for a community of hermit monks. No archaeological remains are today visible, but Abela mentions vestigi di grossissime pietre e anticaglie. The name could have derived from the Arabic personal name Bakr, but can also mean “Dejr of the cows”.

95. Buhagiar, Carian and Byzantine Catacombs, 350 – 60.
96. A. Ferris, Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo. Malta 1866. 124. Works were carried out in the church in 1754, and it was rebuilt after being damaged by the blitz in the Second World War.
98. Wettinger, Place-names, 108.
101. There was also a church of S. Dominica inZabbar: M. Buhagiar, ‘Medieval Churches’, 177, and a cave church on Gozo infra 284.
102. Abela, 95; Wettinger, Place-names, 108.
103. Wettinger, Place-names, 28
104. Abela, 95.
105. Ibid. 111. In the 17th century they were a principal source of the Wignacourt Aqueduct: T. Zammit, The Water Supply of the Maltese Islands, Malta 1924, 9 – 10.
106. Wettinger, Place-names, 109, 113.
108. Ibid., 21, and idem. Place-names, 112.
109. V. Bonello, ‘La chiesa bizantina di San Ciro a Malta’, Brutium, xvii. The church, which was also known as St. Michael the Archangel (M. Buhagiar, ‘Medieval Churches’, 177) survived in a ruinous state until the 1930s.
110. Wettinger, Place-names, 108.
111. Ibid., 109.
112. Ibid., 70, 485.
country villa. This tradition could have been a modern fabrication, but it is also possible that it stemmed from the distant recollections of a Christian activity in the area which centred round the presence of Greek-rite monks.

The Raheb Toponyms

Another possible clue to Greek-rite monasticism in early post-Muslim Malta may, perhaps, be preserved in a second set of toponyms that center around the Semitic word raheb (monk), or its derivatives. Wetinger has argued that the word referred to Western mendicant friars, notably Augustinians. The Romance word patri, was (and still is), however, in much more common usage, and it is possible that raheb, which is now virtually obsolete, qualified another type of monk, such as a one belonging to the Greek-rite. It should be emphasized, however, that this is a hypothesis that still needs to be buttressed by scientific investigation, and it could also have been the case that in its late medieval context raheb meant all types of monks.

An eloquent raheb-toponym is Bir ir-Riebhu (‘the Monk’s Well’) which refers to a site in close proximity to Abbatija tad-Dejr, at Rabat, thereby enforcing arguments for a monastic establishment there. The name, which is still in current use, was first mentioned as a galca, or field, in a deed of 1519. L-Iraqijaj tar-Raheb (‘the Fields of the Monk’) which was the name of an area, near the church of S. Lorenzo tal gume, at Ta’ Gholja, is also of interest for its possible associations with the nearby Dejr Baqar, while a causura called Gienir Raib-, noted at Wied Qanommata, near Wardija, in 1611, may, perhaps, be an added argument, to the location in the area of Dejr ir-Safsa.

Raheb place-names do not seem to be widely diffused. There was an un-located alley called Tar-Raheb, in 1496, while two fields at Lija and Mrieħel respectively were known by that name in 1533 and 1539. The Mrieħel field was, perhaps identical with a causura Ta’ Rabba which is recorded there in 1536. The name Rabba (ta raheb) was also borne by three strips of land at Marsalforn on Gozo, in 1496; by a field at Haz-Zebbug, in 1506; by a chantry lane at Tarxien, in 1536; and by an ecclesiastical benefice of undisclosed locality, in 1532. There was also, on Gozo, in 1564, a Wied ir-Raheb, apparently in the neighbourhood of the desolate Kap San Dimitri, while in Malta, an Andar ir-Raheb (‘The Threshing Floor of the Monk’) is recorded, in the area of Fiddien, in 1621.

The most intriguing toponym, is however, Ras ir-Raheb (‘The Headland of the Monk’), on the remote NW corner of the Rabat-Dingli plateau. The place has archaeological interest and there are the remains of a Late Roman establishment, possibly a sanctuary. In 1647, Abela suggested that the area got its name from a peculiar rock formation that vaguely resembled the figure of a monk, but it is equally possible that the name stemmed from the recollection of a community of hermit-monks who squatted among the ruins. The place has been unsatisfactorily excavated and published. A valuable piece of evidence which was overlooked, is a large worked stone with present measurements of 111 x 65.5 x 0.35 cm, that lies partially in a shallow basin, bordered by beautifully squared stone blocks, at the back of one of the two megaliths which mark the site. It has a moulded base and chamfered edges and looks suspiciously like an altar-top, or perhaps, a tombstone. Its age and real purpose cannot possibly be ascertained, and it ought to be said that no demonstrably medieval shrines have so far been identified in the area which abounds in fragments of fine Roman red ware. Important testimonies may have been destroyed during the unhappy excavations of 1961-62, and the true history of the site will probably never be known. The toponomy of the place which, in addition to Ras ir-Raheb, was also called Ras il-Knejjes (‘The Headland of the Churches’), implying some sort of ecclesiastical connections, is, however, significant.

