

Source: **Proceedings of History Week 1982**. [Malta : The [Malta] Historical Society, 1983(53-58)]

**[p.53] The Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka Hhypogea:
Some Reflections on Maltese Paleochristian Art**

Mario Buhagiar

The Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka is a rocky wasteland on the outskirts of the parish boundaries of Kalkara, a few metres away from a new housing estate at the back of the Kappuccini Military Cemetery. The site (fig. 1), which gets its name from a nearby late medieval church, has considerable archaeological interest. Its antiquities, brought to my notice in June 1980 by Mr. Angelo Dougall, include at least four small hypogea and there are indications of a fifth in a **[Fig. 1: see the end of this article] [p.54]** disused quarry closeby. They are all full of stones and debris and only one (no. 1) could, with difficulty, be investigated. This has a roughly cruciform plan and is remarkable for its carved decoration.

Stylistically this hypogeum (fig. 2) is datable to early Christian period, possibly to the 5th-6th centuries A.D.¹ It is dug in a north-south shaft, c.84cm high, reached down two steps, at the bottom of which is a forecourt, 'a', with a lamp-hole in the west wall. In the north wall, an arched doorway leads to an antechamber, 'b', c.80cm high, with three window-tombs, '1-2-3.' These are cut level with the floor and '1' and '2' have similar bi-partite chambers with apsed head and foot recesses.

Tomb '1', 191 x 105 x 74cm, has an arched pottery-niche and a pyramidal lamp-hole. These are also noticeable in '2' where the lamp-hole is, however, semicircular. This tomb, 186 x 112 x 76cm, was mutilated when its arched window-door was enlarged and cut into rectangular shape. The window is here flanked by a crisply carved column, 58cm high, with a richly fluted shaft but plain base and capital (fig. 2).

Tomb '3' was left unfinished and was mutilated when another tomb, '4', was dug in its south wall. Its window-door was also recut and enlarged but the conch of the framing niche and its left pilaster have fortunately been preserved. The pilaster has a fluted shaft and a plain base and capital. The conch is of great interest. It is decorated with a lightly scratched scallop-shell motif between the two inner rays of which is a deeply cut graffito of schematised human figure with out stretched hands (fig.2).

Tomb '4' was, possibly, a late addition. Its rectangular window-door, framed in an arched niche, is flanked on the left by a squat, block-like pilaster. The bi-partite chamber is still full of debris and could not, therefore, be investigated.

The main interest of this small hypogeum is the decoration at the entrance to tomb '3.' The scallop-shell motif, either scratched or carved in relief or (less frequently) painted, is a recurrent form of decoration in Maltese paleochristian **[For p.55, containing Fig. 2: see end**

¹ The dating of Maltese paleochristian burial places is discussed at length in M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands* unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of London 1982, pp. 68-71. Apart from the complex stylistic considerations a post-4th century date for this hypogeum is also suggested by the pottery fragments noted in similar rock-tombs. A tomb with a closely paralleled plan (but lacking carved decoration) discovered in 1912 in Strada Giardino Botanico, Zejtun (Buhagiar, op. cit., pp. 415-416) has, for example, produced three North African lamps (Hayes Type II A) which belong to a type which does not seem to have been produced before 400 A.D. (J.W. Hayes, *Late Roman Pottery — A Catalogue of Roman Fine Wares*, London 1972, p. 313).

of this article] [p.56] hypogea² but this is the only instance where the radiating rays are used to frame an anthropomorphic figure.³ Only the head and hands are indicated. The head has a large mouth and two saucer-like eyes but there is no nose, and one of the hands seems to have four fingers. The meaning of this rude carving is obscure but the out-stretched hands may suggest an Orans. Stylistically it is related to the graffito of an unidentified subject (fig. 3) on a loose stone block discovered in 1966 at Tas-Silġ⁴ and, more significantly, to a better known carving in the hypogaeum of Hal Resqun, near Gudja, where the restricted space above the entrance to a window-tomb is crammed with the deeply cut outlines of animals, birds and fish and three human figures with outstretched arms (fig. 3). For economy of space some animals are represented back to back and upside down. Zammit interpreted the Hal Rasqun scene as

... The Biblical account of God's creation of the world. The figure of the Almighty appears in the upper segment of the arch. With out-stretched hands the face of the Almighty appears over the numerous creatures that come out of his hands and spread on the earth, in the air, and in the water. The heads of our progenitors appear barely sketched on the sides.⁵

An equally possible reading is the heavenly paradise with three Orantes.

