

## A face from the past: death ritual in Punic Malta

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Era il torrido agosto del 1993 quando incontrai per la prima volta il Professor Giovanni Tore. Appena ventenne, ero stato mandato in Sardegna dall'Università di Malta per conoscere in prima persona i resti fenicio-punici dell'isola. Il Professore mi ospitò a Cabras dove ho incontrato alcuni dei suoi colleghi e allievi sommersi da libri e lavoro. Era l'inizio di quella che sarebbe diventata nei successivi quattro anni un'amicizia profonda. Il Ferragosto lo passammo in gita a Cagliari e nel pomeriggio andammo a visitare la necropoli di Tuvixeddu. Una delle tombe, sopra il portello, presentava in bassorilievo una rappresentazione gorgonica. «Dovresti studiarli», rispose al mio commento sul fatto che in alcune tombe puniche di Malta si trovano dei visi scolpiti in rilievo. Dedico questa nota alla Sua memoria ben consapevole del fatto che il risultato sarebbe stato migliore se Lui ci fosse ancora.

### 1. A discovery

On 19<sup>th</sup> January 1918 the curator of the Valletta museum, Themistocles Zammit, was summoned to a rocky plateau outside Rabat (Malta) to inspect two rock-cut tombs that had been discovered there by accident (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. This was not the first discovery in the area of Qallilija (previously known as Kallilija). In July of the previous year, Zammit had excavated and recorded another tomb<sup>2</sup>, whereas in the autumn of 1912 at least eight tombs had been investigated together with one each in 1914 and 1916<sup>3</sup>. What was unique about the 1918 find, however, was the discovery of a face sculpted in relief inside one of the tombs. This is what Zammit published in his annual report of the museum to the Governor:

The second tomb had a rectangular shaft 7' [2.13 m] long, 4' [1.22 m] wide and 7' [2.13 m] deep and one

funeral chamber was cut at each end at the bottom. The chamber to the west, had the slab sealing the entrance still in situ. Red soil had penetrated into the chamber to a small extent. The tomb had been used over and over again and the various groups of pottery deposited with the dead could be seen as left by those who sealed the tomb after the last burial ceremony. A peculiar feature of this tomb were the recesses cut in the wall for the preservation of funeral pottery, and a ledge of rock left all along the tomb for the deposition of the body. This kind of funeral couch, 7'3" [2.21 m] long, was quite plain except for a raised protuberance at one end on which a human face was roughly carved. The skeleton of a male body was found laying [sic] on this couch with the head just behind the carved face. Along with the body, on the platform, 2 clay plates were found. Two lamps, 5 jugs and 1 plate were lying at the foot of the couch; and 1 large amphora and 2 dishes on the floor close to the opposite wall; 1 cinerary urn and 2 jugs were at the furthest end of the room and a jug and 2 plates in the recess at the back; the other recess was empty and so was the lamphole<sup>4</sup>.

To my knowledge, Zammit had nothing more to add about the face, neither in his field notes nor in his published works about rock-cut tombs in Malta (Figs 2; 3, a)<sup>5</sup>. At some unspecified time – probably at Zammit's instigation – the face was cut away from the rock and removed from the tomb because the object found its way at the Museum of Archaeology where it was recently (2006) relocated in the stores (inv. no. KLJ18/ST/42)<sup>6</sup>. It is not known when the face was last

<sup>4</sup> ZAMMIT T. n.d., p. 38 (reproduced as Fig. 2); ZAMMIT T. 1916-21, pp. 32-37.

<sup>5</sup> ZAMMIT T. 1928b. Commitments elsewhere, particularly his excavations of the prehistoric temple complex at Tarxien, probably kept Zammit from publishing a complete corpus of Phoenician and Punic tomb groups he excavated and recorded systematically during a long and distinguished career. The documentation he kept, which includes photographs, plans, sections and elevation drawings, would certainly have made this task possible. Sagona's (2002) seminal monograph brings all of Zammit's work together for the first time.

<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, the National Museum of Archaeology

<sup>1</sup> ZAMMIT T. 1921, pp. xiii-xiv; SAGONA 2002, Qallilija [Tomb Gazetteer No.] 365 (Chamber A).

<sup>2</sup> ZAMMIT T. 1921, p. xiii; SAGONA 2002, Qallilija 363.

<sup>3</sup> SAGONA 2002, Qallilija 354-360, 361, 362, 364.

on display; the showcase containing the objects from this tomb in the permanent exhibition dismantled in 1993, did not include the stone face, probably because it was far too heavy for it. The label prepared by the curator, the late Tancred Gouder, for the tomb group stated that the face had, «an apotropaic function i.e., [it was] meant to scare away evil spirits»<sup>7</sup>. In this explanation he seems to have been following the opinion held by other specialists, namely Giovanni Garbini who had sought in the Qallilija example a parallel for a find from Monte Sirai in Sardinia, and William Culican for whom Malta provided the evidence to sustain the idea that Punic terracotta masks placed in tombs served the same purpose<sup>8</sup>. I will return to these proposals below.

