

**[p.39] The Triclinia
in the Catacombs of Malta¹**

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‘Ma con tutto ciò (che Siracusa offre un’idea di come sono le catacombe maltesi) resta sempre vero quanto anni fa asserirono due dotti tedeschi, che lo studio delle catacombe siciliane conferma solo la profonda impressione di originalità che ti fa l’architettura funeraria maltese.’

A. Ferrua²

When Ferrua made this statement he was referring to the general impression of the architecture of the Maltese catacombs, the form they take and their use of space but perhaps their most original feature is the triclinium area and its table. If any such tables existed in the Roman or Sicilian catacombs they are no longer extant. Iconographic evidence from the catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus, of Callistus and of Priscilla suggests that similar tables were used to celebrate a banquet or feast for the dead. The central circular area is reminiscent of the basins found in Malta.

The depiction of the Last Supper in the Codex Purpureus Rossanensis, a sixth century manuscript,³ shows a table very similar to the Maltese type where the guests are clearly lying on a sigma or bench, leaning on what seem to be cushions round a U-shaped basin. The height and size of the table correspond [p.40] closely to what can be seen in the Maltese catacombs. There is a remarkable iconographic similarity with the sixth century Last Supper mosaic in S.Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (plate 1) that suggests a common stylistic source.⁴

Some scholars such as Stevenson⁵ refer to the ancient pre-Christian and pagan tradition of communal feasts for the dead that could have been continued by the new

¹ The research on which this paper is based was carried out between December 1990 and April 1991 and during the Winter of 1993/4. The authors describe the catacombs according to the naming and numbering system used in publications by Dr. Mario Buhagiar.

² Correspondence in 1952 between Dr. J.G. Baldacchino and Fr. A. Ferrua on the Tac-Caqghi Secondary School Hypogeum. (National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta).

³ The provenance of this manuscript has not, so far, been established though the miniatures follow older models, perhaps from Syria or Asia Minor. Stylistically it could be attributed to a provincial school, perhaps one in Asia Minor, see W.F Volbach, *Early Christian Art*, London 1961, p.357, possibly Constantinople or Antioch, see G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, Vol.2, London 1972, p.23.

⁴ Possibly models derived from an earlier book cycle in the Early Christian style of the region (Asia Minor), Asiatic or possibly Alexandria, see D.M. Robb, *The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript*, London 1973, p.38.

⁵ J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered monuments of early Christianity*, London 1978, p.96.

Christians and incorporated into their own traditions.⁶ Danielou and Marrou⁷ emphasise more the idea of its being a relic of the Jewish Pascal meal. However, it is certain that food and beverage played an important part in the symbolism of the Christian religious experience and that this was to be a communal and not simply a personal experience. Also, as Stevenson points out, the whole attitude of Christians to death in the early centuries was not coloured by apprehension.⁸ And in many Catholic countries the tradition of the 'wake' as in Ireland is still very much felt.

Creating A Typology

The notion of a typology is generally taken to refer to the arranging of artefacts in progressive sequences in order to show progressive changes in shape and style and to arrive at a possible dating sequence or chronology.⁹ Ideally all available evidence should be examined and although over fifty triclinia were investigated, this number does not constitute all the examples of which there are about sixty extant, in urban and rural areas.¹⁰

Before creating a typology, the archaeologist needs to establish the aims of his study and to decide on the features necessary for an analysis that will lead to possibly water-tight conclusions. Aware that the triclinia of the Maltese urban [p.41] and rural hypogea could be studied from various viewpoints, the writers decided that their aim would be a direct study i.e. one based on stylistic, physical and technological criteria.¹¹ An alternative approach would have been an indirect study 'for anthropological, historical and chronological reasons.'¹² This had to be abandoned because the areas under consideration have been rifled over the course of several centuries or have been unscientifically investigated. This has led to the loss of valuable information such as artefacts within a datable context that might have shed light on chronological sequences. It is hoped that excavations at the catacombs at Tal-Barrani, carried out in summer 1993, will help to clarify questions which are as yet unanswered.

One can so far only have a general date for these catacombs. The Hayes Type IIA North African Red-Ware lamps, found in closed contexts, constitute at present a *terminus post quem* (late fourth century). Any discussion about stylistic development is virtually impossible to sustain. Moreover, one can only draw inferences about the intention behind these triclinia, which is inextricably bound to their function.¹³

An examination of diagram 1 will clarify the terminology used in this paper. For the purposes of this study, the triclinium area¹⁴ is taken to be what Becker¹⁵ refers to as

⁶ There is evidence of a triclinium in a pagan funerary context in the Street of Tombs at Herculaneum - Tomb of Gnaeus Vibrius Saturninus.

⁷ J. Danielou & H. Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years*, trans. V. Cronin. London 1964.

⁸ Stevenson, *op.cit.*, p.97.

⁹ A.Anderson, *Interpreting Pottery*, London 1984, pp.23-24.

¹⁰ Access to St. Augustine hypogea and to three of the St. Agatha group was not possible.

¹¹ A.J. Frendo, 'H.J. Franken's Method of Ceramic Typology: an appreciation' in *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 120, 1988, p.114.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ This will be treated in the conclusions to this paper.

¹⁴ In a description of the 'round tables' in St. Paul's Catacombs, and their function, T. Zammit refers to the 'funeral repasts' partaken of round 'a table, styled triclinium funebre (which) was often built in family tombs' in pagan Rome. See T. Zammit, *The St.Paul's*

'Apsisraum' which is to be understood to incorporate a raised area with a basin with a rim. This is the table which is surrounded by a stibadium defined by the exedra or retaining wall, and set within a flattened arch. The basic characteristic of the triclinium area would seem to be the basin, the essence of which would appear to be its shape. However, having considered that shape is constrained by other factors such as rim and body, i.e. the physical material that the shape is made out of, the writers decided to eschew a single- criterion [p.42] typology in favour of a taxonomy based on a multiple-criterion approach deriving from common features.

