

## **Malta's medieval cave-churches: their cultural context and artistic relevance**

Keith Buhagiar,  
Visiting Permanent Lecturer, University of Malta

### **Abstract**

*The rock excavated churches discussed in this paper are the product of a strong cave-dwelling tradition filtering into Malta through the archipelago's close links with south-eastern Sicily in the post AD 1127 period. This paper seeks to draw awareness on a relatively unknown phase of Malta's socio-religious cultural past through the examination of cave church distribution in north and north-west Malta and their typology and artistic decoration. It presents the preliminary results of personal on-going research carried out in Sicily and Malta and includes data on the recently rediscovered church of St James at Wied ir-Rum in the territory of Rabat (Malta), the existence of which had faded from popular memory during the past centuries.*

### **Introduction**

The archaeology and history of Malta's rock-excavated churches is entwined to the archipelago's medieval past and was the result of new attitudes adopted following the Norman conquest of AD 1127. During this period, a strong cave-dwelling tradition emerged in areas of north and north-west Malta possessing a favourable geologic stratification. Furthermore, cave-dwelling was strongly tied to efforts aimed at increasing the hydrological and agricultural infrastructure of specifically designated countryside areas of the Maltese archipelago with the intention of increasing agricultural productivity.<sup>1</sup> In many instances, the religious needs of these cave-dwelling occupants were serviced by cave-churches. It appears that most cultural and technological influences discussed in this study filtered into Malta through direct contact with neighbouring Sicily and included the excavation of cave-churches and their artistic embellishment. This paper seeks to draw awareness on a relatively unknown phase of Malta's socio-religious cultural heritage through the examination of cave-church spatial distribution, their geological context, typology, infrastructure and decoration. The provision of a comprehensive gazetteer of medieval troglodytic churches falls beyond the objective of this study.<sup>2</sup> However, it presents the preliminary results of personal on-going research and comments on several urban and rural cave-churches located in north and north-west Malta, including the recently identified church of St James, the existence of which had faded from

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth study of Malta's landscape transformation and hydrological development during the past millennium see Keith, Buhagiar, *Malta and Water (AD 900 to 1900): Irrigating a semi-arid landscape*, Oxford, UK: BAR International Series 2829, 2016. For an updated analysis of Malta's cave sites and their landscape context see: Keith, Buhagiar, "Investigating cave dwelling in medieval Malta (AD 800-1530)", in *Caves and Ritual in Medieval Europe (AD 500-1500)*, ed. K.A. Bergsvik and M. Dowd, Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books, 2018, 201-218.

<sup>2</sup> For a gazetteer of Maltese rock-excavated churches see Mario, Buhagiar, "The Re-Christianisation of Malta: Siculo-Greek Monasticism, Dejr Toponyms and Rock-Cut Churches", *Melita Historica*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2002, 272-283.

popular memory during the past centuries. Furthermore, this study offers an appraisal to Mario Buhagiar's pioneering life-long study on Malta's medieval churches and their architectural and artistic significance.<sup>3</sup>

As the period covered by the 'early', 'high' and 'late' medieval terminology employed in this paper lacks standardisation, an explanation within the context of the Maltese medieval historical framework is necessary. 'Early Medieval' encompasses the mid-sixth to the tenth century and includes the Byzantine and Early Muslim periods. 'High Medieval' comprises the late tenth to the early thirteenth century and, in a local chronological framework, involved the Late Muslim and Norman periods. 'Late Medieval' encompasses the late thirteenth century until the arrival of the Hospitaller Knights of the Order of St John in Malta in 1530.

### **The geographic and geological contexts**

The Maltese archipelago lies in the central Mediterranean Sea south of Sicily. The island of Malta, which is central to this paper's discussion, has a surface area of 153 sq. km and has a maximum length and width of 27.4 km and 14.5 km respectively. Geological deposits are almost exclusively sedimentary in formation and four distinct rock layers constitute the basic geology. When not disturbed by land faulting, the horizontal stratification from top to bottom consists of: (1) Upper Coralline Limestone; (2) Blue Clay; (3) Globigerina Limestone; and (4) Lower Coralline Limestone.<sup>4</sup>

Of interest to this study are the two uppermost geological horizons, the spatial distribution of which is to the north and north-west of Malta: Upper Coralline Limestone and Blue Clay. Most cave-churches discussed in this paper pertain to this geological framework. Except for some of the Rabat (Malta) rock-excavated places of worship, most are closely associated with agricultural estate infrastructure and *ghar*-type settlements found in this sector of Malta and for which a more detailed description is forthcoming in another section of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

The cave-churches of central and southern Malta belonged to an entirely different geological typology. In comparison to the rock-excavated places of worship in north and north-west Malta, these amount to slightly over a handful and are positioned in the Globigerina and Lower Coralline Limestone plains. Here, the predominant type of medieval settlement subscribed to the *raħal* typology, meaning that these rock-excavated places of worship were stand-alone systems, not forming part of a wider localised troglodytic framework but at the same time were still accessible to near-by *raħal*-type settlements.<sup>6</sup> Examples of churches excavated in Globigerina Limestone deposits include that of St Leonard at San Ģwann, today identified as Tal-Mensija and another dedicated to St Angelo at the *Castrum Maris* or Castle by the Sea,

---

<sup>3</sup> Mario Buhagiar has written extensively on the topic of cave-churches. For a comprehensive account of Malta's subterranean churches see Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 58-82.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, Pedley et al., *Limestone Isles in a Crystal Sea*, PEG Ltd, Malta: 2002, 35; George, Zammit-Maempel, *An Outline of Maltese Geology*, Malta: 1977, 18; H. Bowen-Jones et al., *Malta: Background for Development*, Durham, UK: 1961.

<sup>5</sup> Keith, Buhagiar, "Investigating cave dwelling in medieval Malta (AD 800-1530)", in *Caves and Ritual in Medieval Europe (AD 500-1500)*, ed. K.A. Bergsvik and M. Dowd, Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books, 2018, 201-218.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on the distribution of *raħal* and *ghar*-type settlements in Malta see *ibid*. 201-218.

presently referred to as Fort St Angelo.<sup>7</sup> Quite curiously, it appears that the plastic qualities of the Maltese Globigerina Limestone deposit were not exploited for the benefit of the interior embellishment of these churches. The cave-churches of St Brancatus (Għar San Brinkaw) and Għar San Pietru at Għargħur and Naxxar respectively, were excavated in Lower Coralline Limestone rock formations.<sup>8</sup> The crude interior finishing of these rock-excavated spaces was directly tied to the difficulties related to the quarrying of this hardy rock deposit and the limitations posed by its excavation.