The aim of this short contribution is to highlight a discovery that has hitherto received little attention, and to consider it in the context of similar representations both in Malta and abroad. It is my intention to attempt to specify what the significance of such representations may have been. A conclusion will bring together the argument I shall make.

## 2. Description of the face and other discoveries

The face was sculpted in high relief in the Upper Coralline limestone that outcrops in the area of Qallilija (Fig. 3, c). An attempt to trace the tomb from which the block was removed has not been successful so far<sup>9</sup>. The block measures about 0.54 m by 0.50 m and is 0.35 m deep. The face is oval and shallow except for a slightly receding arched forehead, but the area below the mouth is more marked, finishing in a pointed chin or, as is more likely, a beard. The eyes, like the mouth, are represented closed as slits below the brows, either side of a stylized nose. The left side of the face rests on a protuberance that formed part of

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(Heritage Malta) has embarked on a project to re-open the Phoenician and Punic Galleries. Tomb groups have been re-constituted and an inventory has been drawn up. A select group of artefacts is undergoing conservation treatment before eventual display in a thematic exhibition.

<sup>7</sup> The label is visible in a photograph of the showcase reproduced in SAGONA 2002, fig. 112.

<sup>8</sup> GARBINI 1964, p. 95; CULICAN 1975-76, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> The precise location of the majority of rock-cut tombs of Phoenician, Punic and Roman date is unknown. The re-location of the tombs listed in Sagona (2002), which have escaped destruction, is a major desideratum and the University of Malta has embarked on a long-term project to do just this. The work involved includes the survey of the tombs after these are emptied from the spoil that has accumulated inside them over the years, with the permission of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage.

the rock-cut bier whereas on the right side, an ear has been carved. Sagona has dated the phase of tomb use associated with the inhumation to the third century BC but the tomb seems to have been in use for longer after that<sup>10</sup>. An attempt to trace the tomb from which the sculpted face was lifted was not successful.

This type of representation is not the only one known from the Maltese Islands. Another face is reported from a shaft-and-chamber tomb at Bingemma, north of Qallilija, explored by Zammit in 1927<sup>11</sup>. It was carved in low relief in the soft and friable rock of the underground tomb, to the left of the entrance at about 0.9 m from the floor. It was described by Zammit: «the face is 9 inches [23 cm] high, oval in shape with the traces of a neck; the eyes, the nose and the mouth are deep but roughly cut»<sup>12</sup>. Zammit made a sketch in his notebook of the tomb, including the face (Fig. 4)<sup>13</sup>. I am not aware that the face was photographed or published in any form by Zammit, other than the sketched version that is reproduced here where the eyes and mouth are shown as slits. It seems that the face was not lifted from the rock face to be transferred to the museum. Unfortunately, despite Zammit's indications that the tomb was located «on the Benjemma plateau not far from the chapel»<sup>14</sup>, I could not locate it and it is impossible to check whether the carving is still in place. Furthermore, the contents of this tomb have not been located in the recent inventory of the museum stores.

Another shaft-and-chamber tomb excavated by the new curator of the museum of Archaeology, Charles Zammit, in 1936 at Ta' Venzja in Mosta, also had a face, carved roughly, in the middle of the wall on the right hand side of the chamber:

The carving represents a human face 1ft. 3 in. (0.375 m) high and 11 in. (0.28 m) wide, having the forehead and eyes replaced by a rectangular cavity in the shape of a niche, 6 in. (0.15 m) high, 7 in. (0.21 m) wide, 7 in. (0.21 m) deep, the nose being represented by a triangular projection and the mouth by an irregular horizontal groove 3 in. (0.075 m) long and 1 in. (0.025 m) wide<sup>15</sup>.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that Zammit specifies that photographs of the tomb were taken and detailed

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<sup>10</sup> SAGONA 2002, pp. 62, 935-940 (Chamber A).

<sup>11</sup> ZAMMIT T. 1928a; SAGONA 2002, Bingemma 46.

<sup>12</sup> ZAMMIT T. 1928a, p. ix.

<sup>13</sup> ZAMMIT T. 1927-30, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> ZAMMIT T. 1928a, p. ix.

<sup>15</sup> ZAMMIT C. 1937, p. xi; SAGONA 2002, Mosta 245.

drawings made before the tomb was destroyed, no documentation could be traced in the museum archives<sup>16</sup>.

