

The Iconography of the Maltese Rock-Tombs Punico-Hellenistic, Paleochristian and Byzantine

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The geophysical environment of the central Mediterranean islands of Malta with its rich supply of soft limestone has, since prehistoric times, provided fertile ground for the diffusion and consolidation of a culture of rock architecture. This found one of its most eloquent expressions in Phoenician and Punico-Hellenistic necropolises with shaft and chamber tombs and in the late Roman, Paleochristian and Byzantine tombs and miniature catacombs which followed them. These rock-cut burial places are primarily remarkable for their wealth of architectural detail. Their limited repertory of carved and painted decoration is, none the less, of notable iconographic interest.

This paper is not concerned with the Phoenician tomb which, in the Maltese context, made its appearance in the late 8th-7th century B.C.¹ It should, however, be pointed out that, in an architectural sense, there is very little difference between it and the Punico-Hellenistic sepulchre. The basic characteristics of a roughly square shaft entered down footholes, or a precipitously narrow flight of steps, and of box-like burial chambers with one (at times two) mortuary couches was hardly, if at all, affected by the influx of Alexandrian Hellenism which, from around the late 4th century B.C., started conditioning the culture of the Maltese archipelago (Fig.1). The islands' close proximity to Sicily rendered them vulnerable to Greek and Hellenistic tastes and ideas which, grafted to the indigenous Phoenician civilization, produced an essentially new culture which is best described as Punico-Hellenistic. Punico-Hellenism remained a dominant cultural force throughout the Roman and early Christian periods and had an impact on tomb decoration which should often be considered within the Sicilian context.² It was only around the mid-5th century A.D., when the islands were seemingly conquered by the Vandals of North Africa, that new cultural and iconographic influences started manifesting themselves.³

1. For a quick overview of the Phoenician and Punico-Hellenistic periods in Maltese history vide A. Ciasca, "Malta", in S. Moscati (ed.) *The Phoenicians*, Milan 1988, 206-209.
2. The Maltese Islands became a possession of Carthage around the mid-6th century B.C. They became a Roman possession at the outbreak of the second Punic War in 218 B.C.
3. On the early Christian and Byzantine periods: M. Buhagiar, "Early Christian and Byzantine Malta: Some Archaeological and Textual Considerations", in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Library of Mediterranean History*, vol. I, Malta 1994, 77-125.

There is only one recorded example of a painted sepulchre from the Punico-Hellenistic period. This is a one-chambered, cremation tomb in the major necropolis at Tac-Caghqi, outside the ditch of the city of Melite, discovered and investigated by Themistocles Zammit in 17 February 1910. It is unsatisfactorily recorded and I have not been able to trace photographs. Zammit's excavation notes are, however, of relevance and contain useful sketches.⁴ The tomb (fig. 2) was one in a cluster of around forty and had a finely cut chamber,⁵ 2.20m x 1.60m, with two narrow rock platforms ('a' - 'b') that were isolated from each other and from the side walls by three shallow trenches ('c' - 'd' - 'e'). A shallow circular depression (diam. 30cm), at the back of trench 'd' was presumably the stand of a cinerary urn. This was the focal point of the little cubicle. The wall at its back contained a shallow segmental-headed recess which occupied almost all the available space and served as a backdrop to a bust length relief carving of a humanoid figure with a tall neck and an elongated, pear-shaped head (fig.3). It has large almond-shaped eyes, a prominent nose, a heavily lipped mouth and an accentuated chin. Both arms are represented. One hangs limply by the side of the body while the other is folded at the breast. The figure was painted red all over. The face was light red but a deeper red was used for the cheeks, lips, eyebrows, pupils of the eyes and for the hair. A thin (1.5cm wide) band of red paint defined the curvature of the top of the recess and continued in a straight line round the four sides of the cubicle about 6cm beneath the ceiling level. Of greater decorative interest was a rosette, similarly in a red pigment, painted on the ceiling (fig.4). It was apparently drawn with some skill and Zammit commented that it looked "as if it was drawn from a centre with a string and not by free hand".

The decoration of this tomb is of interest to the study of Phoenico-Punic art. Only a few tomb paintings have been reported, mainly from North Africa, the Near East, and Sardinia. The published examples are datable to the Hellenistic period which makes them coeval to the Tac-Caghqi tomb. It is, therefore, possible to suggest analogies and draw tentative conclusions.⁶ The rosette painting in particular seems to belong to a typology recorded in the nineteenth century by E. Renan in tombs round Sidon where plant motifs, including petal patterns, predominated. In this context, I wish to draw attention to a garland of ivy leaves and tendrils painted in red on an oinochoë from a Punico-Hellenistic tomb explored at Fgura, in the south

4. National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, Field-Notes of Themistocles Zammit: Notebook 3 (1909-1912), 36-41. The discovery was noted in the *Museum Annual Report 1909-10*, 5-6. It was rediscovered in 1951 in the grounds of a newly built Government Primary School (*Museum Annual Report 1951-1952*, viii) but has since been covered up again.
5. Zammit, *op.cit.*: "walls and roof well cut and finished".
6. On Phoenician and Punic painting *vide* M. G. Amadsi Guzzo "Painting" in *The Phoenicians*, *op.cit.*, 448-461.

of Malta, in 1948 (fig.5).⁷ The motif seems particularly suitable for a painted frieze and may echo a typology of wall decoration popular in Maltese tombs of the period. The archaeological evidence is, however, silent. The bright red paint of both the rosette and ivy leaf garland was one of the two colours favoured by Punic art, the other being an equally bright green. The rosette also conforms to the other known examples in that it is in the form of a coloured-in drawing, with the main emphasis on the outline. Such was the nature of most ancient painting, including Egyptian.