Scenes with Orantes, usually painted, are common in the Roman catacombs where the figure, posed frontally is generally represented in full. They get their names from their open arms which suggest an attitude of prayer. Their Interpretation has been the subject of active debate among Christian archeologists but it seems probable that they are an allegory of the soul in heavenly beatitude.⁶ No Orante-scenes have so far been reported from Malta but I suggest that the rude figure carvings at Santa Duminka and Hal Resqun may be interpreted in this light.

Another possible Orante figure occurred in a small hypogaeum discovered accidentally in 1905 in Strada San Cataldo, Rabat, 3.04m below ground, when a cess-pit was cut through it. When it was brought to the notice of Themistocles **[For Figs. 3a and b: see end of this article] [p.57]** Zammit it had already been almost completely destroyed but he managed to sketch in his notebook the detail of an apparent baldacchino-tomb with remarkable painted decoration.⁷ This drawing (pl. 1) and the accompanying notes make it possible to reconstruct this important tomb. A wide frame of alternating bands in verdigris and red ochre curved

² Scratched and relief examples have been noted at Hal Resqun (Gudja), Jesuit Hill (Marsa), Tal-Mintna (Mqabba), Magħlaq Valley (Qrendi), Abbatija tad-Dejr (Rabat) and in three small hypogea at Rabat: at St Mary Street, St. Dominic Square and Hal Bajjada. A good example of a painted shell survives at St. Agatha Catacombs and there is evidence for another in one of the minor hypogea at Abbatija tad-Dejr.

³ In a small hypogaeum at Hal Bajjada (Rabat), close the St. Agatha cluster, the five rays radiate from a compass-drawn circle while in several other instances as at Magħlaq and Mintna they converge on a small knob in relative high relief. At St. Agatha Catacombs the painted shell is accompanied by iconographic symbols.

⁴ *Missione Archaeologica Italiana a Malta: Campagna di Scavi 1966*, Rome 1967, pp. 50-52 and pl. 26.

⁵ T. Zammit, "An Early Christian Rock-Tomb on the Hal Resqun Bridle Road at Gudja," *Bulletin of the Museum*, vol. 1 no. 5, p. 193.

⁶ For a general study of the Orant-figure see A. Mulhern "L'Orante: vie et mort d'une image" in *Les Dossiers de l'archéologie* 18, Sept.-Oct. 1976, pp. 34-47.

⁷ National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, T. Zammit, *Archaeological Fieldbooks. Notebook 1* (1905-1907), ff 12-13.

round the opening of the canopy while red roses and green leaves filled the space above. On the right hand pilaster were two superimposed panels in a verdigris frame with small circles in red ochre running all the way round. The lower panel was smaller and enclosed only a lozenge-shaped motif in red ochre. The other, 63.5 x 27.9cm, was [p.58] of far greater interest for it contained a fragment of a diminutive standing figure. The state of preservation was poor and Zammit's sketch suggests that the figure was painted in profile rather than frontally. It seemed to have, however, at least one open arm and this leads me to suspect another possible orans.

The three hypogea discussed in this paper together with a few others such as those at Salina and Paola Sammat Street⁸ stand apart from most of the early Christian burial places of Malta on account of their rich ornamentation. In an island where stone is remarkable for its plastic qualities it seems strange that the possibilities of carved decoration were not better exploited. Decoration was usually restricted to an occasional chi-rho or cross monogram or, less frequently, to a common iconographical motif such as a palm-frond. Even architectural ornament was restricted. As at Santa Duminka, window-tombs sometimes had scallop-shells and carried crisply carved pilasters and, on a few occasions, a hood-mould with end volutes curled round the arched canopies of baldacchino-tombs. At Qasam il-Fawwara, near the Fort Manoel bridge at Gzira, a window-tomb was flanked by a carving simulating a latticed screen⁹ and the same decoration is used on the ceiling of a baldacchino-tomb at Abbatija Tad-Dejr where it encloses a cross monogram.

Paintings are even less common. A few fragments survive at St. Agatha but daubs of paint are frequently noticed in other hypogea. They suggest that the painting of tombs was quite diffused. More can be discovered if the hypogea were to be cleaned of the powdery white film of mould that in some instances covers whole wall areas. The cleaning of a few tombs in SS Paul / Agatha 13 and 14 about 1947 led to the discovery of two important inscriptions, a painted seven branched candlestick and a boat graffito.¹⁰ The hypogea may still have much to reveal.