In 1961 a tomb discovered whilst a limestone quarry was being extended at Misrah Sinjura in Qrendi, also had representations in low relief (Fig. 5). The brief report, penned by the curator David Trump, makes no mention of any artefacts inside the tomb but states that it «had three rough carvings on its wall, a human head and two very stylized human figures of which one was defaced before it could be removed to safety». Trump thought that these reliefs were «most unusual»<sup>17</sup>. The drawings appended with the report show exactly where the reliefs were located: the head was carved on the inner wall of the rock-cut chamber, opposite the entrance, whereas the human figures were on either side of the entrance on the shaft walls. Sagona is the first to have published what appear to be rubbings of two of the reliefs, the head and one of the figures<sup>18</sup>. Both carvings seem to have been cut away from the rock surface before the tomb was seemingly destroyed because recently they have been traced in the National Museum stores mounted on a wooden board. They have now been conserved to be included in the new displays in the Phoenician and Punic galleries. A description of both reliefs follows. The head (NMA inv. no. MSR61/ST/1) forms part of a block of Globigerina limestone that measures 27 cm by 25 cm and is 8 cm deep (Fig. 5, b). The block was removed from the rock face using a combination of adze and saw as marks of both are visible on the edges and the back. The head was sculpted in low relief; it measures 10 cm in diameter and stands on a neck 5 cm high. The face is rather flat and the brow ridges and cheeks are accentuated by the eye sockets which appear as hollows cut in steps either side of the nose. The mouth is rectangular and, like the eyes and parts of the head, it is marked by sets of parallel lines using a fine point. There are traces of what appears to be (lime?) plaster in the grooves over the mouth. The outline of the ears is visible.

The anthropomorphic figure is found on a Globigerina limestone trapezoidal-shaped block (NMA inv. no.

MSR61/ST/2) (Fig. 5, a). It measures 32 cm high, 16 cm wide at the top and 20 cm at the bottom; its depth is 10.5 cm. Except for the front, on five of its sides, the block shows clear signs of modern cutting. The sawn surface on the back is marked in brown pencil with the words: «ROCK TOMB MISRAH SINJURA QRENDI 20-6-61». The figure was sculpted in low relief to resemble a tube-like body with legs accentuated. It is 22 cm long and 4 cm at its widest. A protuberance over the belly might represent a pair of hands clasped together, but this is not clear. Most detail of the head has been preserved: it appears as a sub-angular mass, 4 cm long, that protrudes directly from the body without an intervening neck. The brow is clear but the nose has been broken off. The right eye is preserved and an almond-shaped outline can, with difficulty, be made out; it is not clear whether the pupil was originally included too. The left eye is missing. The mouth appears as a slit that accentuates a bulging lower lip that becomes one with the chin<sup>19</sup>. The representations discussed thus far, in particular the depiction of the face suggest that the connection between images and their location in funerary chambers is not a chance occurrence. Despite the chronological shortcomings, this suggestion provides a useful starting point for discussion.

### **3. Significance of the face**

Facial representations in burial chambers are not common in the Phoenician and Punic world. Representations of the gorgonic type, with characteristic staring eyes, large deformed ears and a gaping grinning mouth from which protrudes a tongue, are known from two tombs in the Tuvixeddu necropolis in Cagliari, Sardinia. In one of the tombs, at the bottom of the shaft above the entrance to the chamber, the face was sculpted in relief<sup>20</sup>. In the other tomb, dated to the fourth century BC, a gorgonic head

<sup>16</sup> Neither could the pottery inventoried by Zammit be found in the museum stores. Sagona (2002, p. 55) discusses this tomb because of a scarab found within which Zammit had it dated by the British Museum to 663-525 BC. The scarab is not included in Hölbl's catalogue (HÖLBL 1989).

<sup>17</sup> TRUMP 1961, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> SAGONA 2002, fig. 133, 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> The description of the figure is only being given for purposes of information alone. I do not believe that the figure falls in the same category of facial representations discussed here. In fact, a relationship may be sought with the standing figures that occur in Phoenician and Punic tombs, not least in Malta (Malta: SAGONA 2002, Triq Ferris-Rabat 602, figs 218-219, the reference to the same tomb in CULICAN 1975-76, p. 73 and fig. 30 is wrong; Sulci: MATAZZI 1996; BERNARDINI 2004). These figures are often sculpted in such a way that they appear engaged to the underground wall surfaces of tombs as though they are straddling the liminal boundary between different worlds. But this matter deserves a separate paper.

<sup>20</sup> MATAZZI, PARETTA 2004-05, Tomba B58, figs 11, b-d; 14, c and d.