The criteria adopted in the study, which is of a descriptive nature, are those of shape, dimensions, physical properties, manufacturing techniques and decoration. It would have been outside the scope of this paper to formulate a scientific classification of the basins into types and sub-types. The writers feel that they have enough data based on measurements and statistical observations to attempt such a taxonomy at a later stage (see App. A).

General Considerations

The funerary triclinia of Malta can be said to conform to a type. This might be described as a semi-circular raised platform hewn out of the solid rock (plate 2) ranging in depth from 140cm to 315cm, and in width from 256cm to 392cm, with a basin surrounded by a rim, usually circular and pierced by a channel, straddling the middle of the diameter of the semi-circular exedra.¹⁶ (see Diag. 2) A concave indentation breaks the front of the platform below the table in a number of cases e.g. St.Ag.J; P/A 3 (left); Salina 1.¹⁷ Having made this statement one can immediately say that no one triclinium area in the Maltese catacombs is exactly like another. This is also true of those triclinia, often similar in shape, that are found facing each other in the same chamber, of which there are a number of examples: St. Paul Hall A; P/A 6,17,18. The tables, the stibadia, the exedrae and some graves show signs of having been extensively stuccoed. Traces of pigment have also been detected in the basin of P/A 17 (single) and at San Catald.

The Position of the Apse Room in the Hypogea

In a general sense one can say that the triclinium is usually situated at the entrance to a gallery (plate 3). The entrance to the hypogea, and to some burial [p.43] cubicles, seems to have been closed by a door, very probably in stone. This is corroborated by the door still in

Catacombs and other rock-cut tombs in Malta, 4th Edition, Malta 1926, p.23. This term was later taken up by C.G. Zammit in 'I triclini funebri nelle catacombe di Malta,' in *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* vol.vii, Rome 1940, p.293.

¹⁵ E. Becker, *Malta Sotteranea: Studien zur Altchristlichen und Jüdischen Sepulchralkunst*, Strassburg 1913.

¹⁶ The semi-circular exedra cannot be described as an unvarying feature because there are a number of instances where the exedra is elliptic, as at Bingemma 17; rectangular, as at P/A 4; or irregular, as at P/A 7 (mutilated).

¹⁷ It has been said that these tables resemble those found in the N. African catacombs, particularly at Tipasa. However, none of these seems to be actually cut out of the rock, as is the case of the Maltese tables, but seem to be built up with masonry. A triclinium seen by one of the writers in a Roman funerary context outside Seville, Spain would seem to be hewn out of the rock.

situ in P/A 10. Pivot holes and holes for locks are still visible in the lintel, jambs and floor of several hypogea.

Not every gallery is served by a triclinium and it is not always the largest gallery that contains the triclinium.¹⁸ Sometimes one triclinium serves a large chamber with many tombs whilst in certain cases a triclinium serves just one or two window tombs, as at Bingemma 20 and Bistra 6. In certain hypogea the triclinium is situated in an important position, as though it were the first feature to have been cut, as in P/A 17B (single) while in others it seems to have appeared almost as an afterthought, as in P/A 9.

Some triclinia were obviously executed with great care, hewn out of the rock in aesthetically pleasing proportions, with well-modelled tables and elegantly sloping triclinia. In many cases the fine stucco work that covered the table, platform and exedra is still preserved as in St. Paul Hyp.II; P/A 17B and the rural hypogeum of Tar-Raghad, Mgarr.¹⁹ (see Diag. 3)

Evidence of pigment is still clear on the basin of P/A 17B (single) and of San Catald. Other tables are not so fine though still well-preserved, such as P/A 19 (right), which is the worst example. It is not possible to say why this might have happened. It might have been a question of cost. Some might have been cut and finished by the owners who may not have been professionals. Nevertheless, it seems quite clear that the craftsmanship differed from one triclinium to another.

The Table

An analysis of the different tables shows that they were made in a number of different shapes. A glance at the chart of dimensions (App. A) will also show that rim heights and widths differ as do the shapes of the rims themselves. Average inner rim height is 5.10cm and average rim width is 9.66cm. It is the rim [p.44] which can be said to give the table its basic shape. The circular table is the most common but there are examples of U-shapes, as at P/A 3 (right), P/A 4, and P/A 7 and two horseshoe shapes, as at Mgarr and St. Paul Hyp. II. (see Diag. 4)

The omega shape occurs in ten instances. The finest example (plate 4) is that at P/A 17B (single) while that of P/A 22A(a) extends into two seats on either side of a very wide indentation. One cannot help having the suspicion that such a shape is not coincidental but may have a symbolic significance in a funerary context. Alpha and Omega are found painted in the ornate niche facing the triclinium area of St.Ag. D.

In the early 1950's a free-standing rectangular stone block (81x69x37cm) was discovered at Tac-Caghqi, Rabat (plate 5) in a chamber which may have had an apsed roof

¹⁸ It would be interesting to investigate the hypogea which do not have a triclinium. Additional or missing features might be revealed which might serve to elucidate the function of the triclinium.

¹⁹ The tables of Tar-Raghad, Mgarr and St. Paul Hyp.II, both of which have a horseshoe shape, do not conform to type in that the rim is not an integral part hewn out of solid rock but is built up with pieces of pottery sherds. Furthermore, the basin at Mgarr seems also to have been built up of a stone conglomerate and stuccoed. This break from the norm might well have been due to the difficulties of constructing this particular shape.

and in the immediate vicinity of a room with a triclinium. The only characteristics which this block shares with the other tables are a rim and a channel. By analogy one would infer that this is a different type of funerary table.

In P/A 21 Becker had observed a stone object (plate 6) which he refers to as a 'Sitz?'²⁰ The block is trapezoidal (60x50x49x46cm, ht 25cm). However, it does not appear to be a seat but might be another free-standing small table or a table hewn out of the solid rock. The other alternative is that it is the remains of a plug door. Only further investigation of the catacomb could provide the answer.