The Evidence of the Built Churches

Although this study is certainly with rock-cut churches, it should be emphasized that hints of Greek and Oriental Christianity can also be found in the built churches of period. This is above all the case of the countryside churches which normally owed only a very superficial debt to the ecclesiastical architecture of the Latin West. There is, it is here argued, a close relationship between them and their rock-cut counterparts, and they seem likewise to be associated with the earliest, post-Muslim native Christian communities. San Ċir at Bubaqa, with its Siculo-Byzantinesque apse-mural, was presumably not an isolated case, and it is significant that most of their dedications were to eastern saints or devotions. Architecturally they were uninspiring edifices. Constructed entirely of stone, they were plain one-

114. G. Mandoza, Epistola ad P. Octavium Caetanum data Melitae die 9 mensis Maji anni 1608, NLM ms. 25, f. 109; and ibid, De Sancto Publio martyre ... (c. 1620) NLM ms. 25, 17.
115. Wetinger, Place-names, 454.
116. Ibid., 49.
117. ACM, Prebendi Deconatii 1601, f.122v. Information generously supplied by Professor Stanley Fiorini.
118. Wetinger, Place-names, 160 – 161.
119. Ibid., 454.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid., 385.
122. Ibid., 10.
124. Abela, 68.
125. See supra.
cell buildings of severe box-like proportions. Roofing was by a system of stone slabs carried on the backs of transverse arches that rested on wall-piers and divided the internal space into a regular sequence of bays that were lined with low stone benches. At the east end there was often a cylindrical apse, but the altar sometimes rested against a plain wall.  

This typology of stone architecture, which originated in Arabia, and finds a close parallel in the early Christian churches of the Hauran in Syria, reached the western Mediterranean in the course of the Early Middle Ages as a result of the several migration waves of Middle Eastern monks. In 1993 I argued that it might have been introduced in Malta in sub-Saracenic times, by Sicilian Greek-rite monks. Direct evidence is lacking, but it should be pointed out that in Eastern Sicily, churches with similar ground plans and construction methods, had close connections with Basilian cenobitic monasticism. One church in particular, San Barnaba in Valderice, had the same structural idiosyncrasies. Others though largely analogous have different roofs which in their present state are either barrel-vaulted or made of timber. The original roofs were in most cases rebuilt in the early modern period.  

One interesting characteristic of the Maltese churches is that some of them had floors beneath ground level. As in the case of the cave-churches, such a practice could have had an association with the imagery of the tomb that, as pointed out above, is an important element of Middle Eastern eschatology. Also relevant to this argument, is the hood-mould that often curls round the voussoirs of doorways, and is, in most cases, the only element of architectural decoration on the exterior of the building. Art historians have seen in the moulding an element of westernizing sophistication. What they have constantly overlooked is the possibility that it may be rooted in the early Christian catacombs of the island, such as Abbajita tad-Dejr, where similar mouldings with end-volutes were used in the decoration of window- and baldacchino-tombs. The justification for its initial use, round church doorways, could therefore have been its association with the tomb and, as a result, with death and life beyond the grave.

The Troglydotic Phenomenon
The rock-cut churches of Malta are best considered within the context of the troglydotic phenomenon that became widespread in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when there was an expansion into the countryside. There is no real evidence for a significant habitation of the countryside in the Byzantine and Muslim periods. For a long time in the Early Middle Ages the rural topography of the island seems to have remained largely the same as it had been in Roman times when agricultural activity had centred around a network of villa-rustica establishments some of which, like the San Pawl Milqi complex, had an extended existence that might have spilled into the Muslim period. The development of the cave-dwelling practice, which could have been a consequence of the second, and definite, Christian conquest of 1127, probably followed a parallel course to that of the raha, and in both cases it is possible to establish a link with the constraints of an economy based on royal estates (masserie) worked by slaves and Muslim villaini, or servile labourers, who were known by the generic Semitic name beduin, from which the modern Maltese bidu ("farmers") is derived.