was painted at either end of a frieze with a central *uraeus* on one of the chamber walls<sup>21</sup>. However, the facial representation that comes closest to the Maltese example that inspired this paper is from Monte Sirai in Sardinia. It was recovered from looters in 1963 after it had been removed from the ceiling of Tomb 1 where it had originally been sculpted in low relief<sup>22</sup>. The face has a triangular form, with deep-set closed eyes, reduced to mere slits either side of a stylized nose. Another deep slit defines a mouth that was further accentuated by the use of red paint. Writing in 1964, Garbini thought that the Monte Sirai face recalled the Qallilija example and given its similarity to terracotta «demonic» masks from funerary contexts in Sardinia and North Africa it would have served an apotropaic purpose<sup>23</sup>. Several years later Barreca upheld this definition referring to the image as a «*maschera orrida*»<sup>24</sup>. Unfortunately, Garbini did not elaborate on the meaning of apotropaic<sup>25</sup>. The reference to a Gorgon's head sculpted in relief inside a tomb in Cyprus, however, and the description of the mouth on the Monte Sirai facial representation as distorted suggests that he equated the face with the frightening expression of arrest and warning often associated with the Gorgon<sup>26</sup>. Culican, writing a decade later in a seminal article, explained that the heads carved on Punic tombs, including the examples from Malta, «[...] were scarcely horrifying; they must therefore be considered “apotropaic” only in the sense that they “warn off” the visitor from territory and possessions belonging to someone else»<sup>27</sup>. Culican's suggestion, which really sums up what was and is commonplace about funerary masks<sup>28</sup> and facial representations<sup>29</sup>, does not explain how “warning off” is supposed to work, in other words, what exactly is being communicated by the expressive gesture.

His suggestion is rather weak because it underplays the fact that expressive meaning is open to cultural variation.

Four observations should be made at this point.

1. The facial representations in Maltese tombs are distinctively different from the so-called “grimacing” masks with mouth cut open and drawn up at both corners or else drawn upwards to one side, known from several Punic contexts and long thought to make evil spirits innocuous<sup>30</sup>. Even if it is debatable whether the slits and hollows that constitute the faces in Maltese tombs are meant to be stylizations or not, I take the facial example from Qallilija to depict a mouth and eyes which are shut<sup>31</sup>. Instead, on the “grimacing” masks the orifices are open to allow the presumptive wearer to see and to breathe through the mouth. The Maltese faces are also different from the male masks or protomes and satyr (silenos) masks, Culican's “normal” variety<sup>32</sup>. I see no similarities either with the facial representations that supposedly depict Phoenician demons horned and bearded, with gaping grin revealing gnashing teeth, for which a connection has been sought with some grimacing masks even by way of Mesopotamian inspiration<sup>33</sup>. No horns can be made out on the Maltese examples either.

2. Where I see similarities with the Maltese faces is in representations invariably on stone stelae that have been found in Phoenician and Punic funerary contexts, including the so-called tophet precincts<sup>34</sup>. Culican had drawn important comparisons noting a little known discovery reported by Canon G. Spano of a grotesque face which had been sculpted above the entrance to a tomb at Tharros in Sardinia<sup>35</sup>. Other cases can be mentioned. In Tyre's Al-Bass cremation cemetery

<sup>21</sup> MATTAZZI, PARETTA 2004-05, Tomba A109, figs 11, b-d.

<sup>22</sup> GARBINI 1964, p. 94, pl. XLVII.

<sup>23</sup> GARBINI 1964, p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> BARRECA 1989, p. 127, pl. V, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Aragozzini (2004-05, p. 5, no. 8) believes that the red colour used to highlight the face «*ribadisce il potere apotropaico della protome demoniaca*».

<sup>26</sup> Garbini's distorted mouth appears in the photograph published in his report where the relief is illustrated in a three-quarters view (GARBINI 1964, pl. XLVII); the distortion disappears in the frontal view published in Barreca's (1989, pl. V, 1) contribution (also CIASCA 1991, fig. 32).

<sup>27</sup> CULICAN 1975-76, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. KRIEN-KUMMROW 1961, p. 907; STERN 1976; KARAGEORGHIS 2004. Ciasca (1991) took a more cautious stand.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. MOSCATI 1990, p. 103; BUHAGIAR 2001, p. 173; PISANO 2004; SAVIO 2004-05, p. 455.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. CINTAS 1946, p. 37; PICARD 1965-66, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> It may be relevant to note that the late 6<sup>th</sup>- or early 5<sup>th</sup>-century BC terracotta anthropomorphic sarcophagus from Ghar Barka outside Rabat (Malta) also displays a face with closed eyes and mouth (LEMBKE 2001, cat. no. 106, pl. 51a). This is different from the Arwad/Amrit (Syria) examples that are thought to be its prototypes (LEMBKE 2001, pls 29-30).

<sup>32</sup> PICARD 1965-66, pp. 17, 18, 20; CULICAN 1975-76, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> CULICAN 1976, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> These include the types included in Tore's classification of funerary monuments: Variant B.1/a (anthropomorphic cippus), Type A.2 (incised stele), Type A.4 (L-shaped stele); see TORE 1992; TORE 1998. A similarity can also be sought with a facial representation sculpted in low relief on the wall of a Tunisian *hanout* at Ben Yassa. The photograph published by Ghaki (1999, p. 176) is not very clear but he refers to the face as a «*masque funéraire*».

<sup>35</sup> SPANO 1875, pp. 355-356, fig. 16; CULICAN 1975-76, p. 73.