The relief of the humanoid is characteristic in as much as it testifies to the love for polychrome figurative sculpture that the Phoenico-Punic civilization shared in common with other cultures of the ancient world. The fact that it was painted entirely in gradations of red might have had a religious (possibly eschatological) significance but its true relevance escapes us. Typologically it seems to pertain to the style of figural stelae reliefs such as were found in Motya, Sicily.⁸ These belong to a late period and, unlike Carthage, were largely independent of the *Tophet*. No similar stelae have been reported from Malta. Could it be that they were replaced by figure reliefs inside the tombs themselves? Possibly in the Maltese context such figures served a magical purpose to protect the spirits of the dead from the malignant forces that haunted the precincts of the tomb.

Presumably serving a similar purpose to the Tac-Caghqi sculpture was the high relief of a grotesque head carved in high relief on the mortuary couch of a two-chambered inhumation tomb, discovered and surveyed by Themistocles Zammit on the Qallelija Hill, limits of Rabat, in 19 January 1918 (fig. 6).⁹ It measured 36 x 31 cm and was probably polychromised even though Zammit's notes make no reference to colour. Mention should finally be made to the carving, in an Egyptianizing style, of a nude male figure, discovered at Attard, in 1989, in a two-chambered tomb in the garden of a private villa, in Old Railway Track (fig. 7).¹⁰ It is boldly incised on the smoothed rock face and has a well proportioned body except for the arms which are exaggeratedly enlarged and are shown raised at different angles in threatening gesture. The torso is represented frontally but the head (which has a large frontal eye) and legs are in profile. One leg is thrust forward giving the impression that the figure is performing a ritual dance. The protective magic intention of the figure is quite obvious.

7. J.G. Baldacchino, "Punic Rock-Tombs near Pawla, Malta, reprinted from the *Papers of the British School at Rome* vol.XIX (new series, vol.VI), 1951.
8. On stelae reliefs: S.Moscati, "Stelae", in *The Phoenicians*, *op.cit.*, 304-327.
9. National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, Field Notes of Themistocles Zammit: Notebook 5 (1916-1921), 32.
10. H. Frendo, *Attard- The Life of a Maltese Casale*, Malta 1997, 6.

A rock-cut chambered gallery which was possibly (though not necessarily) a tomb was discovered in 1847, at a place called Qasam il-Gewwieni, outside Rabat. The remains of an apparently engraved decoration could, with difficulty, be made out on some of the walls and there is mention of the traces of an animal, perhaps an ibis, that could have been painted. The surviving accounts are both inadequate and confusing but they seem to agree that the style was Egyptianising and that the monument should be dated to the Phoenico-Punic period.¹¹ This is not improbable but it should be recalled that iconographically the bird is more associated with Christian allegory than with Punic eschatology.

A specific reference to the spirits of the dead is made in a four line incantation, painted in Neo-Punic characters, in a 1st century B.C. - 1st A.D. miniature catacomb at Tac-Caghqi, Rabat, in the same necropolis as the Punico-Hellenistic tomb, discussed earlier. The inscription (fig.8a) invokes the Spirit to desist and be pacified by virtue of a potent offering that is being made to it. There are archaeological suggestions that the reference is to a charm associated to a libation rite. The catacomb, which was seemingly owned by a community of farmers, had a long history possibly extending into the Early Christian period. A shift in religious and cultural orientation is suggested by a rude painting and inscription, done in a black pigment beneath a child-loculus in an extension to the original cemetery (fig.8b). It represents a schematised palm tree, rooted in the ground, whose fronds project above an arch next to which are two Neo-Punic characters, a **Q** (*qof*) an **M** (*mem*). Together they form the verb **QM** (Hebrew *qum*: 'rise' or 'wake-up'). Benedetto Rocco saw in the drawing the Tree of Life which rises from the lowest level of existence (i.e. the ground) but spreads its fronds above the arc of the firmament where the spirits of the dead dwell. The Tree is, therefore, the cosmic ladder that unites earth to heaven and which the living must climb to wake up to eternal life. The culture which inspired this drawing is different to that of the propitiatory incantation. It seems to betray a new attitude to the concept of life and death which might have been influenced by an emergent Christian ethos.¹²

The Maltese early Christian rock-tombs and miniature catacombs are certainly not remarkable for their wealth of painted decoration. The few surviving fragments are, however, of notable iconographic and art historical interest since they consist almost of our only knowledge of painting in the late Roman and Byzantine periods.

11. The best account is in C. Vassallo, *Dei Monumenti Antichi del Gruppo di Malta - Cenni Storici: Periodo Fenicio ed Egizio* (2nd ed.) Malta 1976, 49-51.

12. On this catacomb: V.Borg and B.Rocco, "L'Ipogeo di Tac-Caghqi a Malta", *Sicilia Archeologica - Rassegna periodica di studi, notizie e documentazioni*, ed. E.P.T. of Trapani, V (1976), 61-74; M.Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*, Oxford 1986, 186-89; M. Buhagiar, "Early Christian and Byzantine Malta", op.cit., 78-80.

The artists employed were craftsmen of varying skill who might also have been employed in the interior decoration of above-ground houses. They did not produce masterpieces but their work is not devoid of a certain charm. Fresco was the technique usually employed but, occasionally paintings also executed *a secco* on the smoothed rock-surface without any preparation.