In Malta and Sicily troglydotic settlements were distinguished by the appellative ghar, meaning "cave", and, as in the case of the raha toponyms, they share the common characteristic of getting their name from Muslim patronyms of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Ghar Dalam (Dalam’s Cave) is a well-known example. In Sicily raha and ghar toponyms, apparently denoted different types of settlement. It was not necessarily the case in Malta where the raha was often made up, at least in part, of cave-dwellings, and where the troglydotic phenomenon knew a greater permanence than in Sicily. The troglydotic settlements with their largely servile Muslim population were fertile missionary ground for Sicilian and South Italian Greek-rite monks, and the first Maltese converts were probably made from among their inhabitants. The Greek Christianity that the neophytes embraced continued to differentiate them from their town-dwelling Latin overlords and their...
Garrison. In Sicily converts from Islam for a long time associated the Latin-rite with the hated Norman conqueror, and the situation in Malta was, presumably similar. Church rites would therefore appear to have been a mark of social distinction. That this was not entirely the case is suggested by a Greek signature in a will of 1299 from Gozo, but in general terms it is probably correct to speak of a liturgical divide between the Christian Arab natives and the Latin immigrants. In this distinction the countryside may have been an important factor even though one must necessarily assume the presence in the city, and its suburb (Rabat) of a significant native community of tradesmen and petty artisans who likewise lived in servile conditions, but whose status was possibly better than that of the villani of the countryside. Some of the inhabitants of Rabat were likewise troglodytes who fashioned their houses from the Late Roman and Byzantine hypogea that honeycombed the area. The presence of rock-cut churches in Rabat is presumably indebted in equal proportions (as was the case in the countryside) to the activities of Greek-rite monks, and to the presence there of the troglodytic phenomenon.

Gazetteer of Rock-Cut Churches
There is no substantial difference between urban and rural rock-cut churches. Irrespective of their location, churches share common characteristics and are the product of similar religious pressures and socio-historical realities. Surviving murals speak a common iconographic language and are rooted in the same Siculo-Byzantine milieu. On the other hand, urban churches have a more intimate relationship with Early Christian hypogea and are often re-cut from them. They also tend to show greater preoccupation with architectural elaboration and decoration. Dating is in either case difficult. The evidence of murals can only provide the latest possible date for these could have been painted a long time after the founding of the church. Equally deceptive is dating by architectural idiosyncrasies because in rock excavations the resultant spaces are often conditioned by geophysical factors. Original ground plans and wall surfaces are, moreover, many times obliterated by alterations and enlargements so that, in most cases, it is impossible to be sure whether churches were originally conceived in the form we see them today. The dating criteria used below, are based on archaeological and historical considerations, but it should be emphasized that dates are to be regarded as tentative. Archaeological investigations, if properly carried out, may be a useful tool in historical clarifications, but it is doubtful whether they can settle dating problems. The following gazetteer summarises the basic characteristics of the known churches. It has no claim to completeness. Several others churches may still be awaiting identification. Spelaeology has not yet been seriously pursued in Malta and there are still several caves that can be investigated with a profit.

The urban churches (nos. 1–9) are discussed first:

1. Unknown Dedication – St Paul’s Catacombs, Rabat
This oratory formed by the recutting of burial-chambers at the entrance to Malta’s major paleochristian cemetery, bears a superficial resemblance to the two Byzantine oratories in the Catacombs of Santa Lucia in Syracuse, and like them it seems to belong to a late phase in the history of the site, between approximately the sixth and eighth centuries A.D. It is reached directly from the entrance of the catacombs and is both nobly proportioned (9.14m x 3.65m x 3.81m) and handsomely adorned with fluted Doric half-columns four of which are grouped in a tight cluster. There is archaeological evidence for an altar with a ciborium carried on four slender columns. In 1898, A.A. Caruana noted traces of paintings on the wall at the back of the altar. There is clear evidence for alterations and mutilations, but there is no proof that the oratory was in use in the late Middle Ages. It had certainly been abandoned by 1575.