### **The urban cave-churches**

The rock-cut churches of the north and north-west Malta can be divided into two main categories: (a) the urban, sited in the neighbourhood of the *Civitas* (Mdina); and (b) the rural. Both share common characteristics and are the product of the same religious pressures and socio-cultural circumstances.<sup>9</sup> They contained either masonry or wooden altars and in the case of the cave-church of St Leonard in Rabat, and that dedicated to St Peter in Naxxar, there is evidence for an internal flagstone floor. In some churches a cobbled passage way facilitated access to the entrance, especially in circumstances of challenging relief. Several of the surviving churches were decorated with murals that survive in a precarious state of preservation. The dating of both urban and rural churches is a challenging issue and continuous reuse makes it improbable that any archaeologically relevant deposits survive within. The assessment of cave typologies, as well as the art historical analysis of preserved murals, where available, are the most reliable methods of dating.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the surviving urban churches lie in the precincts of Palaeochristian period hypogea and tend to show a greater preoccupation with architectural enhancement and elaboration than their rural counterparts.<sup>11</sup> The Abbatija tad-Dejr and the rock-oratory at St Agatha's Catacombs, both at Rabat, are amongst the most important still extant urban rock-excavated church sites for which an archaeological and historical evaluation is included in this study.

### **The St Agatha Oratory**

This rock-excavated oratory was reclaimed from a much earlier, more extensive Late Roman and Byzantine period cemetery. As with other excavations in Upper Coralline Limestone

<sup>7</sup> Godfrey, Wettinger, “The Castrum Maris and its Suburb of Birgu during the Middle Ages”, in *Birgu: A Maltese Maritime City*, ed. L. Bugeja, M. Buhagiar and S. Fiorini, The Central Bank of Malta, Malta: 1993, 35; Vincenzo, Laurenza, “Malta nei documenti angioini del regio archivio di Napoli”, *Archivio Storico di Malta*, viii/1, Rome, 1936-37, doc. 40.

<sup>8</sup> For data on Għar San Brinkaw and Għar San Pietru see Keith, Buhagiar, ‘The Għar il-Kbir Settlement and the Cave-Dwelling Phenomenon in Malta’, Unpublished Dissertation, University of Malta: 1997, 84-86; Keith, Buhagiar, “The San Pietru Cave-Settlement at San Pawl Tat-Targħ”, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1998, 42-43; Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 75-76.

<sup>9</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 58-59.

<sup>10</sup> Keith. Buhagiar, “Investigating cave dwelling in medieval Malta (AD 800-1530)”, in *Caves and Ritual in Medieval Europe (AD 500-1500)*, ed. K.A. Bergsvik and M. Dowd, Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books, 2018, 210.

<sup>11</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 58.

deposits, this complex's maximum depth beneath surface level was conditioned by the level of the perched aquifer forming above the impermeable Blue Clay deposit. Personal field research is ongoing but emerging data indicates that prior to the seventeenth century, the perched aquifer level in most areas of the Rabat promontory was 0.5 to 1 m higher than the present-day. Failure to steer clear of the perched aquifer would have resulted in the partial flooding of the excavated space with water, effectively transforming it into a well from which water of potable quality could be extracted.

St Agatha cave-church consists of a roughly rectangular-shaped hall containing a deep square-cut apse in which a rock-excavated altar was placed. The hall measures some 4.20 by 9.50 m and has a ceiling height of 2.70 m. The apse recess is 3.65 m wide and is 2.20 m deep. It is currently adorned by an eighteenth-century altar, but during the late medieval period, it is likely that this space was occupied by a crude stone or wooden altar.

In 1575, the Apostolic Delegate Pietro Dusina only provided a fleeting description of the St Agatha cave-church.<sup>12</sup> A 1647 description by G.F. Abela is more detailed and associated the St Agatha cave-church as a cultic centre of popular veneration and which contained: [...] *la figura di Sant' Agata con altare de' Santi dipinte alla Greca sopra l'intonacato del muro, ò per dir meglio della Rocca, nella quale ancora intorno intorno [sic] si ravvisano alcune antiche croci come segni di dedicatione, e fin' oggi vi appare l'altare intagliato, e spiccato dalla Rocca, dove si celebrava anticamente, e di donde poi si passava al cimiterio, il quale e vastissimo [...].*<sup>13</sup> A few decades later, in 1685, Monsignor Cocco Palmieri described this rock-excavated space as: *In eadem Crypta adsunt deverae effigies Sanctorum et quaedam crucis sculptae [...].*<sup>14</sup>

It appears that the cave-church originally contained a fresco cycle consisting of a programme of juxtaposed cult images of hieratic standing saints. These were of probable Siculo-Byzantinesque inspiration, of which only two painted panels survive. The remaining were replaced at the turn of the sixteenth century by a series of Late Gothic devotional images. This study will focus exclusively on the iconographic significance of the two pre-sixteenth century fresco panels. These show a male and female saint, the stylistic and technical idiosyncrasies of which find comparison with the vernacular Byzantine art of Norman Sicily and were possibly saved because of their cultic appeal.<sup>15</sup> Each of the images is contained in a deep framing border and their respective names were written in characteristic Latin characters next to their head. Only a couple of letters survive with the result that the identity of the cult images is difficult to determine with certainty. The 'th' of the female saint may perhaps suggest 'Agatha', the saint to whom the church is dedicated. St Agatha enjoyed popular cult in Sicily

<sup>12</sup> George, Aquilina and Stanley, Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part IV Documents at the Vatican No. 1, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari*, Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51, Mgr Petrus Dusina 1575, Malta University Press, Malta: 2001, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Gio Francesco, Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notitie*, Malta, 1647, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Paolo, Pullicino, *Ristauri della Cripta e della Chiesa di Sant' Agata, Posta nel Rabato della Notabile in Malta: Memoria del Can. P. Pullicino*, Albion Press, Oxford University: 1881, 11. See also Antonio Annetto, *Caruana, The Crypt of St Agatha in Hal-Bajada District*, Government Printing Office, Malta: 1899.

<sup>15</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 65.

and is the patron saint of the Catania settlement. In the fresco under discussion, the St Agatha is portrayed holding a gemmed cross, wears a gemmed head-dress and a pearly halo. The male saint has iconographic characteristics that appear to recall those of St Paul or, perhaps, St Anthony the Abbot. This fresco panel is superior artistic merit and the head detailing has better incisive quality.<sup>16</sup>

The saints have almond-shaped eyes and a long straight nose which bridges to their eyebrows. The drapery is characterised by its linearity and the figures are heavily outlined in red and blue. A diminutive figure portrayed in a kneeling pose in the lower right-hand corner of the presumed St Agatha panel is a later addition.<sup>17</sup> The red and yellow framing border and the blue background against which they are placed are like many examples found in Sicily. Red and yellow were the colours normally used for the framing of juxtaposed wall images in both rock-excavated and masonry-built churches in the Val di Noto and Val Demone territories in the South East and North East sectors of Sicily respectively.