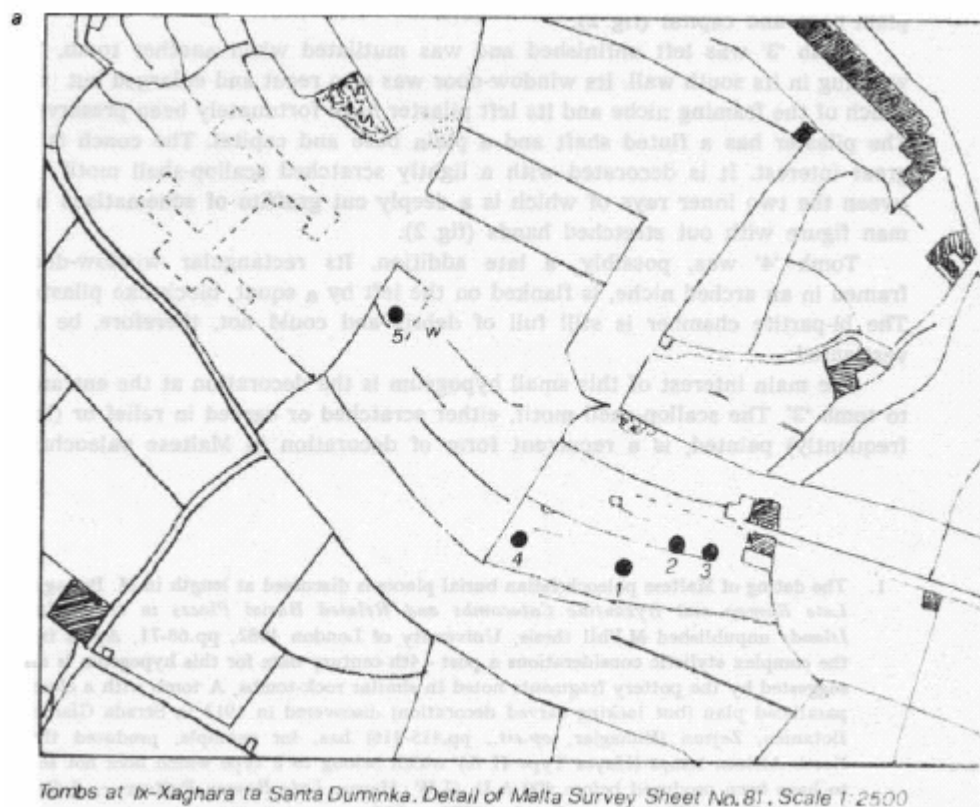
There is one final consideration. The painted fragments seem to belong to the same artistic milieu as those of the catacombs of Siracusa but the Santa Duminka and Hal Resqun carvings together with the Tas-Silġ graffito seem to point to an indigenous style perhaps betraying North African influence.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Notebook 3 (1909-1912), f. 53; *Museum Annual Report 1910-1911*, p. 9; E. Becker, *Malta Sotterranea - studien zur altchristlichen and jüdischen sepulkralkunst*, Strassburg 1913, p. 60. There is a detailed plan with elevations at the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta.