It has been suggested that at Salina 2 there is a square table of the same type as those at Tac-Caghqi and P/A 21.²¹ Writing about the catacombs near Salina Bay, Upton Way mentions 'fixed by cement to the wall opposite the entrance a nicely cut stone slab which appears to be a later form of the table of the feast.'²² Our reading of Upton Way's description, substantiated by two field visits, leads us to believe that the slab, no longer extant, was never floor mounted and was simply a large shelf with a possible ritual purpose (plate 7), similar to, though larger than, other shelves in various hypogea.

Some rims slope away sharply onto the triclinium (plate 8), others are gently sloping or rounded. The channel seems to have been present on almost every table, except Bistra 15, Tal-Mentna (plate 2) and possibly St. Paul Hall A (right), though many tables have been broken exactly in that spot. Some channels are straight, others V-shaped with either the wider part on the inner side of the basin, or vice versa. They also differ in cross-section. The rim of the table is often tapered differently to right and left, making it asymmetrical. Some obvious examples are P/A 22A (a)&(b) and P/A 7 (left).²³ (see Diag. 5)

In 30% of the tables investigated a concave indentation is present below the channel in the front of the platform. It varies in width from 23cm to 70cm and in depth from 8cm to 34cm.

The Triclinium

The seat usually slopes away from the table though the gradient does vary considerably. There are, in fact, triclinia that are totally flat, as in P/A 4. Most can be sat upon with a fair degree of ease though some are rather small, such as in St.Ag. I(b), and St. Paul's Cave Hypogaeum and lead one to suspect a symbolic table rather than one that was actually used.²⁴

²⁰ Becker *op.cit.* p.32. This particular catacomb was inaccessible until early in 1991 when it was investigated by the writers.

²¹ M. Buhagiar, 'The Maltese Palaeochristian Hypogea - A Reassessment of the Archaeological, Iconographic and Epigraphic Source Material' in R. Ellul-Micallef and S. Fiorini (eds.) *Collected Papers*. Malta 1993, pp. 152, 161.

²² L.J.Upton Way, 'Catacombs near Salina Bay' in *Times of Malta*. 29/6/37.

²³ It is difficult to tell whether this is intentional or the result of indifferent workmanship. In P/A 7 (left) and in St. Paul's Hall A (right) careful stucco work could have corrected the obvious asymmetry. The fact that this was not done leads one to conclude that it was deliberate.

²⁴ A modern parallel may be drawn from the baptismal font, now no longer used, which has traditionally been placed just inside the entrance to a church. This will soon be considered

Many of the triclinia both in urban and in rural hypogea show evidence of having been finely stuccoed. Significantly the one with the most extensive stucco is the one which is not normally accessible - P/A 5 (left).²⁵ This thick layer of reddish-brown stucco is unfortunately pitted, possibly due to waterdripping from the roof. A frequent feature of the triclinium is a ridge situated on one outer side, as at P/A 19 (left) (plate 3), or on two sides, as at San Catald. The ridge is also found in a domestic context in the Casa di Caro, Pompeii (plate 9).

[p.46] The height of the tables varies considerably, ranging from 27cm at St.Ag. B (left) to 73cm at P/A 19.(left) and this effects the height of the triclinia. Occasionally, as at P/A 1713, there are some steps leading on to the triclinium from the side which gave access to the chamber beyond the apse room which might also have served the purpose of facilitating access to the triclinia which are comparatively high. At P/A 18, where there are two triclinia facing each other in the same chamber, one is comparatively higher than the other for no apparent reason.

The Exedra

Most exedrae are semi-circular in shape-though some are elliptic as at Bingemma 17; rectangular, as at P/A 4 or irregular, as at P/A 7 (mutilated). The exedra is usually framed by a flattened arch, though in some cases this is missing. Occasionally the sides are decorated by pilasters and corner features such as St. Paul's mutilated triclinium in the Area of Hyp.II; St.Ag. D, O(b), P; P/A 22A (a). A corbelled effect is to be seen decorating the exedra below ceiling level in St.Ag. D and St.Ag. O(b). In P/A 23 tools are cut in relief in the rear of the exedra (plate 8) and in P/A 6 a Greek cross is cut into a window in the left of the exedra. Often there are rectangular or arched entrances into further chambers cut out at the rear or sides of the exedra. In some cases the exedra has been removed, as at P/A 16 (plate 10) or extended backwards as at Salina 5, while the basic shape of the triclinium has been retained.

There are very few exedrae which are not cut into at all, while they frequently have different types of grave breaking into the rear and sides.

Grave types in the Triclinium Area

The exedra is cut by a range of all the different types of grave in the hypogea. The most common is the child loculus (plate 5), which is the exclusive grave in the exedrae of P/A 7 (right); P/A 9; P/A 1713; 22A(a) & (b); St.Ag. K & N. In P/ A 18 (left) two adult loculi were noted in the exedra, unusual enough to merit special mention (plate 11). The window tomb features prominently in most exedrae and with the loculus is the sole feature in the exedrae (plate 8) of rural hypogea. Less common is the arcosolium type of grave which is found in the centre of the exedra of such hypogea as St. Paul Hall A (right), where it seems to have been re-modelled into a baldacchino; in St.Ag. B & F; in P/A 4 where the sealing slabs are still in situ, in P/A 5 and in St.Ag. L which is unusual for its sloping effect. The baldacchino tomb cut into the centre of the exedra was only [p.47] noted in P/A 18 (right).

obsolete and in future years will be decorative rather than functional. One hopes it will not cause problems of interpretation to archaeologists in two thousand years' time!

²⁵ Becker *op.cit.* p.16. Erich Becker may have been the last person to investigate P/A 5 before the writers gained access to it in 1991. He fails to record, however, a second triclinium area immediately to the right of the original entrance.