The utilised pigments are simple earth colours consisting of red and yellow ochres, Verdigris and a dark blue-grey that was commonly achieved through the mixture of charcoal and lime. The painting technique is seemingly a *secco*, but it was suggested by M. Buhagiar that the damp and humid nature of this subterranean space resulted in a virtual ‘frescoing’ of the applied pigmentation, which the passage of time has caused to calcify.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Abbatija tad-Dejr***

The archaeology and history of the Abbatija tad-Dejr site is a complex one and warrants further scholarly assessment and revaluation. Like St Agatha, Abbatija tad-Dejr was a Palaeochristian and/or Byzantine period rock-excavated cemetery, consisting of four adjoining hypogea excavated into the face of a low hill, the foot of which was quarried into a quadrangular court containing the ruins of a colonnaded building adorned with a polychrome mosaic floor. Sections of Abbatija tad-Dejr were revitalised as a cult centre following the Norman conquest of Malta in AD 1127. Eight crosses carved in the vestibule of the main hypogea (Oratory I) as well as cult images are the result of site’s reutilisation during the High and Late Medieval periods. Oratory II was likewise utilised as a cultic space during the Late Medieval period.<sup>19</sup>

### **Oratory I**

This consists of a well-excavated rectangular hall measuring some 9.14 by 3.96 m and a ceiling height of 2.25 m. It appears that Oratory I is of a Byzantine date and that its reutilisation during the High and Late Medieval periods only brought about some minor modifications to the physiognomy of this subterranean hall. In the main, later medieval period alterations consisted in: (a) the lowering of the original floor or platform level in the east section of the hall in the

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 66; Charlene, Vella, *The Mediterranean Artistic Context of Late Medieval Malta: 1091-1530*, Midsea Books, Malta: 2013, 69-70.

<sup>17</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 65-66.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Aldo, Messina, *Le chiese rupestri del Siracusano*, Istituto Siciliano di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici, Palermo: 1979, 49; Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 59-61.

area fronting the apse recess; (b) the shaping of the remaining platform section into an L-shaped *dukkien*-type rock bench right next to the doorway giving access to Oratory II; (c) the carving of eight crosses with forked arms in the vertical rock walls of the hall; and (d) the painting of cult images.

It is probable that a raised platform in the west section of the hall indicates that the original height of the floor in the east section of the oratory was similarly 0.43 m above the current level. The original purpose of both platforms is unknown, but in the Byzantine period, each might have contained a *triclinium*, traces of which were subsequently erased. A series of rock-cut arched openings separates the hall from the adjoining cemetery.

The focal point of the oratory is an apsed niche measuring 2.10 by 0.64 m and which is 1.66 m high. This is dug into the east wall at a height of 1.34 m from the present floor level. In 1647, apart from providing a scale drawing of Oratory I and Oratory II as well as that of the adjoining cemetery, G.F. Abela mentions the presence of rock cutting in this area which he identified as providing support for a portable wooden altar.<sup>20</sup> Abela, furthermore, comments on traces of painting surviving in the niche which he describes as: [...] *dipinta la figura del Padre Eterno alla Greca, & à mano diritta sopra l'incrostatura della cripta sin' oggi si scopre l'immagine di S. Gio. Evangelista in abito Vescouale alla Greca: dall' altra bâda si vede una figura di S. Michele Arcangelo, essendo tutto il resto guasto dal tempo, e rouinato dall' umidità del luogo [...].*<sup>21</sup>

Except for the sinopia drawing showing a Blessing Christ flanked on the right by the head of another figure, the painting mentioned by Abela has completely disintegrated. The oval head of Christ with its prominent nose, oval-shaped eyes and pronounced bridge of the eyebrows suggests the Siculo-Byzantine Christ Pantocrator iconography of Norman Sicily. Nineteenth-century accounts drawn-up when the sinopia was in a better state of preservation refer to a banner or a pennant that in art is normally associated with St John the Baptist and mention the remains of an inscription in vermillion, but only the letters SCR could be deciphered.

<sup>20</sup> Gio Francesco, Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notitie*, Malta, 1647, 48-49.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 49.

Mario Buhagiar suggested that the painting could have represented a *Deësis* – a representation of Christ making the sign of the Cross, the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. Coupled with data provided by the nineteenth-century accounts on this fresco, it is likely that this is a work of art that stylistically comes from the milieu of Siculo-Norman Sicily. The Abbatija tad-Dejr sinopia consists of a bearded Christ wearing a halo which in turn is enclosed with a Greek cross. This may also have been placed within a mandorla or an almond-shaped aureole of light surrounding the entire figure of Christ. The surviving head may, perhaps, have belonged to the Virgin Mary. The presence of St John the Baptist could have been indicated by the banner that has since disappeared.<sup>22</sup> A recent reassessment of the sinopia representation by the present author led to the identification of three lines of painted text to the upper left of the Blessing Christ figure, the middle line of which appears to read 'Lucia' (Fig. 1). To the upper right of the Blessing Christ is a painted Greek cross, over which a section of the sinopia rendering is clearly drawn. This suggests that both the painted inscription and cross monogram may pre-date the sinopia rendering.



Figure 1 Abbatija Tad-Dejr, Oratory I. Three lines of painted text in the apse area, recently identified by the author. The middle line appears to read 'Lucia'. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.

<sup>22</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 59-61.

In South-East Sicily there are similar representations of Christ the Pantocrator in the surviving rock-excavated and built churches dating to between the eleventh and the thirteenth century. One such Christ Pantocrator representation is from the Grotta di Santa Febronia in the province of Catania. Another is from the Grotta di S. Nicola at Modica, datable to the thirteenth century. Both are of direct Siculo-Byzantinesque inspiration.

As mentioned in the reproduction of G.F. Abela's text above, within the precincts of Oratory I at Abbatija tad-Dejr, there were two other murals, thought to depicting the Archangel Michael and St John the Evangelist. The icons were contained in a red frame that probably once bore the saints' names in Latin characters.<sup>23</sup> The artistic representation of St John the Evangelist has faded off completely, whilst only the halo of the Archangel Michel still survives. M. Buhagiar recalls that the pontifical robe of the Archangel Michael was ornamented with small Greek crosses that are a characteristic of Greek-rite liturgical robes. This brings up the possibility of a Greek-rite monastic presence at Abbatija tad-Dejr during the Norman or the immediate post-Norman period which would have also filtered into Malta through the archipelago's close connection with Sicily.<sup>24</sup>

## Oratory II

This oratory is of a rather intimate size and consists of a rectangular-shaped room measuring 3.20 by 2.89 m and has a ceiling height of 1.95 m. A thick rock-cut pilaster measures 0.90 by 0.70 m was placed in an off-centre position, probably, not to obliterate the view of a square-shaped apse recess from the original doorway giving access to this subterranean cultic space. In addition, two niches adorned either side of the square-shaped apse and each was fronted by a *dukkien*-style rock-excavated bench. The apse recess was fronted by a stone altar, noted by G.F. Abela in 1647, and what appear to be the remains of a stone basin.<sup>25</sup> Cultic activity at this Oratory appears to have lingered on during the post-1530 period. Two shields representing the Knights of St. John and the Kingdom of Sicily were painted on the rock-cut pilaster that supports the ceiling of the little chapel in which mass could still be celebrated in 1575 when it was listed by Pietro Dusina as being dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin. It had however fallen into disrepair and did not have wooden doors.<sup>26</sup>

There is evidence to indicate that the Oratory was extensively decorated. The most important artistic representation consisted of a fresco now on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. This shows the fusion of the Crucifixion and Annunciation scenes. 'Painted partly on the rock and partly on the plaster applied in patches to the level of the rock', this is Malta's most important Siculo-Byzantinesque painting. The fresco was placed inside a lunette in the apse of this Oratory II with a background bisected into two different portions: the upper

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of a possible Siculo-Greek monastic presence in Malta during the High and Late Medieval period see Ibid. 2005, 58-60; Mario, Buhagiar, "The Re-Christianisation of Malta: Siculo-Greek Monasticism, Dejr Toponyms and Rock-Cut Churches", *Melita Historica*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2002, 253-283.