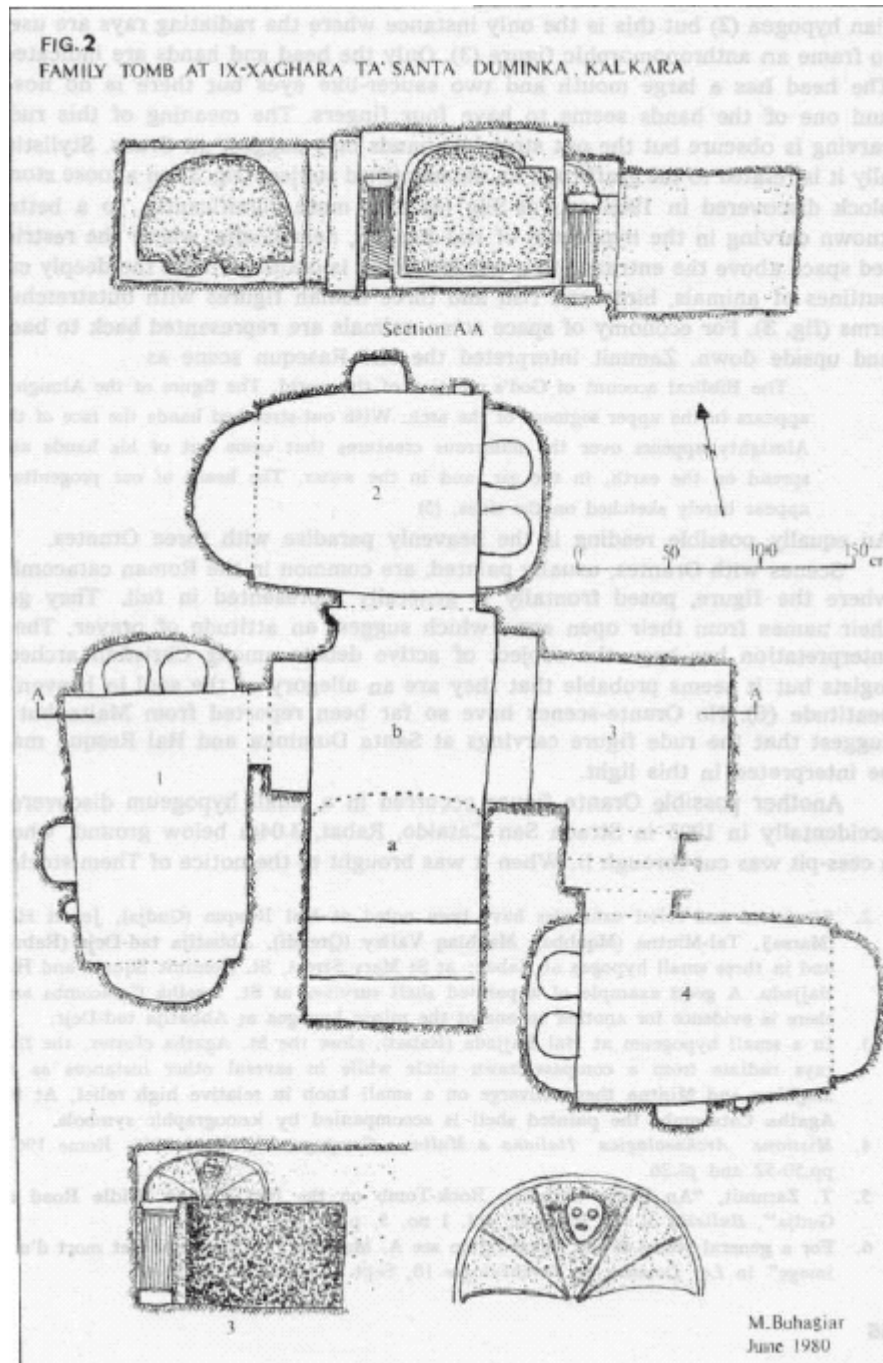
⁹ This interesting hypogeum is discussed in a number of works including C. Vassallo, *Dei Monumenti Antichi del Gruppo di Malta — Cenni Storici: Periodo Fenicio ed Egizio. Seconda edizione riveduta ed accresciuta*, Malta 1876, pp. 39-40; A.A. Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta*, Malta 1899, p. 55 and pl. VI; E. Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 67 and pl. XIII.

¹⁰ Their discovery was communicated by the Director of Museum, Dr. J.G. Baldacchino to Padre Antonio Ferrua S.J., who in a letter dated Rome 20th May 1948 (preserved at the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta) attempted an interpretation. Their significance is discussed in M. Buhagiar, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

[Fig. 1 on p. 53]

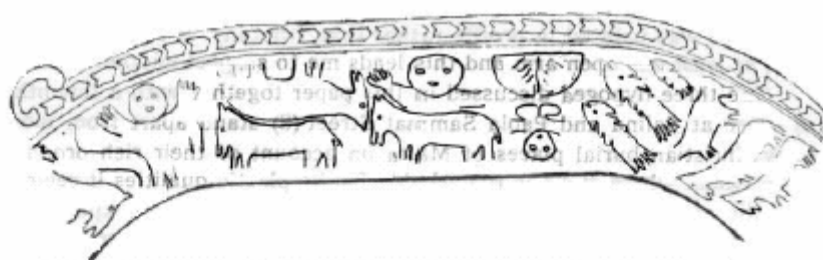


[Fig. 2 on p. 55]

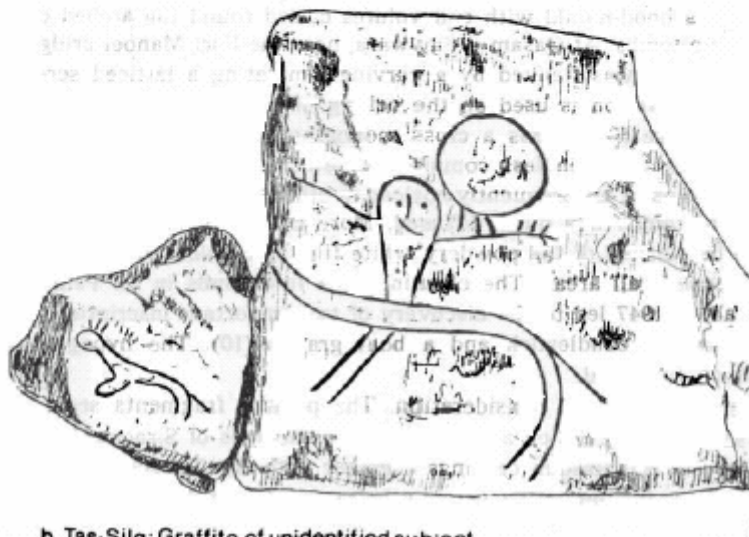


[Figs. 3a and b on p.57]