(Lebanon), the face on stele 9 of Sader's catalogue recalls the face from Misrah Sinjura, whereas the face on stele 47 recalls the Qallilija example<sup>36</sup>. Another stele, 50, now lost, has a face which to Sader recalls the representation on a mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC stele found in a Punic rock-cut tomb in Lilibeo (Sicily)<sup>37</sup>. The eyes on the Sicilian stele appear as circular hollows on published photographs but the excavator clearly defines them as slits: «*brevi incisioni orizzontali e verticali*»<sup>38</sup>. Sader cautiously tries to understand the function of the anthropomorphic stelae she studied, arguing that this is difficult because of lack of evidence and because they do not form a homogenous group. She thinks that the human figures could represent the personification of a supernatural force the function of which was to protect the tomb. Whereas the mask, which is perishable, was meant to protect the dead in the afterlife, the stele was meant to protect the burial place from demonic forces and from tomb robbers<sup>39</sup>. To these proposals I will return indirectly below.

**3.** It is not essential to accept the interpretation made by several scholars in order to appreciate the mortuary connotations of the facial representations inside Maltese tombs. Lancel has pointed out that the Punic terracotta masks which ended up in tombs may have had a previous use other than a funerary one<sup>40</sup>. But this is not to forget that masks are often employed in rites of passage, in transgressing boundaries and hence spatial contexts<sup>41</sup>. The Maltese facial representations, however, belong to a strictly defined context; they were sculpted "inside" the burial chamber, on its rock surface, and form an integral part of it, so that their connection with death need not be disputed.

**4.** The gorgonic representations in the Tuvixeddu necropolis, mentioned above, may allow us to make a detour to Greek data, as others have done to argue for the significance of this motif in the Punic West<sup>42</sup>. Placed above the entrance to one of the tombs, marking the threshold to the burial chamber, the mask of Gorgon could be taken to express, as Vernant put it,

«the alterity of the world of the dead, which no living person may approach»<sup>43</sup>. Crossing the threshold would have meant confronting the monstrosity of the frontal face, the face of terror, of death, of the underworld. The apotropaic effect of the *gorgoneion* is understood because the rhetorical quality of the gaze was deployed effectively by Greek poets, including Homer, as a metaphor in different contexts<sup>44</sup>. But in following this line of inquiry we risk not only oversimplifying the debate on cultural borrowings even for motifs which may have originated in the east (like the Gorgon)<sup>45</sup>, thereby committing the mistake for which we faulted Culican, but to forget that the facial representations from Malta are dissimilar to the gorgonic ones. Closed eyes do not allow the gaze of the viewer to be returned.

The alternative approach I want to follow should offer us more secure terrain. It departs from the observation that the face from Qallilija in Malta has shut eyes and mouth and it builds on Aho's argument on how the most telling organs of the human body are its orifices, its entry and exit points<sup>46</sup>. Aho has noticed how orifice regimens vary from one society to the next and posits that the personal body is a metaphor of the social body. Orifices, as Mary Douglas also claimed<sup>47</sup>, symbolize the body's vulnerable points and they also stand for a group's weak spots. In reviewing theories on orifice management Aho notes that out of terror of their own mortality, human beings often devise legends about body openings and invent ceremonies to police their display and effusions. Aho is primarily concerned with the living (rather than dead) body so he does not elaborate but the ethnographic literature is replete with insights that underscore the importance some societies afford to body openings in death ritual. In his oft-quoted essay on the collective representation of death, Hertz described in passing how closing the eyes and orifices of the corpse was one way of forearming the dead body against demons and evil spirits<sup>48</sup>. Charles' cross-cultural study about mortuary ceremonies in traditional societies reveals the importance afforded the treatment of a corpse's face<sup>49</sup>: painting it, covering

<sup>36</sup> SADER 2005, pp. 69-70, figs 57-58.

<sup>37</sup> SADER 2005, p. 72, pl. 62; for the stele from Tomba 27 Tumbarello at Lilibeo: BISI 1971, pp. 740-742, figs 7, 82, 83; TORE 1984.

<sup>38</sup> BISI 1971, p. 742.

<sup>39</sup> SADER 2004, pp. 392-393; SADER 2005, pp. 134-135.

<sup>40</sup> LANCEL 1995, p. 61.

<sup>41</sup> NAPIER 1986. I believe that the subject of masks in the Phoenician and Punic world warrants revisiting with greater methodological and interpretative sophistication applied to reliable evidence from different contexts.

<sup>42</sup> COSTA, FERNÁNDEZ 2001.

<sup>43</sup> VERNANT 1991, p. 121.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. MACK 2002.

<sup>45</sup> See the analysis by COSTA, FERNÁNDEZ 2001, pp. 225-232. On the Levantine origins of the Gorgon, see HOPKINS 1934; GOLDMAN 1961; BURKET 1992, pp. 83-85.

<sup>46</sup> AHO 2002.

<sup>47</sup> DOUGLAS 1966.

<sup>48</sup> HERTZ 2004, p. 199.