<sup>25</sup> Gio Francesco, Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notitie*, Malta, 1647, 48-49.

<sup>26</sup> George, Aquilina and Stanley, Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part IV Documents at the Vatican No. 1, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari*, Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51, Mgr Petrus Dusina 1575, Malta University Press, Malta: 2001, 171.

portion is blue and the lower is red. The crucifixion scene dominates this composition and is flanked by smaller images of the Virgin Mary and St John.<sup>27</sup> Its dating is unknown and can range to any period between the twelfth and fourteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

The fresco's iconography is of Byzantine inspiration with roots seemingly firmly embedded in eleventh-century Sicily. The Oratory II fresco closely parallels a painting at the Grotta dei Santi at Licodia Eubea, close to the northern border of the Sicilian province of Ragusa and likewise, seems to be of a contemporaneous date.<sup>29</sup> Analogies between Abbatija tad-Dejr and the Grotta dei Santi are not limited to art historical considerations. The Grotta dei Santi cave-church is likewise positioned in a Palaeochristian period burial site.

In 1647, G.F. Abela's text reserves special mention to the Oratory II painting which it describes as including: (a) reference to the text 'M. Domini' placed next to the Virgin Mary; (b) the text 'Viktor Mortis' depicted on to one of the arms of the lateral beams of the cross; (c) the text 'MAT' depicted next to the sorrowing Virgin; and (d) the letters 'IOH' placed next to St John the Evangelist.<sup>30</sup> Over the centuries, a series of graffiti were inscribed in Oratory II, with the oldest seemingly dating to 1445 and the latest to the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 63; Charlene, Vella, *The Mediterranean Artistic Context of Late Medieval Malta: 1091-1530*, Midsea Books, Malta: 2013, 65-66.

<sup>29</sup> Aldo, Messina, *Le chiese rupestri del Siracusano*, Istituto Siciliano di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici, Palermo: 1979, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Gio Francesco, Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notitie*, Malta, 1647, 51-52.

<sup>31</sup> Mario Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 61-63.

## The rural cave-churches



Figure 2 The western section of the medieval giardino of Wied ir-Rum as seen from the recently identified cave-church of San Gakbu. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.

In contrast to the urban cultic spaces, rural rock-cut churches are more simplistic and formed an integral part of the rural cave-dwelling landscape in which they were located. Personal field and archival research work on Maltese landscape development strongly indicates that this landscape transformation process commenced in ca. AD 1000, when centralised management, coordinated from Palermo in Sicily appeared again in Malta. Landscape development involved the construction of *giardini* agricultural estates or fiefs which were positioned in valleys containing man-excavated perennial water galleries and underlying terraced land in which an annual cycle of three crops could be harvested (Fig. 2). These *giardini* contained gravity-fed water irrigation systems, cave houses and cave churches.<sup>32</sup>

As previously specified in the subsection dealing with the geological characteristics of cave-churches located in the north and north-west Malta, the prevailing geological formations in these areas involve different members of Upper Coralline Limestone formations. The Upper Coralline Limestone deposit most commonly exposed at the surface is a hard, geological deposit locally identified as the Tal-Pitkal Member. The underlying Mtarfa Member deposit, however, is not and it is in this rock layer that Malta's cave-houses and churches were excavated. Moreover, Upper Coralline Limestone deposits are largely fragmented and contain visible fissures which encourage water percolation, characteristics which encourage water

<sup>32</sup> Keith. Buhagiar, "Investigating cave dwelling in medieval Malta (AD 800-1530)", in *Caves and Ritual in Medieval Europe (AD 500-1500)*, ed. K.A. Bergsvik and M. Dowd, Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books, 2018, 201-218; Keith, Buhagiar, *Malta and Water (AD 900 to 1900): Irrigating a semi-arid landscape*, Oxford, UK: BAR International Series 2829, 2016.

permeability. The underlying Blue Clay, however, is impervious and is characterised by restricted water percolation and the formation of a Perched Aquifer.



Figure 3 Gnien San Niklaw, Mellieħa. The dry-stone built entrance section to the water gallery providing this agricultural estate with a perennial water supply. Water is conveyed to different areas of the valley by means of masonry canals. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.

This geological setup makes most valleys in north and north-west Malta amongst the most fertile on the island and adequate landscape resource management has since AD 1000 enabled the cultivation of water-intensive crops. The life source of such valleys consists of a series of rock-excavated galleries, hewn into the brittle Mtarfa Member deposit, and which capture perched aquifer water. The volume of the retrieved water varies from gallery to gallery and most still yield a perennial water supply, enough to allow crop cultivation during the arid summer months. Water transportation out of water gallery systems is often aided by means of a shallow canal excavated into the gallery floor (Fig. 3).<sup>33</sup>

The cave-dwellings and cave-churches of north and north-west Malta were similarly excavated in Mtarfa Member deposits directly above the water galleries. The rural subterranean cave-churches included in this study are those of: (1) the Sanctuary of the Virgin at Mellieħa; (2) that of St Nicholas (Mellieħa); (3) St Leonard cave-church at Rabat (Malta); and (4) the recently identified cave-church of St James at Rabat (Malta).

### Cave-churches in the Mellieħa district

Mellieħa's *giardini* were conveniently placed in a series of adjoining natural river-carved valleys and contained rock-excavated nuclei of habitation, the more affluent of which were serviced by cave-churches. The principal church of the Mellieħa locality was the rock-

<sup>33</sup> Keith, Buhagiar, "Water management strategies and the cave-dwelling phenomenon in Late-Medieval Malta", *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 51, 2007, 103-31.

excavated sanctuary of the Virgin Mary, which in 1436, enjoyed the status of cappella or parish and had an income of two *uncie*.<sup>34</sup> Located in *Vyed Santa Maria* (Wied ta' Santa Marija),<sup>35</sup> G.F. Abela describes the valley as: [...] *dou'è il giardino di quella deuotissima, e miracolosa Chiesa della B. Vergine sotto titolo della Melleha, si scorge edificata in una cripta antichissima, già parrocchiale [...]*.<sup>36</sup> A 1497 contract recording the lease of the Wied ta' Santa Marija *giardino* for a four-year period at a price of fourteen florins, strongly affirms that in the fifteenth century, Wied ta' Santa Marija was a fully-functional agricultural estate involved in both arable agriculture and animal husbandry. The *giardino*'s lessee, Leone Xerri, had the contractual obligation to plant twenty-five vines, harvest their produce, water and weed the whole *giardino* as well as gather brushwood from the east side of this agricultural estate and pass this on to the landlord.