Baldacchino tombs opening onto the exedra to one side have been observed in some hypogea, among them St.Ag. B (left & right); St.Ag. E and P/A 19 (left). Arcosolia in the same position were noted in St.Ag. K and P/A 22B.

A feature of the exedra is a small semi-circular opening leading directly into an adjacent tomb, very often an arcosolium. At Salina 1 such an opening is a special feature set within a recessed rectangular rebate, and semi-circular openings link a row of arcosolia above the sealing slab level. P/A 16 and P/A 17B(single) (plate 4) show a similar feature leading into the arcosolia of the adjacent chamber. In P/A 7 (left) such an opening is found across the passageway from the table into the arcosolium facing the table.

Arcosolia and baldacchino tombs, often free-standing, occupy a prominent position facing the table. The window tomb often features here, particularly in rural hypogea (plate 14). In St.Ag. D the conch of the apsed alcove facing the triclinium area is elaborately painted and the sill might possibly have featured as an altar in a ritual service. Baldacchino tombs may have been finely stuccoed and decorated. At San Catald birds, presumably doves, flowers and leafy branches in flower are still evident. Comparison with a painting from the House of the Fruit Orchard in Pompeii suggest that the branches are likely to be the ubiquitous oleander. Baldacchino tombs feature frontally in P/A 9; P/A 22A (b); StAg. K; St.Ag. P and in P/A 22A (a) where the openings are rectangular rather than arched (plate 12). The most unusual arcosolia are those in P/A 16 where two arcosolia abut each other at right angles, presenting a long and a short side to the table.

The floor tomb in the stibadium was seen in P/A 4, in P/A 7 (mutilated) and P/A 22A(a). There were no graves in the exedrae of P/A 6 and P/A 7 (left) and StAg. P.

The exedra is also cut into by rectangular or arched doorways that lead into burial cubicles or into adjoining corridors. This was observed in P/A 3 (right & left); St. Ag. B (right); St.Ag. I where the large plug door still lies on the stibadium; St.Ag. J which has two openings; P/A 17B, 18, 19, 21. These often create harmonious rhythmic effects, particularly in P/A 17B & 19 (plate 3).

Benches

More than anything else in the apse room, it is the benches that give the impression of an assembly place for some kind of rite. Some triclinia have rock-cut [p.48] cut seats incorporated into the design of the front of the table. They may be square, round, rectangular or D-shaped. A number of tables have a seat flanking each side of the table. Salina 5 is one such example, which moreover seems to have footrests, possibly a unique feature in the catacombs surveyed. Other tables with two seats are found in St. Paul Hyp. IV; St.Ag. O(b), P; P/A 18; Tal-Mentna (plate 2) and San Catald.

Single seats are an integral part to the left of the table of P/A 3 (right) (see diagram 4), to the left of the table at Tac-Caghqi (plate 5), to the right of the table of St.Ag. L and to the right of the table of P/A 23 where it forms part of a step (plate 8). The remains of a seat are also faintly discernible to the left of the table of Bingemma 20. A separate seat, carved out of a stone block, is located in front of the table of P/A 6.

Additional seating is provided by benches cut into the wall adjacent to or opposite the triclinium itself. These benches are meticulously hewn out of the rock and are often

harmoniously proportioned. Among the more striking arrangements are those in St. Paul Hyp. II (plate 13) and in St.Ag. J. In St.Ag. J and St.Ag. I the bench is situated symmetrically within a flattened arch facing the triclinium. In some cases the original bench has been cut through by a doorway leading into a burial cubicle. Such is the case in St.Ag. I to the left of the triclinium and in St.Ag. J. Benches may be L-shaped as in P/A 17B (single) and in St.Ag. N or may have tombs or ossuaries cut into them as in P/A 3 (right); P/A 4 & 17B (single). In P/A 19 (left) the lower step into the chamber is extended rightwards to provide seating accommodation. In P/A 21 the bench is surmounted by a window tomb and has two further seats on a lower level to right and left.

Shelves

The remains of shelves in the form of elongated narrow slits, some still holding traces of marble or limestone have been discerned in several hypogea below loculi, window tombs or arcosolia. In St.Ag. D & O(b) a large shelf stood prominently in front of the table. A similar large shelf was discernible in Salina 2 (plate 7). A small shelf was seen in P/A 21 (plate 6) and the remains of grey marble are still embedded in a shelf in P/A 5 (right), in P/A 16 and P/A 17B. A partly broken finely worked limestone shelf is still in situ in the exedra of St.Ag. I & a slit was observed in the exedra of Tad-Dejr. Rectangular box-like openings were seen in, amongst others, P/A 3 (left); P/A 4 & St.Ag. J. These might have [p.49] served as pottery shelves although small semi-circular pottery shelves are ubiquitous within the exedra particularly within window tombs and on the exedra. Elsewhere shelves are provided within larger apsed recesses. This is a very prominent feature of P/A 20 and is also found in St.Ag. I, J, L & N.

Lampholes

The triclinium area was probably lit by lamps, the holes for which are to be found in and around the exedrae. Some chambers have many examples of such lampholes while in others they are conspicuous by their absence. This would indicate that handheld lamps or perhaps hanging lamps were sometimes used. Some loops in the rock can be seen as in the exedra of P/A 23 but these may well be more modern.

The shape of the lampholes varies, the most common being the semicircular ones as in P/A 22A(a) (plate 12). Near the exedra of P/A 23 is an unusual row of semi-circular lampholes. Some are pyramidal as in P/A 5 (right) and Tal Mentna (plate 14) while others are square as in St.Ag. J and in the exedra of P/A 23 (plate 8).

Alteration

This is a debatable point. There are quite a few examples of triclinia that have been cleared of their tables (St. Paul Area D; St. Paul Area of Hyp. II; St.Ag. D; Bingemma 17 & 25) leaving only the exedra which in the case of St.Ag. D has been decorated with corbelling and pilasters. Other triclinia present a table and stibadium only with the exedra cut away partially as in P/A 16 (plate 10) or totally as in St.Ag. F. Other tables 'show signs of a wilful mutilation',²⁶ but it is almost impossible to say whether this was done in antiquity by the early Christians or at some later date.