<sup>49</sup> CHARLES 1948.

it with a mask, dripping blood over it, blowing or spitting over it, blocking its orifices (e.g. a bean in the ear, stomach contents of a goat in the mouth, shreds of mirror glass on the eyelids, bits of steel in the teeth, jasmine flowers in the nostrils). The reasons for doing so are multifarious and go from blocking the ears not to hear more about mortal life to covering the eyes with heavy objects to prevent the corpse from staring malignantly. Even the state of the soul and attitudes towards it relate to the corpses' head and its orifices. For instance, the orientation of the face during burial has been known to carry meaning that often related to the journey of the soul towards the world of the spirits<sup>50</sup>. From Tibet, a correspondent of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain reported on the ceremony of extracting the soul of the dead<sup>51</sup>. He explained that if the soul escaped through an aperture in the head, from the eyes, nose, ears, or mouth, it was considered a favourable omen, whilst it was unfavourable if the soul found vent through any other orifice of the body. Another case is that of Melanesian societies. When social anthropologists came into sustained contact with them in the early twentieth century, emphasis was often placed on understanding death rituals. The ethnographic texts of Hocart, for example, explain how shell rings were lashed to skulls of the dead, particularly the orifices corresponding to ears and eyes, because it was through them that the disembodied spirit could hear and see the wishes of the living. It was through the rings that the wishes of the living entered into and were comprehended by the dead<sup>52</sup>.

The ethnographic depth and detail provided by the examples above add to our archaeological picture but are included here primarily to stimulate ideas and to provoke. I now return to the world of the ancients. We know, and several have stressed this<sup>53</sup>, that the face of the living human being, with its particular features, is an important component of an individual's personal representation. But in death, the head is weak and without vigour. The facial representation from Qallilija appears life-less, without the precise expression that often conveys a state of being in a living person (for

instance, smiling, frowning, laughing, crying). In my mind it is human, but is it anything more? Can the representation in the tomb be meant to represent the face of the dead (rather than Death itself)? The position of the face sculpted on the side of the bier inside the Qallilija tomb, and positioned by the head of the corpse as though it too rests on its side on a sort of pillow, with only one ear exposed, would seem to lend weight to this suggestion. But what is the significance of closed eyes and mouth? Whilst it is difficult to put forth a strong case about the eyes over and above the observation made earlier that closed eyes do not have sight (i.e., the face as ocular surface loses its power to receive sight), the information is available to throw light on the relevance of the mouth. One Punic inscription that has been dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC provides the first clue<sup>54</sup>. Inscribed on a bronze hatchet-razor discovered in a tomb in the Sainte-Monique necropolis at Carthage, the inscription has been read thus by Garbini: «there is no vigour in the mouth of ʿKY, whom Astarte had empowered»<sup>55</sup>. Garbini thinks that the vigour in the mouth is linked to the profession which the person held in life, an orator or a singer. One alternative interpretation would be to read more into the explicit link between the mouth of the deceased and the force or power which is lacking on death. A closed mouth may be seen as an attempt to protect and conserve the power (or soul?)<sup>56</sup>, within the body or protect the community from the effects of the power that leaves the body. A second datum lends weight to this idea but also opens up another possibility. I consider this in order to conclude.

In 1929, excavations by M. Dunand in Byblos brought to light the tomb of Bitnoam (or Batnoam), the mother of the mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century BC Phoenician King Azbaal. The complete funerary inscription on the marble sarcophagus talks about a gold MḤSM on the mouth of Bitnoam<sup>57</sup>. There is scholarly agreement on the translation of the Phoenician word despite the fact that the object was not found inside the coffin:

<sup>54</sup> CIS I, 6066; PICARD 1965-66, p. 73 cat. no. 44.

<sup>55</sup> GARBINI 1994, pp. 87-90.

<sup>56</sup> Much discussion has been entertained about the possibility of a Phoenician concept of the soul. A lot depends on the reading of non-Phoenician texts, in particular the reference in the Ugaritic epic story of Aqhat who, after being struck by the warrior Yatpan on Anat's instructions, loses his breath (NPŠ) «like a wind, his life like spittle, like a vapour from his nose» (KTU 1, 18 iv, 223-27; GIBSON 1978, p. 112; cfr. RIBICHINI 2004, pp. 44-45 especially the references therein to the work of P. Xella).

<sup>57</sup> GIBSON 1982, pp. 99-100.

<sup>50</sup> PERRY 1914.

<sup>51</sup> ASBOE 1932.

<sup>52</sup> HOCART 1922, p. 91; WALTER *et alii* 2004.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. BAILEY 2005, pp. 81-82. Pertinent are A. Di Vita's comments about the facial representations of the deceased on the stelae from the Meilichios at Selinunte: «[...] *estremo simbolico elemento di vita* [...]» quoted by Famà (FAMÀ, TUSA 2000, p. 63).