Reference to the watering of the whole *giardino* evokes the presence of at least one water gallery which provided this agricultural framework with all its perennial hydrological needs. Nineteenth and twentieth-century urban sprawl has drastically modified Wied ta' Santa Marija's physiognomy. Any surviving remnants of the rock-excavated fabric now lie concealed by modern development and to the untrained eye, the Late Medieval setup is difficult to discern.

Even though drastically modified during the ensuing centuries, the Sanctuary of the Virgin is the most meaningful surviving remnant of this Late Medieval *giardino* and cave-settlement framework which present-day development has nearly completely obliterated. During the centuries, numerous accretions were added to the once humble cave-church dedicated to the Virgin Mary at Mellieħa. A masonry-built church now abuts a surviving portion of the original cave-church. The surviving rock-excavated church section not only serves as a backdrop to the altar area but contains the remains of a cult image placed in an apsed recess, which retains notable devotional significance. The icon represents the Virgin and Child and pertains to the *Theotokos* or *Eleousa* typology, common in Byzantine Iconography.<sup>37</sup> This icon is of notable artistic interest. The Virgin is depicted wearing a maphorion and is crowned by a pearlized halo. The Latin text *MAT(ER) DOMINI* is painted on either side of the Virgin's head. Artistic cross-cultural influences once again point to south-east Sicily, where an image of the *Mater Domini* found in the Grotta di Santa Maria la Cava in the outskirts of the settlement of Cava d'Ispica reveals artistic similarities. The *Mater Domini* fresco at Cava d'Ispica is similarly placed in an

<sup>34</sup> NLM, Biblioteca Ms. 721, f. 2-4v; George, Aquilina and Stanley, Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part IV Documents at the Vatican No. 1, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari, Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51, Mgr Petrus Dusina 1575*, Malta University Press, Malta: 2001, 187-188; Anthony T., Luttrell, "Approaches to Medieval Malta", in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A.T. Luttrell, London, UK: The British School at Rome, 1975, 62-63; Mario, Buhagiar, "Medieval Churches in Malta", in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A.T. Luttrell, London, UK: The British School at Rome, 1975, 166-72.

<sup>35</sup> To avert unnecessary confusion with the neighbouring Santa Marija Estate (*Wied ta' Ghajn Ċejtuna*), it is to be pointed out that Wied ta' Santa Marija is the valley located right next to the Sanctuary of the Virgin and is flanked by the old Mellieħa village core.

<sup>36</sup> Gio Francesco, Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notitie*, Malta, 1647, 73. The *Wied ta' Santa Marija* is sometimes colloquially referred to as *Wied tal-Madonna*.

<sup>37</sup> Charlene, Vella, *The Mediterranean Artistic Context of Late Medieval Malta: 1091-1530*, Midsea Books, Malta: 2013, 71; Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 71.

apse and there are similarities in the facial detailing and maphorion rendering to the Mellieħa icon.<sup>38</sup> Another possible detectable source of artistic influence points towards Lentini in the Province of Syracuse, where a Virgin and Child representation in the church of Santa Lucia sul Tirone has close thematic and iconographic parallels.<sup>39</sup> The dating of the Mellieħa icon can range from the late twelfth to the fourteenth century.<sup>40</sup> The rock-excavated section of the Sanctuary of the Virgin at Mellieħa probably contained other painted sections and cult images, which were not only destroyed with the ravages of time, but the subsequent reorganisation of this space. It is likely that the Virgin and Child icon was preserved due to its cultic significance.<sup>41</sup>

The elevation of the Church of the Virgin to parish status during the Late Medieval period quite likely embodies the presence of a neighbouring series of thriving *giardini* and not only that located within Wied ta' Santa Marija. Each *giardino* contained rock-excavated enclaves and was probably inhabited by a small, permanent community engaged in land cultivation. Wied tal-Madonna apart, the most prominent of these *giardini* estates consisted of Ģnien San Niklaw, Ģnien Ingraw and Wied ta' Ghajn Żejtuna.

### **Għar San Niklaw**

Commonly referred to as Ģnien San Niklaw, this *giardino* lies entrenched within the framework of a river-carved valley in the north-west side of Mellieħa Ridge, overlooking Ghadira. Wied San Niklaw is well-sheltered from all but north-westerly winds and provides adequate protection to the crops cultivated within. During the past centuries, the valley sides were extensively terraced. The life source of Ģnien San Niklaw is a perennial spring which originates from a perched aquifer water gallery and is probably the *fonte* mentioned by G.F. Abela in 1647 (Fig. 3).<sup>42</sup> In the fifteenth century, the benefice of San Nikola was church property,<sup>43</sup> but by the nineteenth century, Ģnien San Niklaw was privately owned by Baronessa Damico and was adjoined by the public property of Qasam Barrani.<sup>44</sup>

The San Niklaw valley sides are characterised by a series of large natural openings, the interior of which were drastically modified and enlarged over the centuries to serve the purpose of habitation, animal pens and agricultural storage recesses. Undoubtedly, the most prominent landmark of the San Niklaw *giardino* is a sizeable cave situated in the south-facing side of the

<sup>38</sup> Charlene, Vella, *The Mediterranean Artistic Context of Late Medieval Malta: 1091-1530*, Midsea Books, Malta: 2013, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Aldo, Messina, *Le chiese rupestri del Val di Noto*, Istituto Siciliano di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici, Palermo: 1994, 82; Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 71.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed assessment of the art historical importance of the Sanctuary of the Virgin at Mellieħa, see Charlene, Vella, *The Mediterranean Artistic Context of Late Medieval Malta: 1091-1530*, Midsea Books, Malta: 2013, 71-73.

<sup>42</sup> Gio Francesco, Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notitie*, Malta, 1647, 73.

<sup>43</sup> Godfrey, Wettinger, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, PEG Ltd., Malta: 2002, 44.

<sup>44</sup> National Archives Malta: Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property in Malta, Book 2, (1866). See plan for the *Kasam Barrani* area.

valley. This is fronted by a partly natural, partly dry-stone wall constructed rock terrace, which apart from serving the purpose of a communal gathering point for the congregation attending religious services celebrated in the adjoining San Niklaw cave-church, also allowed access to other cave units of habitation and other areas of the rock-excavated settlement and *giardino*.

