

MARIO BUHAGIAR, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*, Oxford, British Archaeological Reports International Series 302, 1986, pp.xxiii and 435; 120 figures and 31 plates.

Given the limited financial - definitely not human - resources of this country and the absence therein of an enlightened political will in this field, we normally consider ourselves fortunate to have even one Maltese scholar who could devote himself in an expert, professional and specialized way to a particular area of our historical and archaeological heritage. For Malta's Early Christian period we are, therefore, twice blest in having two such scholars, Mario Buhagiar and Vincent Borg, each of whom has produced in 1986 a work that constitutes a landmark in the study of our Palaeochristian heritage: V. Borg's article "Malta and its Palaeochristian Heritage: a New Approach" published in *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History*, Malta, Mid-Med Bank Limited, 1986; and M. Buhagiar's publication of his M. Phil. thesis with the University of London. The following review concerns itself only with the latter.

Having two or more experts in one particular area can generate, it should be observed, healthy debates. Between the works of Buhagiar and Borg one notes a divergence of opinion on one major aspect: the dating of our earliest Christian tombs and catacombs - an aspect of considerable sensitivity since it is intimately related to the question of the date of the early Christianization of the island's population. Borg seems to throw all his weight on arguments in favour of a very early date for our Christian burials - third century A.D. at the latest. Buhagiar, on the other hand, is much more cautious and aligns himself with upholders of a later date - not earlier than the late fourth century A.D.

Mario Buhagiar has made for the study of Malta's late Roman and early Christian tombs what J.D. Evans did for the study of Maltese prehistory with his *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: a Survey*, that is, an exhaustive survey of the hard archaeological facts available on our catacombs and hypogea of this period (pp. 49-373). He has done this systematically and dealt with the sites by parishes (as Evans had done for the prehistoric sites), the district around Rabat being further subdivided into areas. - One is immediately struck by the extraordinary, but understandable, concentration of burials around Rabat and by the inexplicable scarcity of finds in Gozo. - Practically every tomb known is described in detail and accompanied, whenever possible, by a plan, sometimes by sections and drawings of particular features, such as carvings, architectural decorations and inscriptions. Plates, although not always of the best quality, illustrate a number of features some of which have now been lost forever, like the views of structural remains in front of the Abatija tad-Dejr hypogeum just after the excavations of July 1933.

To compile all this information the author had to face considerable difficulties in view of "the deplorable state of neglect prevailing at most sites some of which have been reduced to rubbish dumps" (p.xi).

Buhagiar introduces every site by an account of its discovery and subsequent history, and gives a detailed list of finds from it. Again one notices immediately how few, how very few, are the Christian tombs to which finds can be securely attributed; thus the process of identification and dating is seriously hampered. This shows how necessary scientifically conducted excavations are of any remaining unexplored tombs. It should also dissuade those responsible for privately owned complexes from undertaking 'clearing' operations without the co-operation and scientific control from

the competent Museum authorities.

The survey proper is preceded by an introductory chapter on the physical formation and the early history of the Maltese islands, as well as the study of the Maltese catacombs (pp.1-12). In connection with the second section it should be emphasized that the 5th millennium does not correspond to the *conventional* radio-carbon calculation but constitutes the *calibrated* C¹⁴ period of the earliest evidence of man on Malta (p.2, note).

The following chapter deals with several important aspects and problems relating to the Maltese catacombs, such as: their relationship with the previous Phoenician, Punic and Roman rock-cut tombs; head-rests; grave types; burial arrangements; the so-called 'agape tables'; ownership and dating of hypogea (pp.13-42). As to the latter, Buhagiar's more conservative dating finds further confirmation in the contents of a small hypogeum at Mgarr recently investigated by the Grupp Arkejoloġiku Malti, under the supervision of the Museums Department, which were examined by Dr. John W. Hayes during his brief visit in 1985 and dated to the period from the late fourth to the late sixth/early seventh centuries A.D.

For easier consultation the author has compiled in appendices I-III (pp.392-422) three separate catalogues: one of the inscriptions in Neo-Punic, Latin, Greek and Hebrew found in the various tombs of the period; one of the hypogea with 'agape tables'; and a third one of the painted and carved decoration and iconographical motifs. The bibliography at the end will be an excellent tool in the hands of any researcher on the subject.

Apart from the bad quality of some of the illustrations one finds fault in the general presentation of the volume, which leaves a lot of room for improvement, and the inadequate proof-reading. Misprints are more common than one would normally allow for oversight. Some internal page references are left blank as on pages 48 and 216 and there is some confusion in the references to plates 3-5 and figures 62-64 in the text. For the sake of making it easier for the reader to consult I think an *errata* list would be very useful and should be included in the volume.

Students of Maltese archaeology and history are very grateful to the author and the publisher for this extremely useful publication. In spite of the errors to which attention has been drawn, this comprehensive study is a valuable addition to the reference material on the subject. Most of the blemishes could readily be removed in a second edition.

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