²⁶ M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*, Oxford 1986, p.34.

The table in St. Paul Hyp. II has been disgracefully mutilated in what would seem at first sight to have been a recent occurrence connected with works on a drainage channel nearby. However, it was already so in 1913, to what extent [p.50] is unknown, when Becker saw it and described the area as 'Das Becken ist durch einen Grabraum zerstört.'²⁷

Bistra 6 had the unusual feature of a deeply hewn basin similar to a font. This may have been an original feature or may have been the work of a modern farmer. It was certainly mutilated in recent times and is no longer extant.²⁸

It appears, however, that frequently the table and triclinium have been left intact even when need for space has forced the people using the catacombs to utilise the area behind the table. This can be seen most clearly at Tac-Caghqi (plate 5) and St. Paul's Cave Hypogeum, Rabat where the basin has been carefully skirted when cutting a stairway and in P/A 16 (plate 10) where the exedra has been cut into a flattened archway perhaps so that the baldacchino tombs of the new extension could 'overlook' the table. At Tal-Mentna (plate 2) it seems that space was deliberately made in the ceiling to allow for head clearance in front of a window tomb overlooking the triclinium. P/A 11 and 15; St. Paul Hyp. II and Area D; Bingemma 25 have triclinia that have been flattened leaving just the exedra while nearby hypogea retain their triclinia so it is difficult to be able to state that the table went out of fashion while the catacombs were still in use.

Function

'Tot homines, tot sententiae' - Terence

One should regard the triclinium as a part of a broader cultural process,²⁹ almost definitely imported and related to a social and belief sub-system³⁰ which may or may not be Christian though iconographic evidence leads one to infer a Christian context at some stage in connection with some kind of meal or feast. It has not been possible to deduce how this culture was related to the environment and to behaviour patterns in what are likely to be the earlier centuries of the Christian era.

[p.51] A brick-built or stone table with a separate sloping stibadium was in use as a piece of furniture in the first centuries AD (plate 9). However, the triclinia shown in the iconographic evidence from the Roman catacombs do not indicate a channel or an indentation such as found in c. 97% of the funerary triclinia of the Maltese Catacombs. The writers have found evidence nonetheless of two triclinia with a marked indentation in a domestic setting in Pompeii, one of which is identified as being in the Casa del Moralista.

Tal-Mentna does not have the usual channel but has a hole at the front of the table below the rim which connects directly with the basin (plate 2). Bistra 40 (not extant) seems from photographic evidence³¹ to have had a hole similar to that at Tal-Mentna. St. Paul's Hall

²⁷ Becker, *op. cit.* p.13.

²⁸ It is illustrated in C.G. Zammit, 'The Tal-Bistra Catacombs' in *Bulletin of the Museum* (Malta), vol. i no. v, February 1935, p. 185.

²⁹ D.E. Arnold, *Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process*, Cambridge 1985, p. 234.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.14.

³¹ C.G. Zammit, *op.cit.* p. 185. Several of the Tal-Bistra catacombs were destroyed in the 1970's to make way for a road in the Targa Gap area. Especially regrettable was the

A (right) has a mutilated, off-centre hole in the indentation at the front of the table. However, one cannot be sure of its antiquity. Although mutilated it does seem that there was only a very narrow break in the rim, equivalent to a channel. There is also a hole in the centre of the basin but it has not been possible without investigation, to ascertain whether the two were connected.

Many ideas have been put forward for having a basin and a channel. The writers consider that the channel was probably associated with some kind of liquid, possibly ablutions. The liquid would then have run through the channel and where there was an indentation it would have been caught within it at floor level to prevent its running into the corridor. Further investigation might reveal that where there was no indentation there may have been a dip in the floor to serve a similar purpose.

A few stibadia of the Catacombs are of very small dimensions which makes their actual use for seating unlikely [St.Ag. I(b); St. Paul's Cave Hypogeum, Rabat; Tac-Caghqi & Mgarr]. This could suggest a symbolic significance. It has also been observed that some triclinia served very small hypogea [Bingemma 20; Bingemma 17 & P/A 17B (single)].

[p.52] Conclusions

This study has taken as its basis the triclinium area of the hypogea, the components of which have been defined and analysed. At this stage the writers can divide their conclusions under a number of headings - those of certainty, probability, hypothesis and speculation. They are **certain** of the shape, dimensions, manufacturing techniques and decoration of this area. It is **probable** that the area was used in the context of a funerary rite. They can **hypothesize** that the table was used for a funerary meal involving the use of liquid, possibly for ablutions and they can **speculate** that at some stage the triclinium took on a symbolic significance.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Mario Buhagiar for sending us out on an assignment in the catacombs in November 1990 and thus triggering off our fascination with the subject.

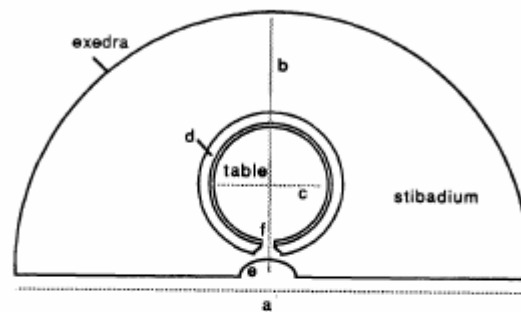
Dr. Tancred Gouder and Mr. Anthony Pace, at the time, Director and Curator, respectively of the National Museum of Archaeology, for allowing us access to the hypogea which are not open to the general public.

Mr. Anton Catania, guide/custodian, for taking us down the catacombs in the early days.