During the Late Medieval period, this cave's interior was partitioned into three distinct spaces by means of dry-stone wall construction, one of which was utilised as a cave-church dedicated to St Nicholas. This cave-church was only sparingly mentioned by the Apostolic Delegate Pietro Dusina in 1575 and no description of its interior was provided.<sup>45</sup> Earlier reference to the St Nicholas cave-church dates to a 1436 document referring to a *Beneficio di S. Nicolao della Mellecha* and 1445 documentation in which there is mention of the church of *S. Nicola de la Malacha*.<sup>46</sup> The St Nicholas cave-church was a major landmark within this landscape and lent its name to the *giardino* framework and valley in which it is located. Recollection of a cave-church in Ģnien San Niklaw survived in popular memory for centuries after the church's deconsecration. Nonetheless, the church's existence was once again



Figure 4 The remains of the cave-church of San Niklaw at Mellieħa as seen from its fronting terrace area. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.

<sup>45</sup> George, Aquilina and Stanley, Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part IV Documents at the Vatican No. 1, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari, Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51, Mgr Petrus Dusina 1575*, Malta University Press, Malta: 2001, 187-188.

<sup>46</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, "Medieval Churches in Malta", in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A.T. Luttrell, London, UK: The British School at Rome, 1975, 164; Godfrey, Wettinger, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, PEG Ltd., Malta: 2002, 501.

rekindled in popular memory by the late Godfrey Wettinger, who, with the assistance of farmers cultivating land in San Niklaw valley, re-identified the site around four decades ago.<sup>47</sup>

St Nicholas cave-church has intimate proportions and its extent was demarcated by a V-shaped dry-rubble screening wall, which originally, must have reached right up to the cave ceiling (Fig. 4). The partitioning walls completely isolated the church from its fronting terrace and adjoining dwellings. Entrance to the cave-church was through a narrow square-headed doorway and in the probable absence of window apertures, it had a dimly lit interior. Large-scale deterioration is evident throughout, but traces of a mortar rendering and applied pigmentation survive in its interior. Only a few daubs of pigment account for what, during the Late Medieval period must have been an extensively decorated subterranean space. This loss of artistic heritage was primarily due to the friable nature of the Mtarfa Member deposits out of which the cave is shaped. Mortared areas still survive within, but because of rock weathering, most mortar sections are unstable and face steady deterioration. A careful inspection of the surviving patches of mortar was carried out by the author of this study and led to the detection of two distinct, superimposed layers, thus reflecting separate phases of cave-church embellishment and decoration. The uppermost mortar layer is the most recent. This has a distinctive pink colouration and applied to its surface are traces of an ox-blood coloured pigment which must have formed part of mural decoration during the church's final phase of utilisation (Fig. 5).

---

<sup>47</sup> Personal communicating by the late Prof. Godfrey Wettinger.



*Figure 5* San Niklaw cave-church at Mellieha. Photographic detail showing two distinct coatings of painted mortar applied to the rockwall of the cave-church. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.

The more significant iconographic representation appears to have been located on the rock wall opposite the cave-church entrance. The surviving daubs of paint formed part of a painted panel measuring some sixty-five by fifty centimetres and the sides of which were bordered by thick ox-blood coloured linear framing bands (Fig. 6). A visual analysis of the painted panel section revealed that this was directly applied to the underlying layer of mortar, indicating that the exposed panel section formed part of an older decorative programme, portions of which are still concealed beneath the overlying mortar coating. The panel's advanced state of deterioration makes it difficult to determine its original iconographic context, but this probably belonged to the artistic milieu of Siculo-Norman Sicily and reflected a decorative programme which still survives, at least in part, in the cave-churches of St Agatha and St Leonard, both at Rabat (Malta) and the interior of the masonry-built church of the Annunciation of the Virgin at Hal Millieri in the limits of Żurrieq.

Late Medieval rural cave-churches were sparsely furnished and often lacked a wooden door. An intriguing feature noted in the St Nicholas cave-church interior consists of a rectangular incision accompanied by a square-shaped ledge in immediate proximity to the left-hand door jamb. It is difficult to determine the utility of this feature, but its proximity to the church entrance evokes some association with door fixtures. No traces of an altar survive, but this was probably positioned against the far-end rock wall, right next to the painted panel. In Late

Medieval Sicilian churches, altars commonly consisted of a simple, movable wooden table and this was probably the case with the rural church of St Nicholas as well.

A series of wide crevices adjoin the cliff-face near the San Niklaw cave-church. These serve as a stark reminder of the natural process of cliff-face detachment that entire sections of the San Niklaw valley are exposed to. During the past decade, sizeable boulder detachment has already occurred close to St Nicholas cave-church. The same unfortunate fate awaits St



Figure 6 San Niklaw cave-church at Mellieha. The surviving remains of a painted panel, presumably located in the altar area of the cave-church. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.

Nicholas cave-church. Cliff-face detachment cannot be prevented, but passively awaiting the disappearance of priceless cultural heritage without further scientific investigation is reprehensible. For this reason, Rescue Archaeology principles must be adopted for the St Nicholas Church area of the San Niklaw *giardino* and must ensure the recovery of cultural data which would otherwise be lost. Research efforts should concentrate on: (a) the 3D laser mapping of the St Nicholas cave-church and adjoining habitational units; (b) the excavation of any archaeologically relevant deposits found within the cave enclosures and the fronting rock terraces; (c) the scientific analysis of the mortar and pigmentation in the cave-church area; (d) a tentative reconstruction of the church's decorative programme; and (e) the investigation of the field terraces underlying the St Nicholas cave-church area, within which a dense multi-period ceramic scatter was identified by the author of this work during non-invasive field-research sessions.

### Rural cave-churches in the Rabat (Malta) district

The cave-church of St Leonard at Rabat (Malta) is located within the precincts of a medieval *giardino* or agricultural estate, which in the first half of the fifteenth century became the property of the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel.<sup>48</sup> The St Leonard cave-church is accessed via a concrete-clad footpath and steps which from the northwest end of the Lunzjata retreat house car park perimeters past the edge of the ravine and gives access to the cave entrance. A dry-stone wall screens the west-facing cave entrance, and the only means of access into the interior is through a 0.9 m, wide square-headed doorway. The gap between the cave roof and the northwest section of the screening wall is bridged over by roughly faced ashlars. Such a method of roofing was commonly resorted to in other Maltese and Sicilian cave-settlements in a bid to regain more internal space without having to undergo the more labour-intensive process of reshaping the cave interior.<sup>49</sup>

The cave-church is excavated into the brittle Mtarfa Member deposit and appears to have experienced at least two separate phases of development, which in the absence of further archaeological investigation are difficult to date. The current internal setup is the product of the cave's final phase of occupation and consists of an irregular-shaped cave with an east-end cylindrical apse, built partly of ashlars, and partly of wet-rubble. The use of faced stones is only limited to the skeletal framework of the arch and the roof slabs bridging the gap between the keystone section of the arch and the adjoining wet-rubble wall. Until recently, several coatings of a mortar rendering and white washing were still present in the apse area, over which painted decoration was applied, and traces of which still survive. The mortar thickness varied from 1 to 1.5 cm in thickness. However, both the mortar coating and painted decoration were recently removed and discarded to make space for the redecoration of the apse area of this cave-church was subjected to. Abutting the apse is a rectangular-shaped, wet-rubble altar. The central floor area is paved by means of a flagstone paving. Another section of flagstone flooring survives in the northeast end of the cave.