«implement to close lips, bridle, clip, leaf of metal»<sup>58</sup>. This interpretation was put forth eloquently by Friedrich in 1935<sup>59</sup> and found support by Maisler<sup>60</sup> who cited archaeological discoveries of Late Bronze/Iron Age date from burial contexts from Mycenae<sup>61</sup>, Enkomi, Beth-Shan<sup>62</sup>, and Tell Halaf<sup>63</sup> of metal mouthpieces, some lozenge-shaped with holes at either end or rings. Other discoveries in Late Bronze/Early Iron Age Palestine and from Greece have since been added to the corpus<sup>64</sup>. We can follow, from here, two directions. Both put an emphasis on the mouth as an important facial entryway into the body, as Aho put it, «the site where, through a mysterious alchemy, inanimate “stuff” [food] is incorporated and reconfigured into energy, heat, breath, life»<sup>65</sup>. The first recalls an episode in the Old Testament (Isaiah 57:4) which has been interpreted as a reference to Death personified which opens wide its mouth and stretches its tongue to devour the living. A parallelism has also been sought with the story of Baal’s descent into Death’s gullet in Ugaritic literature<sup>66</sup>. In this light, ensuring that the mouth of the corpse was shut may have meant stopping the head/skull from taking on the semblance of Death. The second direction, which I prefer, sticks to the Phoenician evidence. Friedrich was the first to propose that the mouthpiece of the Bitnoam inscription, attached to the head of the deceased, would have prevented demons entry to the corpse<sup>67</sup>. But despite Azize’s assertion to the contrary<sup>68</sup>, we do not have unequivocal information

about the existence of Phoenician demons, unless by demons we understand a generic label owed to ancient Near Eastern sources more generally: spirits of calamity and death<sup>69</sup>. On the other hand, we know from a 6<sup>th</sup>-century Phoenician funerary inscription from a tomb at Tal-Virtù in Malta that an unnamed entity which is «strong of heart» was meant to leave the body to embark on an enemy-infested journey over the waters<sup>70</sup>. So the mouthpiece, just like a tightly shut mouth, could have acted to seal one of the facial openings to keep within, or perhaps prolong, the vigour of the body from taking its final breath. It could also have been meant to stop the «enemy» of the type mentioned in the Tal-Virtù inscription – considered to be Apophis but not inconsistent with Bailey’s and Peri’s powerful enemy that stands in opposition to the created order<sup>71</sup> – from taking possession of the body lying in its eternal resting place<sup>72</sup>. Either way, the sculpted faces in the tombs play on the uneasy paradox that exists between life and death.

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I would like to thank Carla Del Vais for inviting me to contribute to this volume which celebrates the life and work of Gianni Tore. Part of this research was carried out whilst on sabbatical leave from the University of Malta in spring 2007 during which I was a holder of a Visiting Scholarship at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California. The study of the sculpted faces was permitted and facilitated by Sharon Sultana, Principal Curator at the National Museum of Archaeology. I thank her for her patience and help, and am especially grateful to Heritage Malta for allowing me to publish a selection of photographs from their archival collection. To Aaron Brody (California) and Rossana De Simone (Palermo) go especial thanks for passing on some important bibliographic items.

<sup>58</sup> HOFTIJZER, JONGELING 2004, p. 614; KRAHMALKOV 2000, p. 276; AZIZE 2005. To my knowledge mouthpieces have never been recovered archaeologically in Phoenician and Punic tombs.

<sup>59</sup> FRIEDRICH 1935.

<sup>60</sup> MAISLER 1936-37, p. 240.

<sup>61</sup> KARO 1930, p. 36.

<sup>62</sup> ROWE 1930, pp. 39-40, pl. 39.2; ALBRIGHT 1932, p. 298; WRIGHT 1959, p. 56.

<sup>63</sup> VON OPPENHEIM 1962, p. 4, pls 1.8, 2.9.

<sup>64</sup> CASSON 1923-25, pp. 5, 23 and no. 4, pl. III, 1a; OREN 1973, p. 119, figs 46.15, 76.11; KURTZ, BOARDMAN 1971, pp. 212-213.

<sup>65</sup> AHO 2002, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> FREUDO *et alii* 2005, pp. 434-436.

<sup>67</sup> FRIEDRICH 1935.

<sup>68</sup> AZIZE 2005, p. 322. Azize does not sustain his claim. The matter of Phoenician demons may find support in the “flyers” and “stranglers” of the first 7<sup>th</sup>-century BC Arslan Tash plaque often brought into the discussion on eschatology (RIBICHINI 1987, p. 153), and especially on the demonic adversary of the second Arslan Tash plaque that operates in the victim’s home and is asked to flee: «keep away from people’s heads, you that put an end to their senses» (GASTER 1973, p. 19); but complications arise from the fact that the authenticity of the texts and representations has often been called into question (cfr. discussion and support for

their antiquity in PARDEE 1998). See also Conklin (2003) on the “demons” of the first plaque and the preoccupation with nighttime intruders in Levantine thought.