Fr. Victor Camilleri MSSP, Curator of the Catacombs of St. Agatha in Rabat, for allowing us to take photographs.

destruction of Bistra 40. This triclinium had stylistic similarities with the Tal-Mentna table: an unbroken rim without a central channel, and a hole on the inner rim linking to a large rectangular aperture at the front of the table.

[p.53]



KEY TO DIMENSIONS & TERMINOLOGY

a = width	f = channel
b = depth	g = height of table
c = width of basin	h = height to ceiling
d = width of rim	i = height of triclinium at left
e = indentation	j = height of triclinium at right

While every effort has been made to give exact dimensions there were occasions when it was not possible to remove debris or earth from the floor in order to be perfectly precise. On a slightly mutilated table it was not always possible to take an exact measurement. On the chart, therefore, some measurements are marked 'circa' while 'n/a' means that the feature either did not exist or that the triclinium was mutilated. Where, for example, rim width varied considerably the range is given (eg. 5/10).

ABBREVIATIONS

P/A =	Saints Paul/Agatha Complex, Rabat
St. Ag. =	St. Agatha Complex, Rabat

Diagram 1

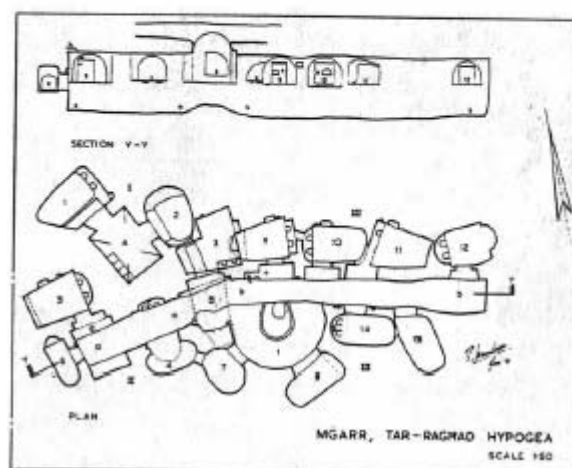
[p.54]

RANGE OF DIMENSIONS		
Width of stibadium Catacomb	256cm St. Agatha I (b)	392cm P/A 17 (l)
Depth of stibadium Catacomb	140cm St. Paul's Cave, Rabat	315cm St. Paul Hall A (r)
Height of table Catacomb	27cm St. Agatha B (l)	73cm P/A 19 (l)
Diameter of basin Catacomb	47cm St. Paul's Cave, Rabat	113cm P/A 18 (r)
In the catacombs of the St. Agatha Complex the writers adopted the lettering formulated by Fr. Victor Camilleri MSSP. All other references are those used by Dr. Mario Buhagiar.		

Diagram 2

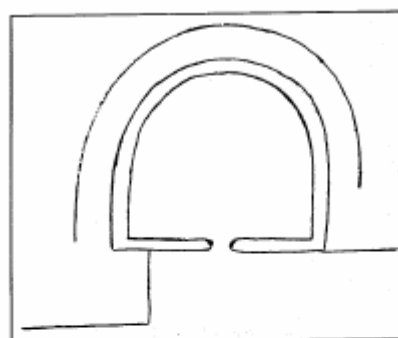
[p.55]

Diagram 3

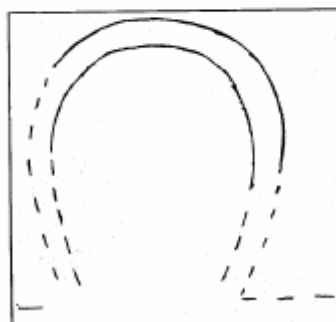


[p.56]

Diagram 4



P/A 3 (right)
(not to scale)



St. Paul Hyp. II
(not to scale)

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[p.58]

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*The triclinium was extended lengthwise and widthwise and these statistics represent the later and earlier dimensions.

All measurements in cm



Plate 2

Ial-Mentna

[p.61]

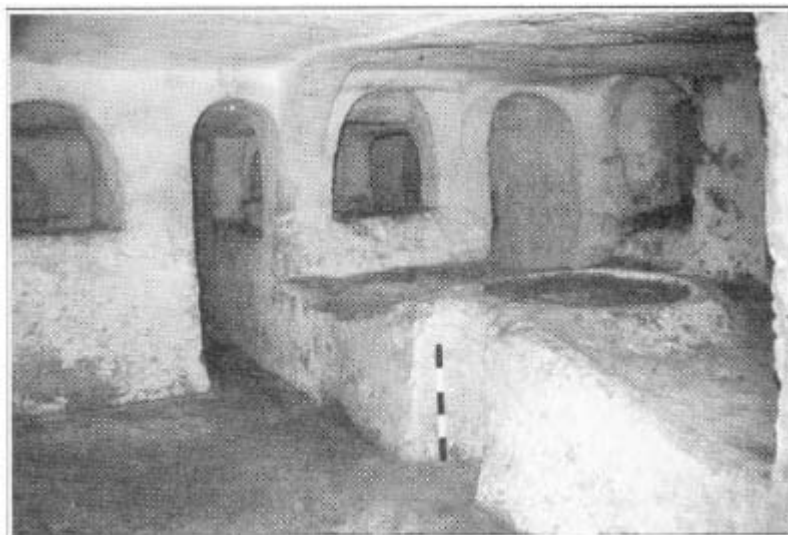


Plate 3

Saint Paul/Agatha Complex Hypogeum 19 (left)



Plate 4

Saint Paul/Agatha Complex Hypogeum 17B (single)

[p.62]