Subjects were, with a few exceptions, restricted to either symbolic motifs or to purely decorative patterns. The Old and New Testament scenes characteristic of the Roman catacombs are absent. Figure painting is limited to two examples. The better known is executed on the platform of a *baldacchino*-tomb in the major catacomb of St Paul at Rabat.¹³ It shows a person, of undetermined sex, seated on a chair and resting his/her hands on a cylindrical object. It might show a scribe with his *scrinium* but the poor state of preservation makes an interpretation hazardous. A farewell message **ΕΥΤΥΧΙΟΝ** ('Good luck to you' or simply 'Farewell'), accompanied by the anchor-symbol of hope, is painted in red ochre above figure.

The other mural showed a diminutive, standing figure, perhaps an ornate. It formed part of the painted decoration on a *baldacchino*-tomb in a small catacomb near the church of San Catald at Rabat (fig.9). This was discovered in 1905 but could not, unfortunately, be preserved. For our knowledge of it we have once more to rely on Themistocles Zammit's sketches and scribbled notes.¹⁴ The main facade of the apparently free-standing *baldacchino* was framed with alternating bands in verdegris and red ochre and carried a decoration of red roses and green leaves. The standing figure (63.5 x 27.9cm), shown in profile, appeared on the right hand pilaster within a rectangle enclosed by a verdegris frame, surrounded by small red circles. A lower rectangle contained a lozenge-shaped motif painted in red ochre.

The decorative scheme of this impressive tomb seems to echo the elegant linear style fashionable in the late Roman period which depended for its effect on the division of the painted surface into various geometric shapes by thin lines. Such an art was particularly suitable to the decoration of catacombs.¹⁵ In Malta it was used on at least one other *baldacchino*. This tomb, in the nearby St Agatha Catacombs (Catacomb 2), was entirely painted (fig.10). On the front, on either side of the arched opening, are the outline figures of two birds, one of which is, possibly, a dove. They

13. The *baldacchino* was the most space consuming and imposing tomb-type of the Maltese Christian catacomb. It consisted of a large rock-cut sarcophagus with arched corner pilasters which link up with the ceiling to form a canopied superstructure. For the different tomb-types of the Maltese catacombs: M.Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs*, op.cit., 19-24.

14. National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, Field Notes of Themistocles Zammit: Notebook 1 (1905-1907), 12-13.

15. J.Liversidge, "Wall painting and Stucco", in M. Hening (ed.), *A Handbook of Roman Art: A Survey of the Visual Arts of the Roman World*, Oxford 1963, 109.

are painted in a dark ochre pigment on a buff field and are enclosed within an ornate frame of curvilinear lines. On the inside of the tomb there are instead two laurel wreaths ornamented with ribbons and enclosing three red roses which stem from a common stalk. The decoration of a neighbouring semi detached *balacchino*, in the same burial-chamber, is in a different style which betrays a familiarity with late Hellenistic painting. It shows two genii carrying a framed Greek inscription composed of white letters on a red field.¹⁶ The modelling is clumsy but the figures have bulk and the effect is three-dimensional.

Of greater interest is the decoration of a liturgical niche (fig.11) in another part of same cemetery (Catacomb 3). The curved space is taken up by the well preserved fresco of a scallop-shell beneath which is the *chi-rho* monogram and two vases each of which is flanked a dove carrying a flowering twig (fig.11). The background is embellished with flowers and leaves that are, perhaps, meant to represent the heavenly paradise. The painting may, in fact, be a symbol of the *refrigerium* of the soul. Stylistically, it seems to belong to the same artistic milieu as many of the frescoes in the catacomb of Vigna Cassia in Syracuse where floral patterns occur with passionate profusion.

In the San Catald Catacomb, also at Rabat, the few surviving paintings were almost completely washed away in the winter of 1969 when the hypogeum was flooded. On the main *baldacchino* it is, none the less, possible to make out the outlines of two birds, probably doves. The outline figures of three horses are painted in black pigment in another catacomb, of the Tac-Caghqi necropolis, discovered in the 1970s. Their iconographic significance is not known but it is possible that the tomb belonged to a man whose name was Hippias or Ippolitus or, less probably, that the dead man was a breeder of horses. The very fragmentary remains of an outline decoration in red ochre (fig. 12) in the *triclinium* hall, at St Paul's Catacomb, in the curved wall at the back of one of the ritual tables, included a palm frond and a dove with an olive branch. Another probable dove was noted, in 1830, on a window-tomb in Catacomb IV of the main Byzantine cemetery of Abbatija tad-Dejr, at Rabat, where it formed part of a decorative scheme that included an inscription recording the names of several deceased (CIL x 7498).¹⁷

Paint was sometimes applied to highlight architectural detail. The best surviving example comes from the main catacomb at Tal-Maghlaq, limits of Qrendi, where the ridges of a carved scallop-shell are painted dark red.¹⁸

16. It commemorates the entombed person who bore the name of Leonia.

17. *Malta Government Gazette* (23 May 1838), 207; M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs*, *op.cit.*, 213-214.

18. M.Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs*, 328-331.

More information about the subject matter of early Christian tomb paintings can possibly, be gleaned from the allegorical scenes and motifs engraved on some of the sepulchres. These can with justification be referred to as incised drawings and they have a clear relationship to the paintings. Paint was, in fact, sometimes used as an infill to make the engraving more easily legible. A case in point are the two birds in Catacomb 3 in the SS.Paul/Agatha Necropolis at Rabat where the outlines are filled with red ochre paint (fig.13). One of the birds, which may be either a quail or a peacock, is rendered with some skill and its plumage is simulated by daubs of red ochre and charcoal-blue paint.