Fig. 3

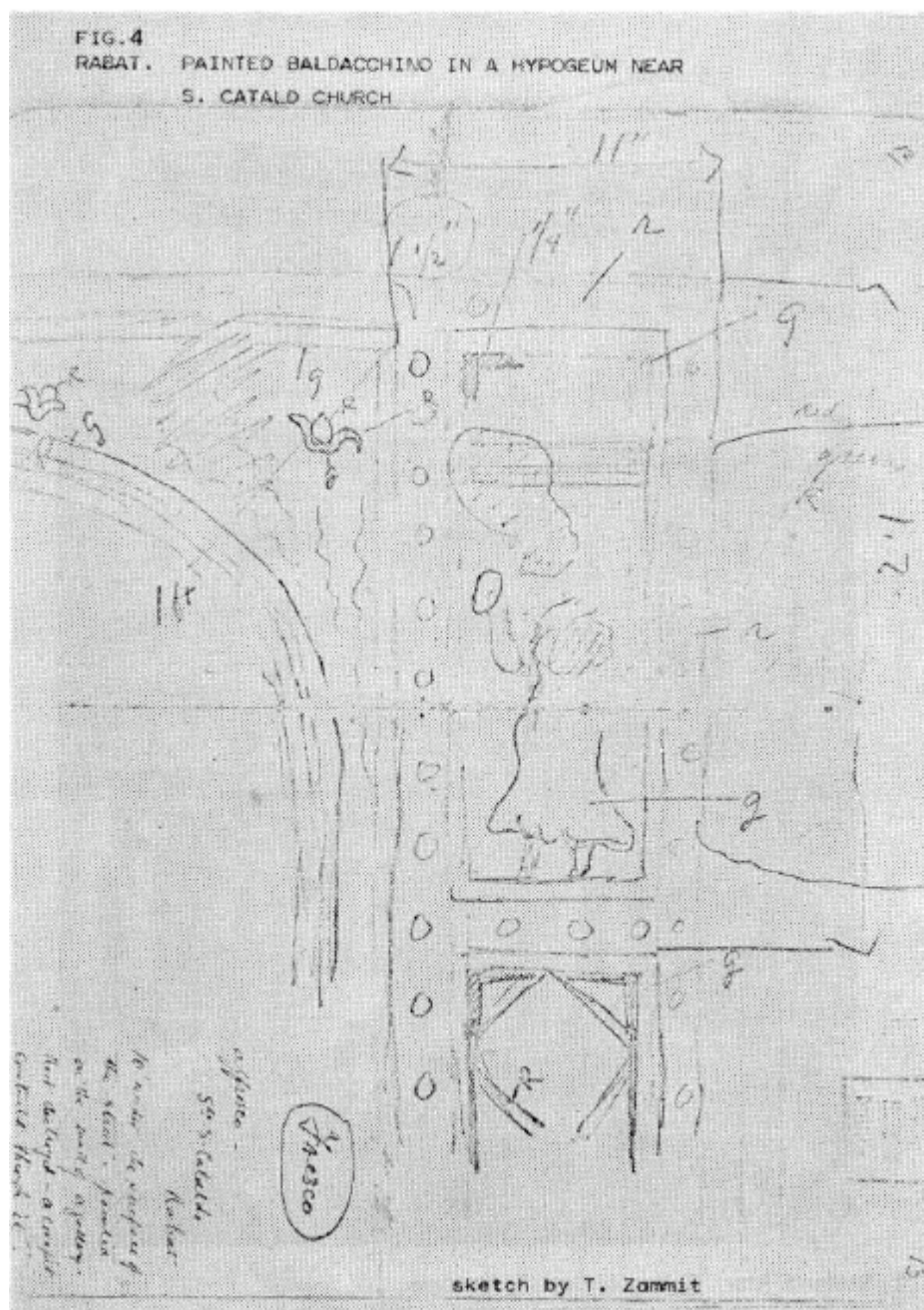


a. Gudja . Hal Resqun : Graffito of the Creation or Heavenly Paradise



b. Tas-Silg: Graffito of unidentified subject

[Plate 1 = Fig. 4]



Sketch by Themistocles Zammit of a painted tomb in a small hypogeum near S. Cataldo Church at Rabat.