Plate 5

Tač-Čaqqhi

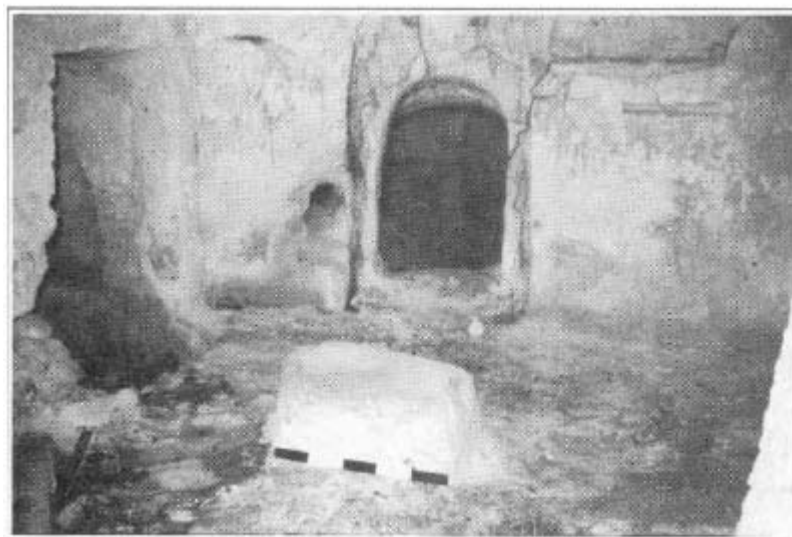


Plate 6

Saint Paul/Agatha Complex Hypogeum 21

[p.63]

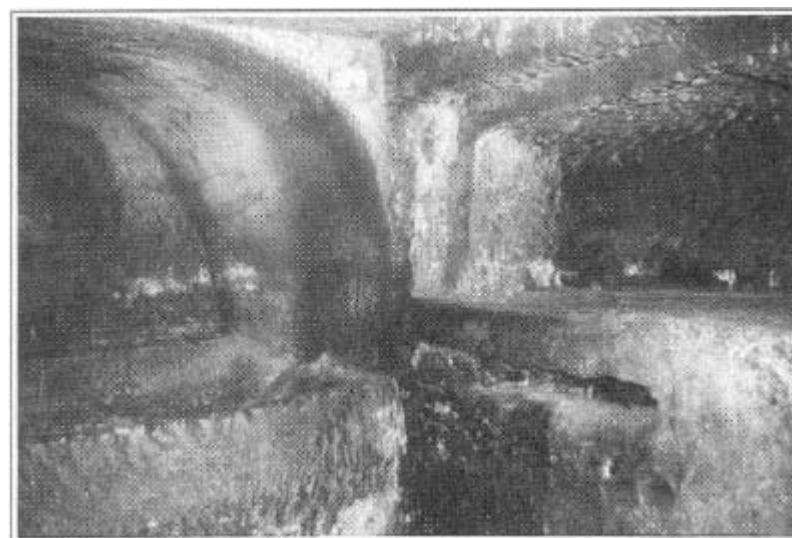


Plate 7

Salina Hypogeum 2



Plate 8 **Saint Paul/Agatha Complex Hypogeum 23**

[p.64]