A wall-niche in the southeast corner of the apse probably provided a convenient space for the keeping of sacred vessels used during the celebration of mass. The wall-niche stylistically resembles a rectangular recess located in the southeast corner of the apse, at the church of the Annunciation at Hal Millieri, similarly used for the keeping of sacred vessels. The 1575 Pietro Dusina report found such niches to be liturgically inappropriate and ordered their substitution by gilt wooden tabernacles that were to be mounted on the altar itself.<sup>50</sup> Two other wall niches are present in the southeast corner of the cave-church. As is the case with other cave-churches,

<sup>48</sup> A fragment of a document dated to the 24 January 1441 mentions a Frater Periconus of the Carmelite Order and a Frater Guillelmus Cassar *Prior Conventus Sancte Mariae Nuntiaite* and suggests a Carmelite presence in Malta by at least this date. See Keith, Buhagiar, "St Leonard Cave Church, Lunzjata l/o Rabat", in *Malta and Sicily: Miscellaneous Research Projects*, ed. A. Bonanno, *Officina di Studi Medievali*, Palermo: 2008; Anthony, Luttrell, "The Augustinians in Malta: 1413", *Anacleta Augustiniana* vol. 38, Institutum Historicum Ord. S. Augustini, Rome: 1975, 295-302.

<sup>49</sup> Keith, Buhagiar, "Malta, an Island Satellite in the lee of Sicily: Investigating the Troglodytic Context for the Late-Medieval and the Early-Modern Periods", in *L'Insediamento Rupestre di Monte S. Antonio a Regalbuto: Alle origini del Rahal di 'Abbud*, ed. I. Contino and F. Buscemi, Paruzzo Editore, Caltanissetta: 2012, 95-118.

<sup>50</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 97.

a rock-cut bench flanks the south rock-wall of the cave to provide some seating accommodation. Identical rock-bench seating accommodation was observed by the author of this paper in different areas of Sicily, namely a cave-church in the rock-excavated hermitage of San Corrado at Noto and the partly rock-excavated and partly masonry-built church of Santa Lucia at Scicli.<sup>51</sup>

A mutilated fresco in the southeast corner of the cave-church measures 87 by ca. 182 cm and betrays Sicilian Renaissance elements. It is stylistically datable to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries. The painting's precarious state of preservation does not facilitate its critical appreciation. The mural has more over suffered from a loss of pigment and the head and torso sections of the image appear to have been vandalised at an unknown date. The surviving sections of the painting point towards a work of pedestrian quality. It is painted in an apparent fresco technique and shows St Leonard in a full length, three-quarter profile, standing against a background of a low stone wall with a few trees showing behind it.<sup>52</sup> The saint's identity can be firmly established from the captive's irons, the saint's symbol in iconography. The complete absence of anecdotal elements echoes a Siculo-Byzantinesque tradition.

Mario Buhagiar has tentatively attributed the St Leonard painting to Antonio Pulcella, a Carmelite friar documented in the interim 1496-1508 period and who seems to have thrived from paintings commissioned by local village churches during this period.<sup>53</sup> Pulcella entered into many contractual agreements for the execution of altar pieces and wall paintings. The fact that none of Antonio Pulcella's paintings can be identified deprives the art historian of knowledge of his artistic manner and technique, and Pulcella's connection with the mural of St Leonard, therefore, remains uncertain. Pulcella is an unusual surname for Malta and may have originated from the south-eastern Sicilian seaside town of Pozzallo.

Until recently, the St Leonard mural was not the only surviving element of painted decoration within the cave-church. The remains of a lime-based mortar and daubs of red pigmentation covered sections of the apse and south rock wall, hinting towards the former presence of an extensive decorative programme, of which only one panel painting was retained.

In the absence of further archaeological investigations, the dating of the current cave arrangement is difficult to ascertain. Neither can the approximate construction date of the east end apse be ascertained. An assessment of the tool marks preserved in the rock-walls of this subterranean sacred space, permit a partial reconstruction of the former cave setup, which appears to have experienced two distinct phases of occupation. The former cave apparently had narrower proportions in its north to south axis but extended further westward by several more metres. The changes brought about to the general cave setup appear to have been dictated by the natural process of weathering and erosion. Cracks and fissures in the cave roof close to the present entrance are symptomatic of a partial roof collapse caused by the weathering and the erosion of the brittle Mtarfa Member layer. Cliff-face detachment appears to have also substantially modified the external appearance of this cave-church. This necessitated the

<sup>51</sup> Keith, Buhagiar, "Malta, an Island Satellite in the lee of Sicily: Investigating the Troglodytic Context for the Late-Medieval and the Early-Modern Periods", in *L'Insediamento Rupestre di Monte S. Antonio a Regalbuto: Alle origini del Rahal di 'Abbud*, ed. I. Contino and F. Buscemi, Paruzzo Editore, Caltanissetta: 2012, 99-101.

<sup>52</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 76.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 184.

reconstruction of the present cave screening wall. Cliff dislocation in the Lunzjata area is being further enhanced by the erosion of underlying clay deposits due to water action. The current access passageway is also probably the result of post cliff-face dislocation repair works. The present cave screening wall abuts against a section of the St Leonard mural, and shows that the screening arrangement is posterior in dating to the mural.<sup>54</sup>

The interior space lost due to the process of cliff recession was probably made good for by extending the north and south extent of the cave by ca. a metre in each direction. The former north – south extent of the cave is still delineated by the lower roof section of the extended areas and a slightly elevated floor level. The rock ceiling of the extended areas is only ca. 2 m high, as opposed to the ca. 3.5-metre-high ceiling in the central cave area. The rock walls of the extended areas also display a slightly cruder finish. The surviving paving section in the northern end of the cave, and the dry-stone screening wall, both appear to be post cliff-face detachment alterations.<sup>55</sup>

### **The church of St James at Wied ir-Rum**

A rural cave-church recently identified by the author as the cave-church of St James (San ġakbu) at Wied ir-Rum also merits mention in this study.<sup>56</sup> Access is via a badly weathered footpath which from the Ta' San ġakbu plateau on the north side of Wied ir-Rum in the Rabat (Malta) territory, leads down to a terrace to which are connected three separate caves. The most important cave of the lot is located on the westernmost extent of the rock terrace and directly overlies a perched aquifer gallery. This cave is extremely well-cut, has a surprisingly high ceiling, and a floor level that is lower than that of its fronting terrace (Fig. 7). The cave's entrance was originally screened off by means of a dry-stone wall and access to the interior was through a square-headed doorway. The interior refinement of this cave is remarkable, especially when considering that a sizeable portion of it, including the ceiling, is shaped out of the hard Tal-Pitkal Member, Upper Coralline Limestone deposit.