The iconography of the allegorical birds and animals of the Maltese catacombs deserves special attention. Most are hybrid creatures whose species are difficult to determine. The finest example comes from a small hypogeum at Hal Resqun in the neighbourhood of the Malta International Airport (fig.14). Here two hybrid creatures are busily feeding a fledgling in the arched space above main entrance of the sepulchre. The iconography seems to recall the well known early Christian allegory of the pelican feeding its young but the two creatures, although apparently birds, present, on closer inspection, a number of queer peculiarities. One of them wears a branched horn like a stag's antler, while the other has an apparent tail and four legs. Were they meant to represent pelicans and stags at the same time? Both animals were important in the early Christian repertory of images.

In one of the catacombs in the Salini Necropolis (Catacomb 5), a stylistically related quadruped has its head lowered in the act of grazing or drinking. A stag has been suggested,¹⁹ but the antlers are seemingly missing and a lamb would seem more probable. Even more enigmatic is the creature (fig.15) from another sepulchre in the same necropolis (Catacomb 15). The small carving (c.21 cm high) seems to represent a biped above which is the *chi-rho* monogram and an alpha and omega. It has generally been thought to represent a lamb,²⁰ but as in the other cases, its species is not easily determined. It has a humped back and an elongated snout which looks like a bird's beak. Its closest resemblance is to the Hal Resqun birds and it may, in fact, have the same allegorical significance.²¹

Finally, a reference should be made to two carvings (or rather incised drawings) with anthropomorphic figures, which have been reported from the already mentioned Hal Resqun Catacomb and from a tomb at Ix-Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka, near the market town of Zabbar, in the south of the island. Both seem to represent a scene

19. G.H.Musgrave, *Friendly Refuge - A Study of St Paul's Shipwreck and his Stay in Malta*. Sussex 1979, 97.

20. *Ibid.*, 91; H.Lewis, *Ancient Malta: A study of its Antiquities*, Bucks 1977, 148.

21. G. Serracino-Inglott, "The Salina Necropolis", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 26/1/1964.

with Orantes. The iconography of the Orante had a special significance to Early Christianity and is frequently met with in catacomb art.²² So called because it shows a figure with outstretched arms in an attitude of prayer, it is thought to represent the soul in the heavenly paradise. The Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka carving (fig.16) shows the highly schematised head and hands of a rudely rendered man emerging from a lightly scratched scallop-shell, the symbol of life beyond the grave.

The carving at Hal Resqun (fig.17) is more elaborate and has greater significance. It shows the outlines of three schematised human figures with outstretched arms, who share the same cramped space with several animals, birds and fish. Themistocles Zammit interpreted the scene as "the biblical account of God's creation of the World."²³ The "naming of animals in the Garden of Eden" has also been suggested.²⁴ If either of these readings is accepted, the carving would probably, be unique in Paleochristian iconography. In view of the upraised arms of the human figures, I am, however, inclined to believe that the scene represents the heavenly paradise with Orantes.

There is an obvious stylistic affinity between these two carvings. One notices the same naive schematization and a similar iconographic economy in the treatment of the forms. Nothing but the barest essentials are stated. In the figures only the head and hands are indicated. The head has a large mouth and two saucer-like eyes but there is no nose; and the number of fingers varies from one hand to the next. The allegorical birds and animals, discussed above, speak the same artistic language. They seem to point to a native style uncontaminated by classical aesthetics. There may be hints of North African influence and, it is well to keep in mind, that in the Early Christian period the Maltese Islands had close links with the *Ecclesia Africana*. The matter, however, deserves much deeper investigation.

22. A. Mulhern, "L'Orante vie et mort d'une image", *Les Dossiers d'Archeologie*, 18 (Sept-Oct., 1976), 34-47.

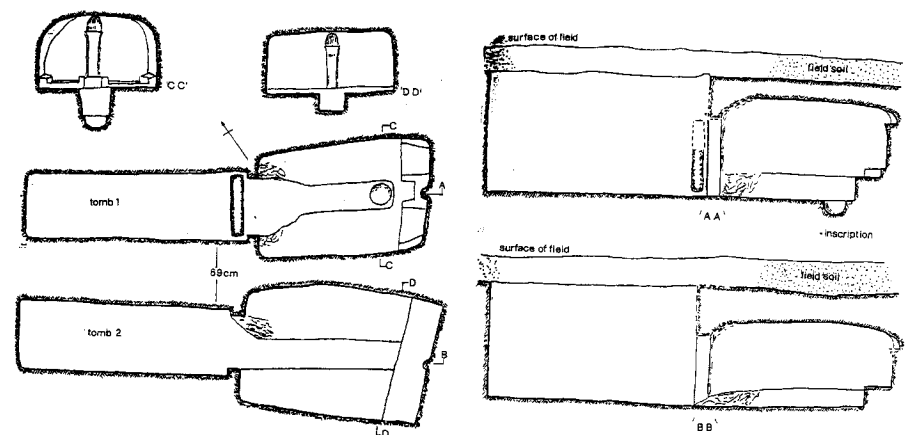
23. T.Zammit, "An Early Christian Rock-Tomb on the Hal Resqun Bridle Road at Gudja", *Bulletin of the Museum*, 1 (iv), (Malta 1934), 189-195.