2. St. Agatha – Rabat
The church is re-cut from a paleochristian hypogea. The remains of the funerary architecture can still be made out, together with the remains of a possibly 5th century A.D. Greek inscription painted in red ochre. The ground plan has been mutilated by modern accretions, but it is probable that the church was originally a rectangle with a deep apsed altar-recess and, perhaps, side altar-niches. Low wall-benches may have provided seating accommodation. Two Siculo-Byzantine frescoes of frontally posed, hieratic saints (St Anthony the Abbot and St Agatha, or perhaps Helena) are stylistically datable to the thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries. Other cult images, juxtaposed, on most of the wall surfaces are late fifteenth or early

138. One should, however, guard against over simplifying a really very complex problem. Thus, for example, the toponym Bieb il-Gharrein, or Bieb il-Greig, at Mdina, and the nearby church of St Nicholas, seem to suggest a Byzantine Greek presence with the implication that the civitas was not exclusively a Latin enclave.


143. For a critical description of the site: M. Buhagiar, Roman and Byzantine Catacombs, and idem., ‘Early Christian and Byzantine Malta’, 84–90.

144. A.A. Caruana, Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta, Malta 1898, 111–2.
sixteenth century. Reliefs of inscribed Greek crosses are difficult to date, but some may be quite modern.

3. St. Venera – Ghar Barca, Rabat
The 1575 Dusina Report mentions a *praebenda muncupato Sancta Venere de Ghar Barca*,145 which presumably got its name from the church. In 1647, Abela indicated its site in the neighbourhood of St Agatha, and reported that it was re-cut from an Early Christian hypogeum, and contained a stone altar and a wall-icon of St. Venera carrying a flaming vase.146 In the late nineteenth century A. A. Caruana made two references to the church, but it is not clear whether he had first hand knowledge, or was simply reporting earlier accounts.147 Its exact location had certainly been lost by 1911.148

The Maltese Pauline tradition identifies this church with a cave that the Apostle chose for a dwelling during his stay on the island. It is first reliably mentioned in a document of 1388 when it was reached from an above-ground cemetery.149 Drastic re-cuttings, in or around 1617, have obliterated the original plan. In 1615 it had a main altar behind a wooden screen, and at least four side-altars set in wall-niches. Next to the church is a roughly hewn, man-made cave, partially re-cut from a paleochristian hypogeum, chippings from which were thought to have talismanic powers.150

5. St. Mary Magdalene – Rabat
The church, and the adjoining chambers, are re-cut from a hypogeum, or a cluster of small hypogea. It is entered down a steep flight of steps and is neatly excavated on a roughly circular plan. The walls are carefully stuccoed with a cement mixture of ground pottery and lime, and gird by a continuous rock-bench. 0.45 x 0.92 m. The church seems to fit with the description of the *Cimiterium Sancti Pauli*, next to the parish church of St. Paul, visited in 1575 by Pietro Dusina who describes it as a rock-cut burial crypt with a stone altar.151 It presumably served the purpose of an ossuary and a great quantity of bones (*innumerable quantità di ossa*) were noted in it around 1647, when its altar was dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene.152

6. S. Maria della Speranza – Rabat
Located in the close neighbourhood of St. Mary Magdalene, the church is mentioned as a *caverna* in the 1575 Dusina Report where it is described as poor and destitute of benefices and other sources of revenue. Mass was occasionally celebrated in it out of devotion.153 Access was down a flight of steps.154 The church was deconsecrated in 1656,155 and its site was marked by a columnar-cross in 1714.156

7. St. Catald – Rabat
The church is situated above the entrance to a paleochristian hypogeum and was presumably re-cut from its shaft.157 It was only partially rock-cut and had a stone-slab roof carried on arches. It was in a state of ruin in 1575 when Mgr Dusina ordered its deconsecration and the erection of a columnar-cross to mark its site.158 In 1739–1745 murals of mitred bishops “in the Greek style” were discovered during the building of the present above-ground centralized church,159 but they disappeared soon afterwards.

8. S. Maria della Grotta – Rabat
The church was re-cut from a burial-chamber (or chambers) at the entrance of a now inaccessible hypogeum that was known as l-Ghar il-Kbir (‘the Large Cave’).160 In the mid-fifteenth century it was entrusted to the care of the Dominican friars who built an above-ground church and a convent, and made it the centre a Marian cult.161 In 1647 it had murals of saints and outside the entrance was a fragment of a Roman composite entablature carried on a pair of stone columns.162 Drastic alterations have obliterated the original plan, walls, and ceiling.