---

<sup>54</sup> Keith, Buhagiar, “St Leonard Cave Church, Lunzjata l/o Rabat”, in *Malta and Sicily: Miscellaneous Research Projects*, ed. A. Bonanno, Officina di Studi Medievali, Palermo: 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> For a comprehensive account of the San ġakbu cave-church see Keith, Buhagiar, “Revisiting Wied ir-Rum: some recent archaeological discoveries”, *Melita Historica*, vol. 16, no. 1, 77-108.



Figure 8 The cave-church of San Gakbu at Wied ir-Rum. Photographic detail showing a series of cross monograms carved into the west wall of the cave-church. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.



Figure 7 Interior view of the recently identified cave-church of San Gakbu at Wied il-Rum. Photo credit: K. Buhagiar.

The cave measures 8.05 by 6.11 m and has an approximate ceiling height of 3.86 m. Four animal feeding troughs flank the west and east walls of the cave and are probably the result of a subsequent reutilisation of this rock-excavated space. Well-defined tool marks preserved in the wall and roof sections, hint that the layout is the result of piecemeal development and together with its typological context, location and general setting, helped to correlate with the long-lost church of San Ġakbu, known to have existed in the Ta' San Ġakbu area of Wied ir-Rum. This church was immortalised in history following the 1575 visitation report by Pietro Dusina who described the church as follows: *Sancti Jacobi Apostoli Guedrum. Vistavit etiam Ecclesiam sub vocabulo Sancti Jacobi Apostoli, quæcaret introitibus, et rectore, pavimento, ostio, et ornamentis verum causa devotionis patroni viridiorum convicinorum in dicta Ecclesia in die festivitatis Sancti Jacobi celebrari faciunt missam, et à parte superiori intus*

*defluit pluvia. Dominus mandavit nullo pacto in dicta Ecclesia amplius celebrari, nisi prius reflectis portis ligneis, ac tecto, et pavimento restauratis* (Dusina 1575, 168).<sup>57</sup>

The San Ġakbu cave-church was in a state of disrepair in the sixteenth century and was probably deconsecrated and abandoned shortly after Dusina's visit. Particularly intriguing are a series of cross monograms carved into the west wall and ceiling and include two Latin crosses and another containing crossbars, and which can be tentatively identified with a cross potent (Fig. 8). The interior of this presumed cave-church closely parallels that of another rock-excavated church dedicated to Maria di Piedigrotta at Scicli, Sicily.<sup>58</sup> There is the possibility that the surviving cave section was abutted but a masonry-built structure that extended outwards onto a rock-excavated terrace which fronted the cave. No architectural elements pertaining to this structure survive, however, probably because a considerable portion of the rock terrace has collapsed into the underlying valley section due to the natural process of cliff-recession.

### **The Siculo-Greek Monastic connection**

Even though there is no direct historical documentary evidence for a Greek monastic presence in the Maltese archipelago, it was proposed that in the post-AD 1127 period, several of the Maltese cave-churches were administered by Greek-rite Basilian monks.<sup>59</sup> This hypothesis is based on Sicilian and Pantellerian models where Greek-rite monks operating from rural monasteries and anchoritic stations saw to the spiritual needs of rural, often isolated communities.<sup>60</sup>

Much of the argument centres round the meaning of the word *dejr*, which can mean either a cowshed, or animal pen or indicated a monastic building/establishment.<sup>61</sup> *Dejr* terminology was used all over the Islamic East, Spain and Muslim-period Sicily and is often associated with a Christian monastic establishment. Whilst making no distinction between Greek and Latin-rite clergy, Sicilian historical information favours the presence of Greek monks, who carried out their evangelisation programme amongst the Muslim communities of the island. The available local archaeological record does hint in an indirect manner the presence of Greek monasticism, but the issue is still the subject of scholarly debate and necessitates further scholarly investigation. So far, none of the known cave-churches and troglodytic settlements can be securely associated with monastic establishments. On the other hand, of interest to this field of study is the site of Abbatija tad-Dejr, where a palaeochristian period burial complex

---

<sup>57</sup> G. Aquilina, S. Fiorini (eds), *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part IV Documents at the Vatican*, 2011, 171.

<sup>58</sup> Keith, Buhagiar, "Malta, an Island Satellite in the lee of Sicily: Investigating the Troglodytic Context for the Late-Medieval and the Early-Modern Periods", in *L'Insediamento Rupestre di Monte S. Antonio a Regalbuto: Alle origini del Rahal di 'Abbud*, ed. I. Contino and F. Buscemi, Paruzzo Editore, Caltanissetta: 2012, 111-112.

<sup>59</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta: catacombs, cult centres and churches in Malta to 1530*, Oxford, UK: BAR International Series 1647, 2007, 317-338.

<sup>60</sup> Anthony, Luttrell, "Approaches to Medieval Malta", in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A.T. Luttrell, London, UK: The British School at Rome, 1975, 37-38.

<sup>61</sup> Godfrey, Wettinger, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, PEG Ltd., Malta: 2002, 107-108.

was re-utilised as a cult centre during the post-Muslim period, making it the foremost contender for a Greek-rite site during this period.<sup>62</sup>

## **Conclusions**

This study brings to the fore a relatively unknown phase of Malta's medieval past and places an emphasis on a series of cave-churches for which ongoing landscape research has yielded new data and a better indication of the cross-cultural context which inspired the creation of these spaces. Many of the subterranean churches discussed in this site are in dire need of further scholarly attention and require adequate preservation and management. Their loss would further augment the general public's indifference to Malta's Late Medieval socio-religious heritage. Preservation measures should not only concentrate on providing protection to these rock-excavated units, but to the wider landscape in which these subterranean places of cultic worship are placed. In the context of north and north-west Malta, landscape preservation should also encompass the safeguarding of the *giardino* framework, the water galleries, cave dwellings. Most of the presented rock-cut spaces require urgent attention. Topping the agenda, however, is the St Nicholas cave-church at Ġnien San Niklaw at Mellieħa. Cliff structural collapse in the valley section in which the cave-site is placed will soon destroy this fine gem of Malta's rural ecclesiastical past, making the full-fledged archaeological assessment of the cave-church and underlying field terraces an urgent endeavour. Many of the subterranean spaces discussed in this paper contain works of great art historical significance of Siculo-Byzantinesque inspiration. Protection of these spaces also requires sensitivity towards the preservation of this artistic heritage. It is unfortunate that in recent years this artistic content was inappropriately restored, or worse still, completely removed and replaced by works of dubious artistic merit. This shameful attitude is causing further depletion of the little that managed to survive the ravages of time.

---

<sup>62</sup> Mario, Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Fundazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2005, 58-61; Mario, Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta: catacombs, cult centres and churches in Malta to 1530*, Oxford, UK: BAR International Series 1647, 2007, 95.