24. J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity*, London 1978, 65.



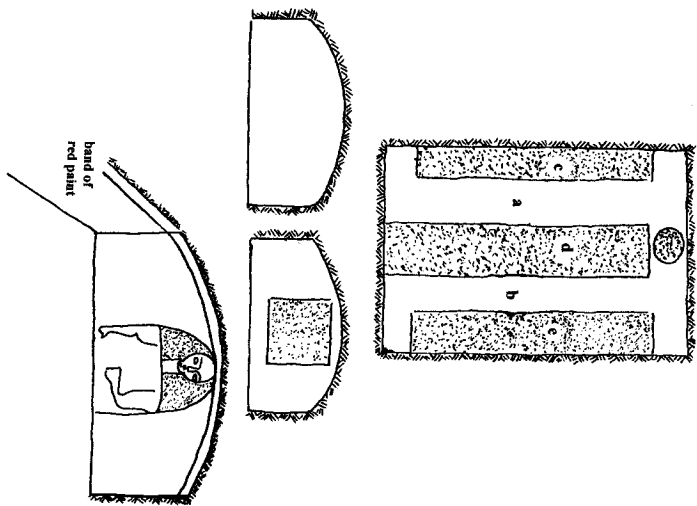
After G.A. Said-Zammit.

Fig. 1a: Distribution of Phoenician and Punico-Hellenistic tombs in the Maltese Islands.



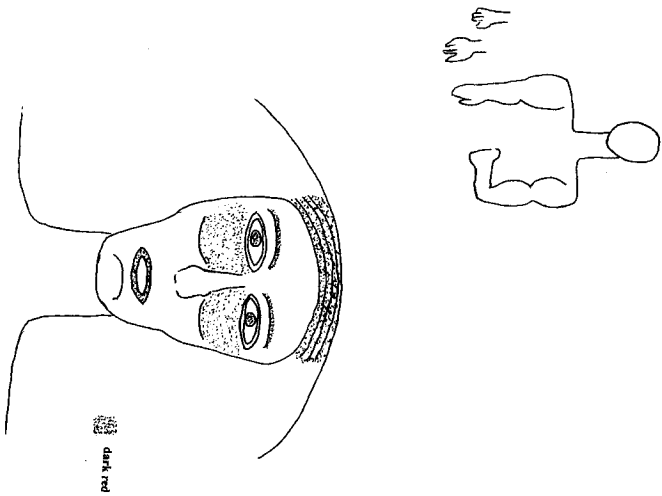
After Museum Annual Report 1955-56.

Fig. 1b: Punico-Hellenistic shaft-tombs discovered at Hal Far Malta in 1956.



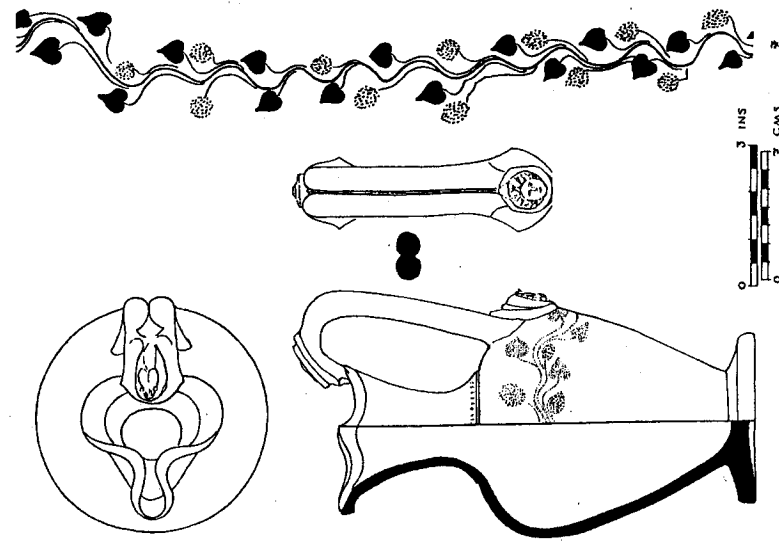
After T. Zammit. Drawings not to scale.

Fig. 2: Tac-Caghqi Cremation Tomb.



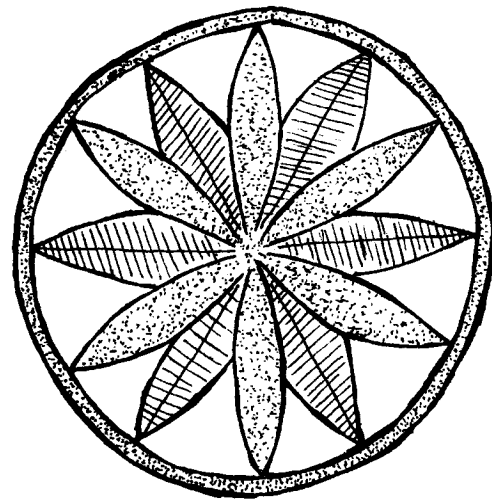
After T. Zammit. Drawings not to scale.

Fig. 3: Tac-Caghqi Cremation Tomb painted relief carving.



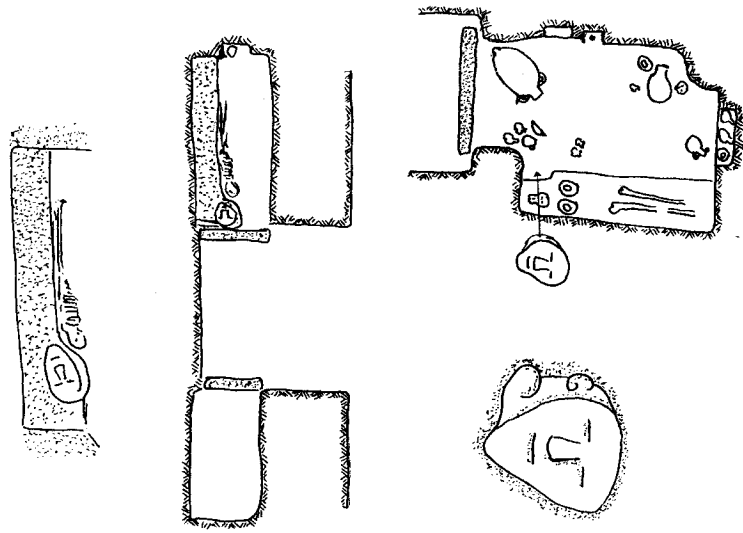
After J.G. Balduccchino.