145. Dusina, f.325.
146. Abela, 46–7.
151. Dusina, f.26v.
152. Abela, 346.
153. Dusina, f. 28.
156. AAM, VP 1758 –1759, f.431, 476v.
158. Dusina, 28v.
9. Nativity of the Virgin – Fort St. Angelo, Birgu
Situated within the precincts of the Castrum Maris (now Fort St. Angelo), on the Grand Harbour, this is the last of the urban churches, and the only known one outside Rabat. It can probably be identified with a church of Sant’ Angelo in castro exteriori mentioned in an Angevin document of 1274. It was enlarged and altered in the seventeenth century when it was also given a new built façade. The original church can, however, be reconstructed as a box-like cell (116cm x 139cm). The location of the church in what was apparently an essentially Latin enclave merits attention.

10. S. Maria della Virtù – limits of Rabat
The church was re-cut from a reputedly paleochristian hypogeum. It has a lobed plan and an ornate built doorway with a Gothic hood-mould that is stylistically datable to the fifteenth century. It had several altars in 1575 but only one is reported in 1647 when there were rock-cut benches, plastered walls, two skylights, and two rock-pilasters to prop up the roof.

11. Nativity of the Virgin – Abbatija Tad-Dejr, limits of Rabat
For an account of this important site see supra, 260.

This natural cave with man-made accretions was subjected to important modifications, possibly in the course of the fifteenth century when it was given a flagstone pavement and a built east-end apse. The latter has a cylindrical shape and is seemingly inspired by the apses of above-ground churches. It is constructed partly of ashlar and partly of wet-rubble and contains a stone altar. A mutilated fresco in the SE corner is stylistically datable to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries, but the remains of a lime-based mortar and daubs of paint suggest that the cave may at some time have been extensively frescoed. The remains of a rock-cut bench along the south wall are a possible relic of the original arrangement when the cave was slightly longer along its EW axis and, probably, had some sort of built façade. The dedication to Leonard of Siponto seems to precede 1418 as suggested by the onym Santu Leonardi to which the site was then known.

The Carmelite friars who established their first Maltese house in the area, in the early fifteenth century, sought to establish a historical link with the church by propagating a tradition about a community of hermit monks of their Order who lived in the area in the thirteenth century. The story is presumably a pious fabrication, but it might have been inspired by folk memory of Greek-rite monks.

13. Unknown Dedication – Ghajn Qajied, limits of Rabat
This subterranean church with wall-paintings of cult images, reputedly of the same period as those at Abbatija tad-Dejr, was discovered in 1829, but “the owner of the soil, annoyed by the curiosity of visitors buried (it) once more.”

Described in 1575, when it was located in the agricultural tenement of a certain Giovanni Paolo Agius, as an “Ecclesiam ruralenm in gripta”, the church was without a rector, had no revenue, and lacked adequate furnishings. A mass was celebrated on St. Nicholas’s day. There is no other record of this church and its exact location is unknown.

15. Unknown Dedication – Bingemma, limits of Rabat and Mgarr
This presumed church was re-cut from one of the tomb-caves (Hypogeum V) in the Bingemma complex. It consists of a roughly rectangular chamber (7.66m x 5.92mx 2.43m) with a wide doorway, lined on one side by the remains of a dry wall of large stone blocks. The floor slopes gently from the entrance and is littered with large stone chips indicating recent quarrying that may have obliterated original features. In the SW, SE, and, possibly, NW corns are the remains of rock platforms that are too badly mutilated to permit interpretation. In the ceiling above the SW platform there is a neat oblong cutting (200cm x 46cm x 11cm) while the curved wall at the back of the SW platform has three lamp-holes. There are other lamp-holes in different parts of the chamber. The most significant feature is a finely finished arched niche (35cm x 83cm x 70cm) at a height of ca. 125cm from the present floor level. A smaller, and coarser, wall-niche in the west wall may have served as a pottery shelf. There are several tethering holes, two of which, in the west wall, are larger than the rest.

162. Abela, 48, 226B, 408.
166. Abela, 47.
167. The wall that now screens the mouth of the cave is a modern accretion.

171. Desina, f.163Gr.
172. Buhagiar, Roman and Byzantine Catacombs, 272–293.
and have a deeply engraved Latin cross between them. Like the tethering holes it may be quite modern, but it remains, nonetheless, the only explicitly Christian element.