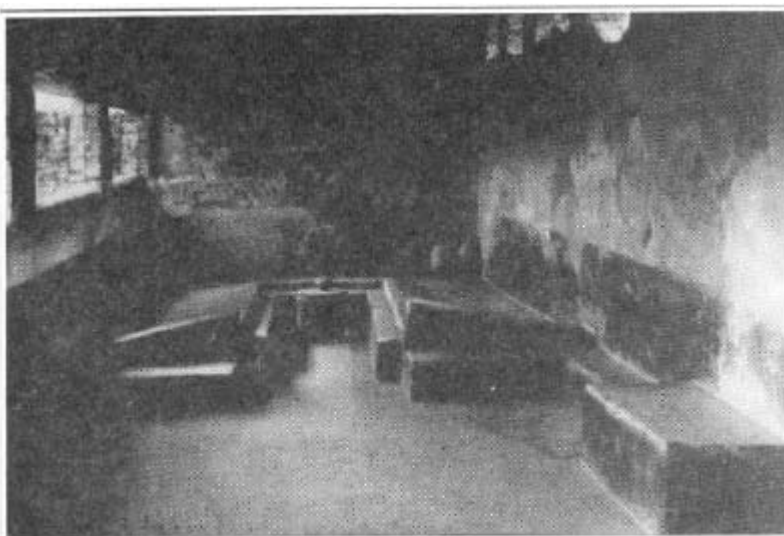


Plate 9 **Casa di Caro, Pompeii**

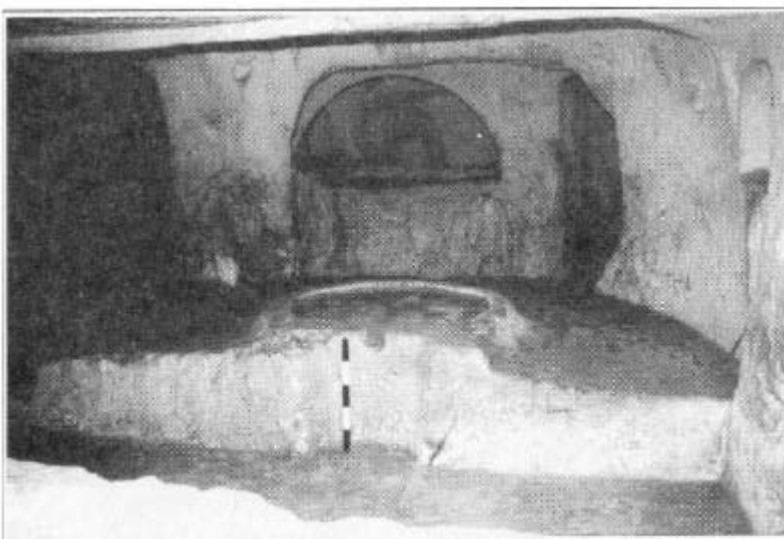


Plate 10 **Saint Paul/Agatha Complex Hypogeum 16**

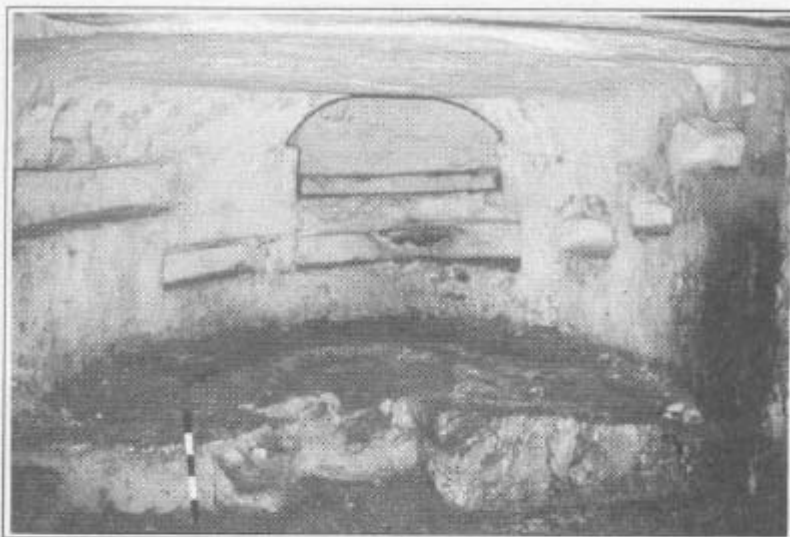


Plate 11

Saint Paul/Agatha Complex Hypogeum 18

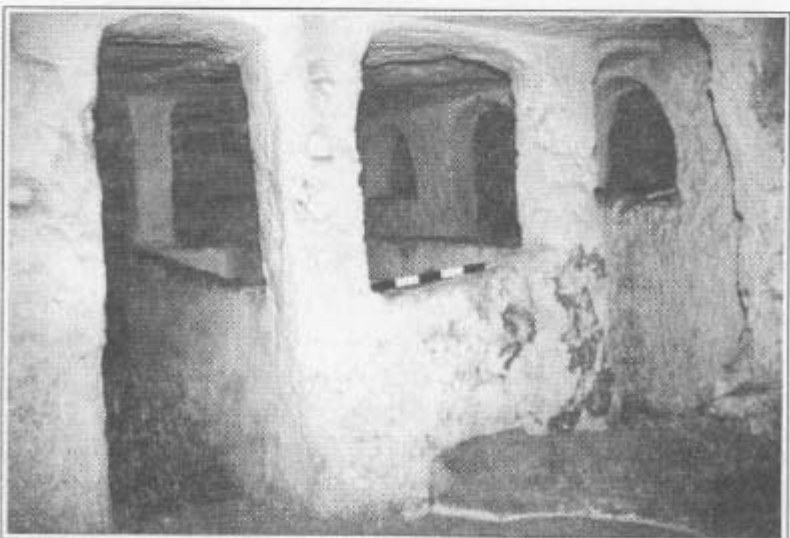


Plate 12

Saint Paul/Agatha Complex Hypogeum 22A(a)

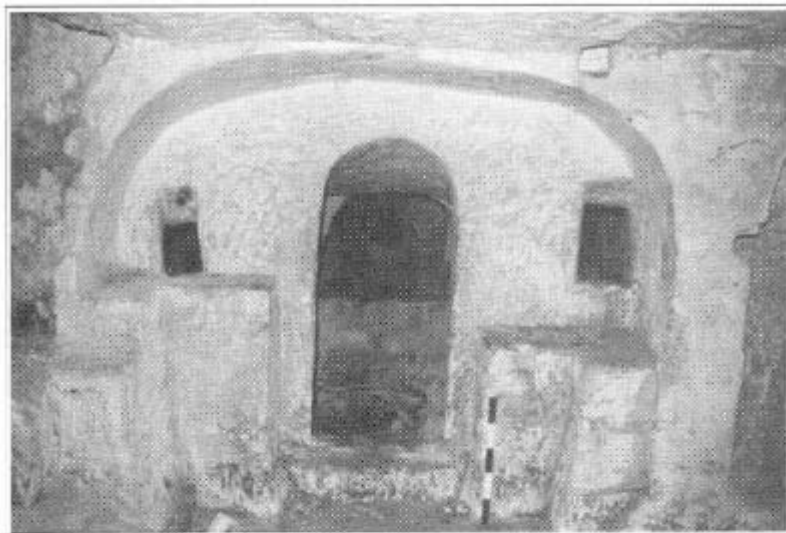


Plate 13

Saint Paul Hypogeum II

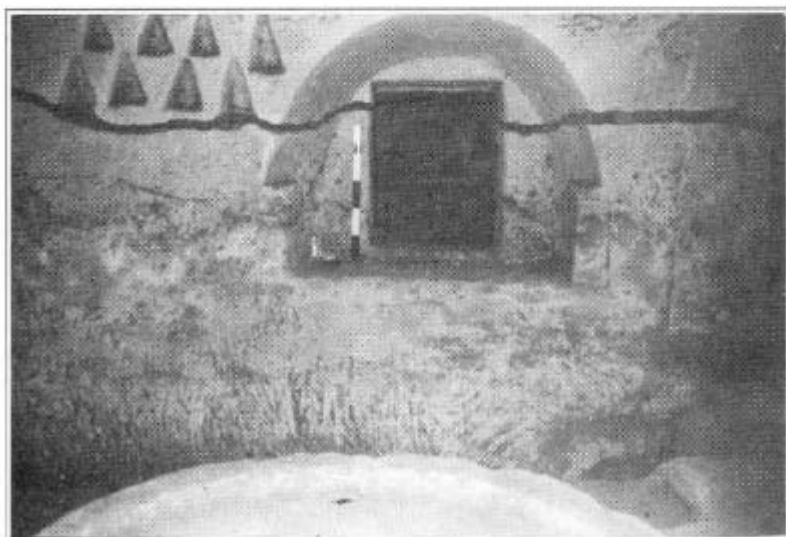


Plate 14

Tal-Mentna