Fig. 5: Figura Tomb. Oinochoe with painted Ivy-Leaf Garland on Body.



After T. Zammit. Drawing not to scale.

Fig. 4: Tac-Caghqi Cremation Tomb. The painted Rosette.



After T. Zammit. Drawings not to scale.

Fig. 6: Tal-Qallejja Tomb.

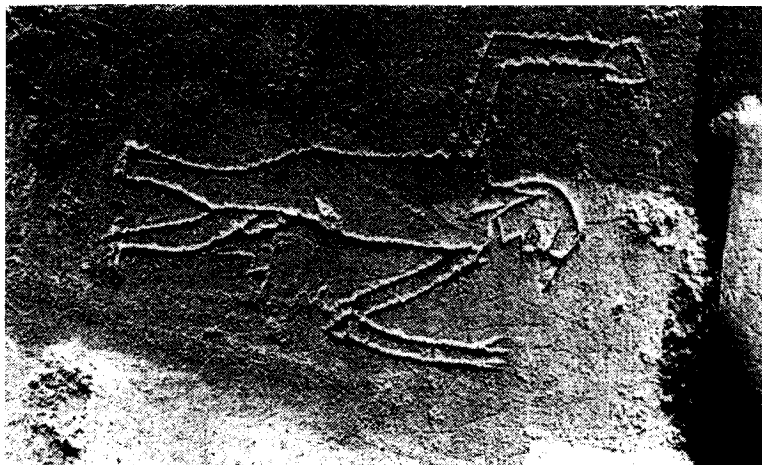


Fig. 7: Attard Tomb, Engraved Male Figure.

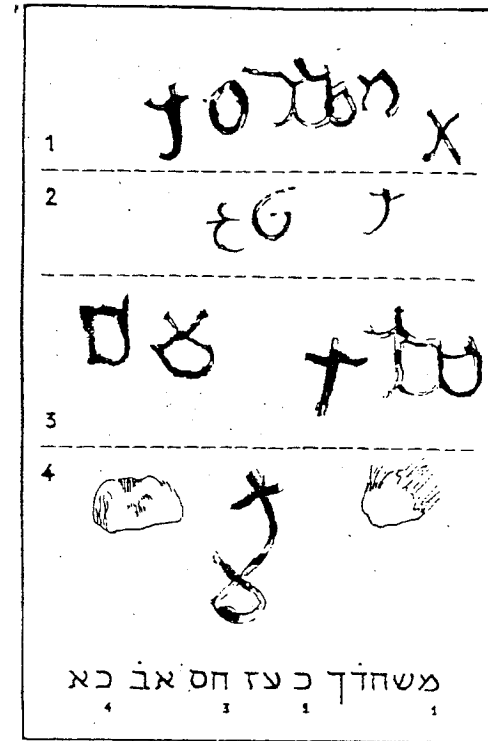
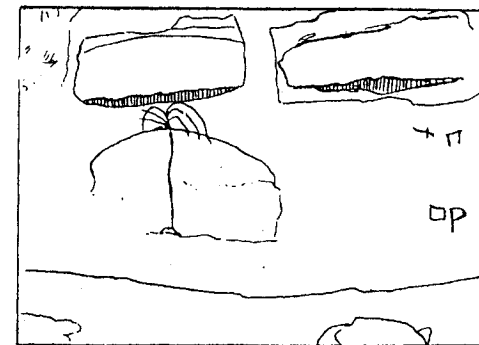
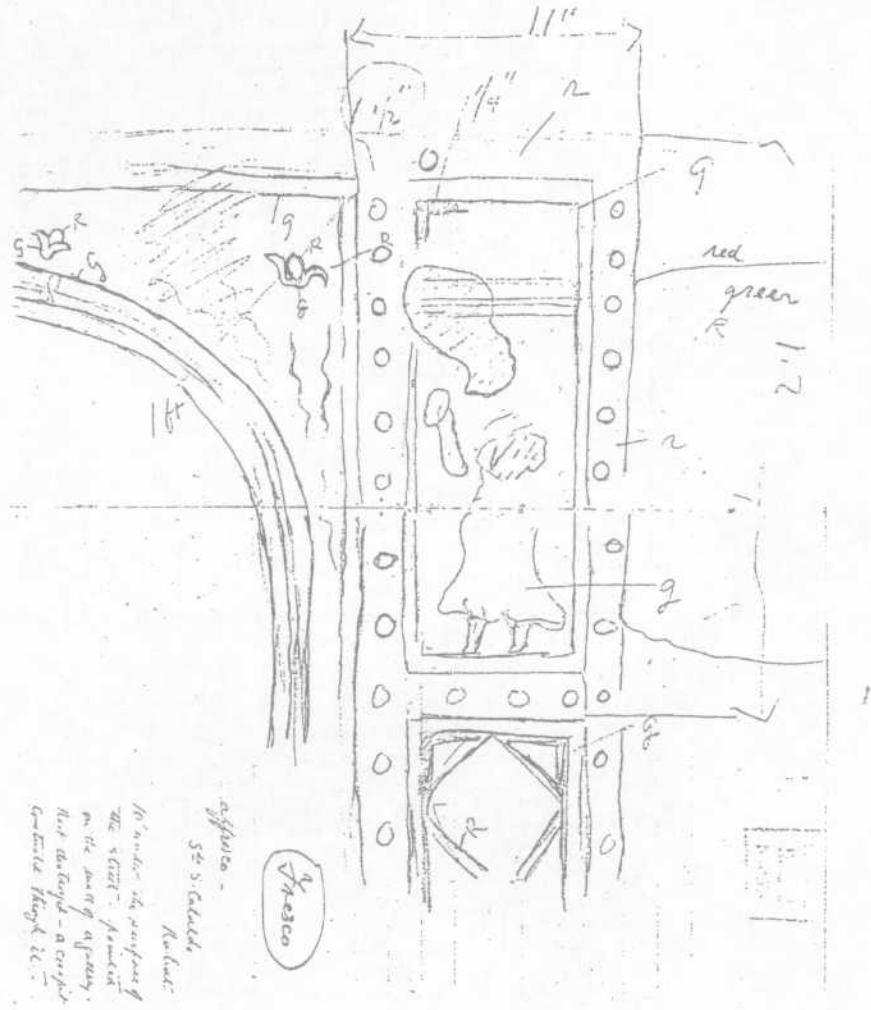