16. Unknown Dedication – Ghar Qarsana, L-Imseiliet, limits of Zebbiegh, Mgarr
A man-enlarged cave utilized as a burial-place in late Roman or early Christian times when tombs were dug into its walls. In the Late Middle Ages it was used for habitation purposes and its mouth was screened by a dry stone wall whose foundations were still visible in 1947. Quarrying has destroyed evidence of the rest of its history and while it is not impossible that it was at some time "an underground chapel", no reliable proof has survived. A shallow roughly cut niche (135cm x 98cm x 28cm) in the back wall was arbitrarily diagnosed in 1947 as "a space occupied by an altarpiece probably a triptych". A rudely engraved cross (ht. 20cm) on a small pyramidal pedestal was thought to be a "Greek dedication cross". Of greater interest are a tethering-hole dug into the ceiling, in the approximate center of cave, from which a light was, perhaps, suspended, and a finely cut oblong shaft (156cm x 38cm) dug through the roof, the purpose of which is unknown. An early modern reference describes the cave as antrum sive cripta, suggesting that it was then inhabited.

17. Visitation of the Virgin – neighbourhood of Mosta
The 1575 Dusina report lists this church among the rural churches of Mellieha, and describes it as a circular chamber dug inside a cave (ecclesia est scultta in grotta) overlooking the village of Mosta (supra Casale Mustae). It also records the tradition that it had been consecrated by seven bishops who were shipwrecked on Malta at an unknown period.

18. S. Maria della Speranza – Mosta
The church, which is re-cut from a natural cave on the southern flank of the Mosta Valley, has been mutilated by quarrying and by a built accretion. The surviving section of the original cave has a rock pillar to support the roof, and a wellhead. A rudely cut shallow wall-niche (59cm x 47cm) may have contained a cult image. Pastoral visitation reports mention an icon of Virgin that was painted directly on the rock, but which was detached, around 1771, and removed to the overlying built-church where it was placed by the doorway. It can, perhaps, be identified

with a mural of the Virgin and Child (26cm x 29cm) integrated in the thickness of the window flanking the west door to the right where it could have been fitted to enable the faithful to address their prayers to it without actually entering the church. The painting is obviously an early modern work, but one cannot exclude the possibility of an earlier image underneath.

19. The Virgin – limits of Mosta
Recorded in 1647, this was apparently not a church, but rather a rock-cut aedicule with a frescoed icon of the Virgin. The area where it was located was known as Figura, presumably on account of the painted image.

20. The Virgin – Hal Bordi, Attard
Also recorded in 1647, this was another rock-cut aedicule with a frescoed icon of the Virgin. The place where it stood was similarly known as Figura.

21. St. Peter – Gebel Pietru, Naxxar
This was the church of a troglodytic community that inhabited the desolate, rocky countryside of the Great Fault. It has a roughly oval plan (7.65m x 5.18m) with a shallow altar-recess and the apparent remains of a rock-cut bench. The walls were smoothed and stuccoed and may have carried cult images. Next to the church, beneath the same overhanging ledge of rock, is a considerably larger cave, which shows signs of habitation and was partitioned by dry-stone walls into different spaces that presumably housed families and their livestock. Outside the entrance are two water cisterns with square orifices fed by water-channels. The larger is roughly bell-shaped and is served by foot-holes. In 1575 the church was fitted with wooden doors and had an altar. The feast of St. Peter was celebrated with two masses and the distribution of wine and loaves of bread among the poor.

22. St. Brancatus (Ghar San Brinkaw) – Garghur
This church shares the same environment as the cave of S. Peter from which it is distant a few hundred metres. No record of its use as a church has survived, but the dedication to St. Brancatus, whose cult flourished in medieval Sicily, may perhaps indicate an origin in sub-Saracenic times. The cave (ca. 7.31m x 3.96m) has been left its natural state, but to enter it one has to descend a gently sloping rock-cut ramp, of unknown antiquity, that is reached via a man-made doorway (ca. 70cm wide) adjacent to the natural cave-opening (6m wide). The height, which at the

174. Ibid.
175. Notarial Archives, Valletta, Br. De Cazzaro, R. 175/19, f.265.
176. Dusina, f.181v.
177. AAM, VP. 1771 – 1774/77 160v – 161; VP. 1781, 237.
178. Abela, 84.
179. Ibid., 86.
180. Dusina, f. 38.
181. Brancato (Pancratius of Taormina) was a legendary saint whose fantastic Greek story made him a disciple of St Peter who suffered martyrdom in Sicily.
THE RE-CHRISTIANISATION OF MALTA