Fig. 8a: Tac-Caghqi Catacomb. The red paint Neo-Punic inscription.



After B. Rocco.

Fig. 8b: Black paint drawing of the Tree of Life.



Sketch by T. Zammit.

Fig. 9: Small Catacomb near S.Cataldo Church, Rabat. Painted Baldacchino.



Fig. 11: St. Agatha Catacombs, painted liturgical niche in catacomb 3: Detail of dove with olive branch.

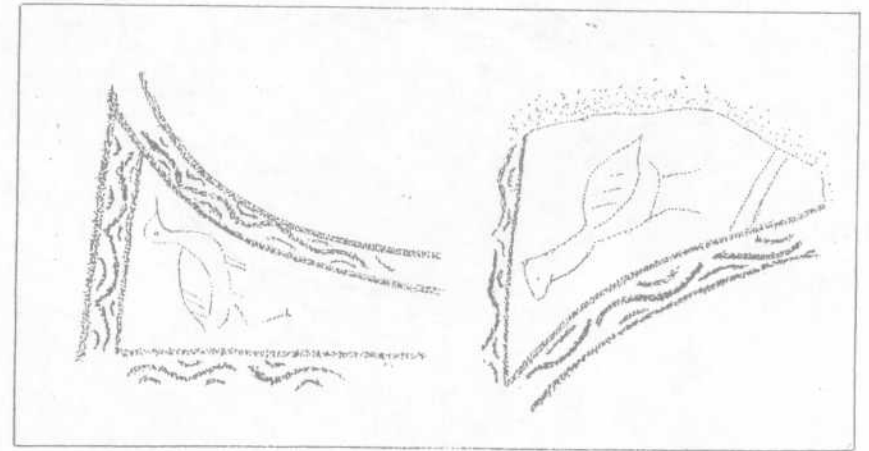


Fig. 10: St. Agatha Catacombs, painted Baldacchino.

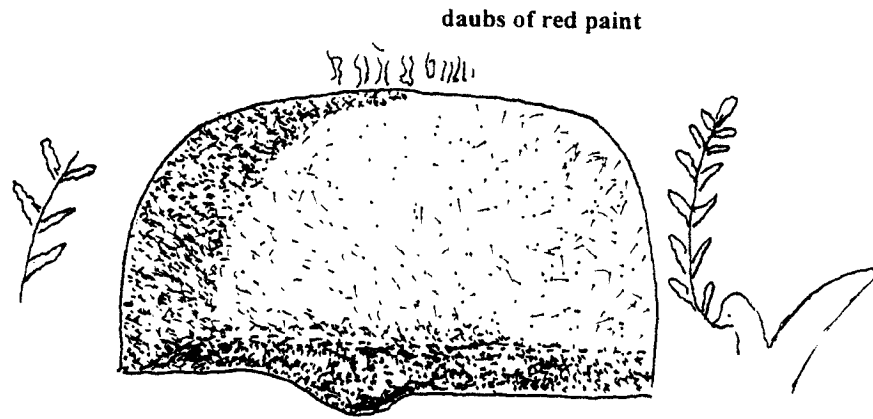


Fig. 12: St. Paul's Catacombs, remains of Fresco of dove with an olive branch.

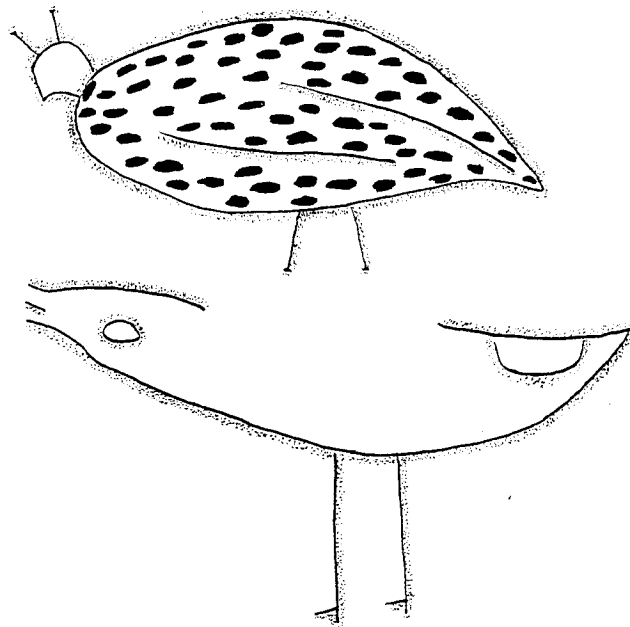
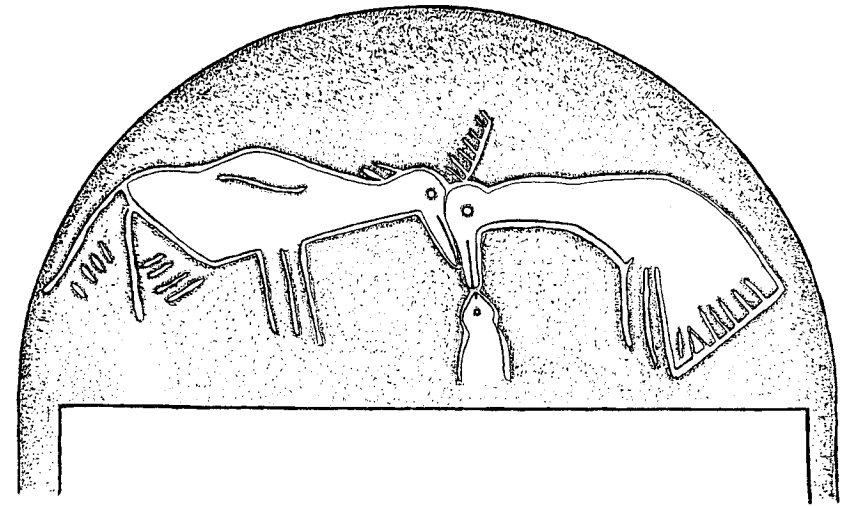