23. St. Nicholas (Ghar San Niklaw) – Mellieha
This is one in a series of large, natural caves which served a prosperous troglodytic community that remained stubbornly nestled among the precipitous high ground of the fertile San Niklaw Valley, overlooking Ghadira Bay, until the turn of the nineteenth century. A beneficio di S Nicola della Mellieha is listed among church lands, in a quaternarius pro Concordia taxarum drawn up in 1436, and the place may have been ecclesiastical property for a long time before that date. The original troglodytes were perhaps the servile beduini who worked the land of the clerical establishment in early sub-Saracenic times. The cave was to a large extent left in its natural state, but a section to the left of the entrance was segregated by means of a dry-stone wall, and used as a church. Its walls were stuccoed and painted with juxtaposed cult images. The few daubs of paint that survive do not permit any speculation as to date, but it is clear that the individual saints were enclosed in characteristic dark red frames. One panel measured 61 cm x 51 cm, while next to it another panel is 51 cm wide. Not far from the cave settlement, are two early Christian tombs one of which carries a cross-monogram.

24. Nativity of the Virgin – Mellieha
This is one of Malta’s most venerated shrines and has intimate links with the Pauline tradition on account of its icon of the Virgin and Child which a pious legend attributes to St. Luke. The icon is one of the earliest surviving paintings in Malta, but it can hardly be dated earlier than the thirteenth century. Painted on the stucco rendering of a rock-cut niche, the image is Siculo-Byzantine in inspiration and displays close similarities with the post-Muslim iconography of the Virgin in the rock-cut churches of Eastern Sicily. The Virgin and Child wear the same peared halo and have identical almond shaped eyes outlined by a single black line, and the painting is likewise inscribed with the legend MAT (ER) DIOMINI in similar letters. The early history of the cave was presumably like that of the Ghar San Niklaw, but it subsequently gained greater ecclesiastical significance and was a cappella, or parish church, by 1436. Seven engraved crosses filled with red paint survived until at least 1866.

25. St. Leonard (San Leonardo tal-Gebel) – Minsija, San Gwann
A roughly oval natural cave, situated several metres beneath ground level. Until the early eighteenth century there were icons of saints John the Baptist, Athanasius, and Basil painted on the rock, on either side of the altar. It preserves a late medieval triptych of St. Leonard of Siponto and the Annunciation. The church is first reliably recorded as San Leonardo “tal-Gebel”, at Il-Hofra tal-Ghar, in 1586. It was deconsecrated in 1618, but the chance find of its triptych caused a renewal of interest in the church, which was reopened for worship in 1691, under the new dedication of the Annunciation and St. Leonard. The access to the church was drastically modified in the late nineteenth century, and it is today impossible to reconstruct the original entrance arrangement, although it is possible that this was done in steps cut in a shaft.

26. Unknown Dedication (L-Ghar tas-Saleb) – Wied il-Kbir, Qormi
This is a long water-worn tunnel, at the junction of Wied il-Kbir and Wied Hanzira, that extends for nearly 31 m into the cliff side. A large stone block (1.52 m x 1.52 m x 0.54 m) partially blocks the opening and suggests that the cave may have been a prehistoric station. A short, narrow entrance corridor leads to a large oval hall (ca. 12.2 m x 8.6 m x 3.1 m) whose long axis is lined with pilasters deeply dug into the rock, on either side, for a distance of about 10 m. Crosses of all types and sizes are engraved on walls and ceiling, some lightly scratched, others deeply incised. Their date is unknown and some may, in fact, be quite recent. On the sixth pilaster on the NE. wall is a graffito that recalls the Muslim hiqali-motif, but the geometric shape may, in fact, result from a concentration of crosses engraved on top of each other. In the NW. corner, at a distance of ca. 4.57 m from the entrance, a break in the rock leads to two small chambers, the larger of which (2.14 m x 3.45 m x 1.83 m) has a concave recess, lamp-holes, a pair of ceiling tethering-holes, and several graffiti.