Fig. 13: SS. Paul/Agatha necropolis, Rabat, Catacomb 3, painted carving of two allegorical birds.



After T. Zammit.

Fig. 14: Hal Resqun Catacomb, Gudia, allegorical carving.

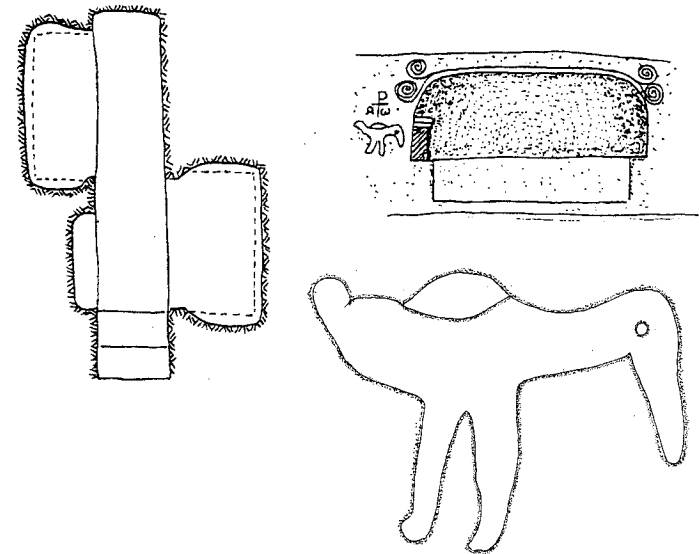


Fig. 15: Salini necropolis (Catacomb 15), allegorical animal.

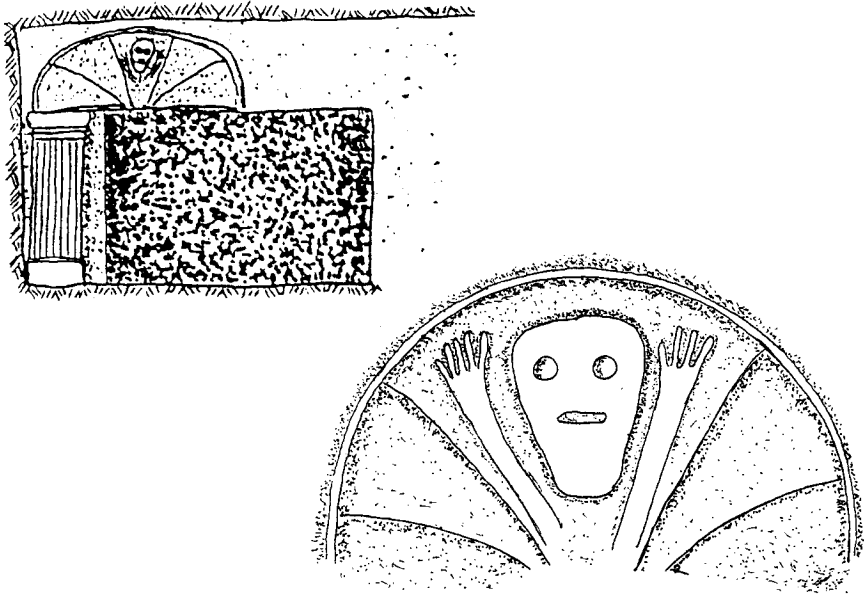


Fig. 16: Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka tomb, orante figure.

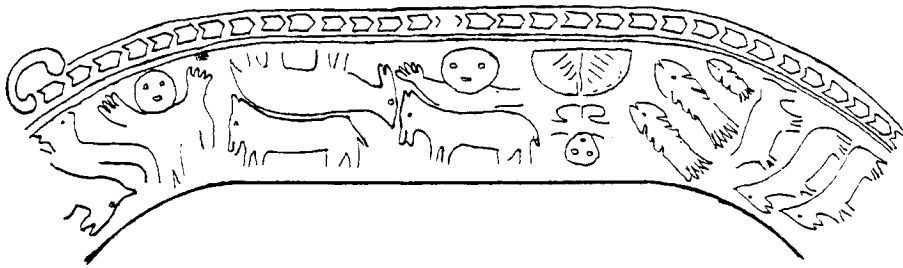


Fig. 17: Hal Resqun Catacomb, Gudja, the Heavenly Paradise with orantes.