183. NLM Bibl. Ms 721, f. 2rv.
185. R. Bonnici-Carr, Our Lady of Mellieha, Malta, Malta 1952.
187. A. Ferris, Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo, Malta 1866, 520.
188. AAM, VP 1714 – 1720; VP 1728 – 1729, f. 719rv
189. Meaning the ‘Sunken Cave’.
190. AAM, VP 1586 – 1602, f.366r.
191. AAM, VP 1618, f.45v.
192. AAM, VP 1736 – 1740, 535v.
that include an apparent chi-rho monogram (15cm x 10cm), and a small but finely engraved pedestalled cross. The smaller chamber lacks interest but contains another engraved pedestalled cross. A third chamber is entered through a narrow gallery at the back of the hall. It has a roughly circular plan and a tall conical roof, and its walls which are smoothened, presumably by water action, are full of modern graffiti. Beyond it is a natural shaft blocked by huge boulders. The location of the cave, at the outskirts of a miniature gorge, made it an ideal site for an anchoritic station, and the rock-cut pilasters with their engraved crosses, together with the presumed little cells make such a hypothesis plausible. The name 'Ghar tas-Slaneb' ('Cave of Crosses') seems to be of recent date. In 1647, Abela called the cave 'Ghar Hanzira' ('The Sow's Cave'), but he was presumably not personally familiar with it, because he refers neither to the rock-cut pilasters, nor to the engraved crosses.\footnote{Abela, 94.}

27. Unknown dedication – ta’ Giampula, limits of Rabat, Haz-Zebbug, and Siggiewi

This largely unknown subterranean rock-cut complex, is located in private property and has still to benefit from a proper survey. Two short visits in 1999, courtesy of the current proprietors, suggested the possibility that a late Roman / Early Christian hypogeum was, at some time in the Middle Ages, re-cut as an anchoritic station and oratory, and of a subsequent early modern mutilations to re-utilize the site for animal pens, and, perhaps human habitation. The complex can perhaps be identified with the "underground excavation in the living rock" noted in 1772 between the villages of Zebbug and Siggiewi, by G.A. Ciantar, who recorded the presence in the central area of "four columns cut in the same rock", and the discovery of human bones.\footnote{G.A. Ciantar, I. 192.}

28. St. George (San Gorg ta’ Gebel Ciantar) – Ta’ Zuta, Siggiewi

This church lies in an archaeologically prosperous area and is possibly re-cut from a Roman cremation-burial of the *columbarium*-type.\footnote{D. H. Trump, *Malta: An Archaeological Guide*, London 1972, 121.} It is mentioned as an *ecclesiam Sancti Georgii* in the will of the nobleman Paolo Pellegrino, of 15th September 1436,\footnote{G. Aquilina 'San Gorg ta’ Gebel Ciantar', op.cit., 29 – 37.} and can perhaps be identified with the *Sancti Georgii de dyr mihallac* of 1494.\footnote{G. Aquilina 'San Gorg ta’ Gebel Ciantar', op.cit., 29 – 37.} In its present state it consists of a carefully excavated chamber (5.50m x 5.60m) with a gently concave back wall and a ceiling shaped to resemble a flattened tunnel-vault. There was originally a built façade with a simple square-headed doorway in the SW. corner through which one entered by descending a couple of steps.\footnote{Supra, 263} Recent drastic mutilations included the transformation of the place into a garage, the raising of the floor-level, the rendering of the walls with a cement covering up to a ht. of ca. 2.50m, and the removal of the altar. The entrance has also been re-cut and fitted with a garage door. Of the surviving original elements the most important is a serried row of twenty beautifully proportioned niches (ca. 33cm x 32cm x 22cm) that may have belonged to the *columbarium*. They are cut at a ht. of 2.95m from the present floor level, and are evenly distributed on three of the internal walls. A few other niches outside this calculated alignment may represent unplanned additions. At an unknown period the niches were plugged with stone slabs and concealed behind a stucco-rendering. Christian elements include a deeply engraved Latin-cross on the back wall, and, beneath it, an apparent chalice-like motive carved in very low relief, but this may, after all be nothing more than a natural rock formation. Several daubs of paint suggest that the walls may at one time have carried cult images. In 1436, Paolo Pellegrino bound his heirs with several obligations. These included the observance of the feast of St. George with low mass, first vespers, and the intoning of a *Salve Regina* by two priests, as well as the distribution of nuts and wine *secundum modum melitensis*, to the congregation. In 1616 the furnishings included an old *conca* or altar-painting, and in 1744 there was a spring of fresh water at the foot of the altar. The built façade carried some sort of bell-cot and in 1818 it was decided to replace the bell by a larger one that could be heard over a larger distance.\footnote{Supra, 263}

29. St. Domenica – Limits of Xlendi, Gozo.

This cave church is documented in the 1637 visitation report when it was deconsecrated. Its furnishings included a polychrome stone statue of the Virgin saint which survives in the Jesuit Retreat House of the Virgin of Manresa, on the outskirts of Rabat, on Gozo.\footnote{Daniel Guvina, op.cit.}