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. KUEMMERLIN-MCLEAN 1992; RILEY 1999<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> GOUDER, ROCCO 1975; FREUDO *et alii* 2005.

<sup>71</sup> BAILEY 1979; HÖLBL 1989, pp. 121-123; PERI 2003. LUCARELLI 2006 writes about the iconography of the snake in ancient Egypt and points out that in the post New Kingdom period, Apophis loses momentarily its malign function.

<sup>72</sup> Conceiving of the tomb as the «house of eternity» is made possible from a reading of a 4<sup>th</sup>-century BC inscription found inscribed in a tomb in Bnghisa, Malta (CIS I, 124; RIBICHINI 1987, p. 149).

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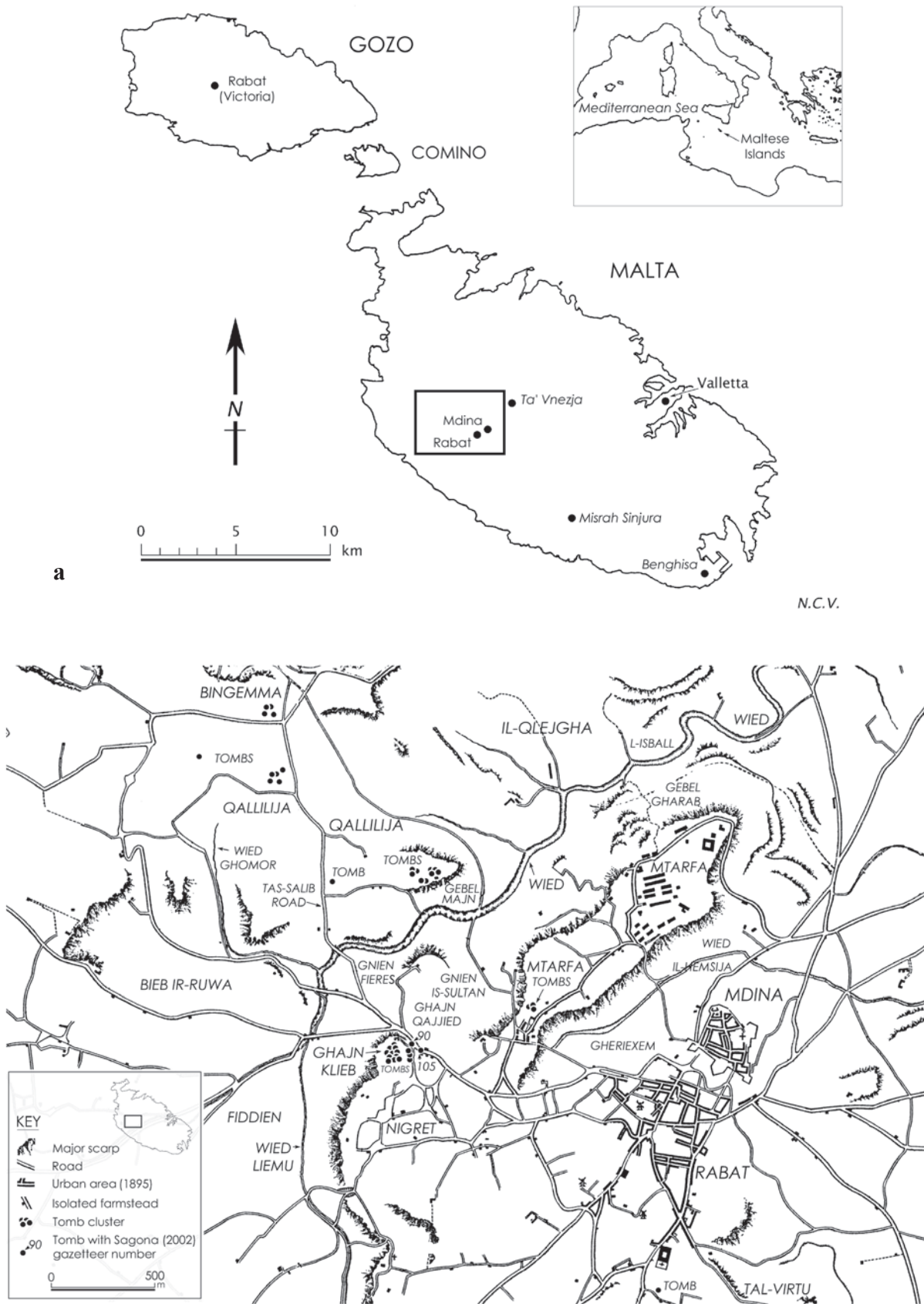
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N.C.V.

**b**

Fig. 1 – Map of the Maltese Islands (a) with place names mentioned in the text and inset corresponding to the area west of Mdina and Rabat (b). In the bottom map, the location of clusters of rock-cut tombs is shown against a map of Malta adapted from *A Map of the Island of Malta sketched and compiled in 1895 by Capt. E. M. Woodward*, London, Intelligence Division, War Office.



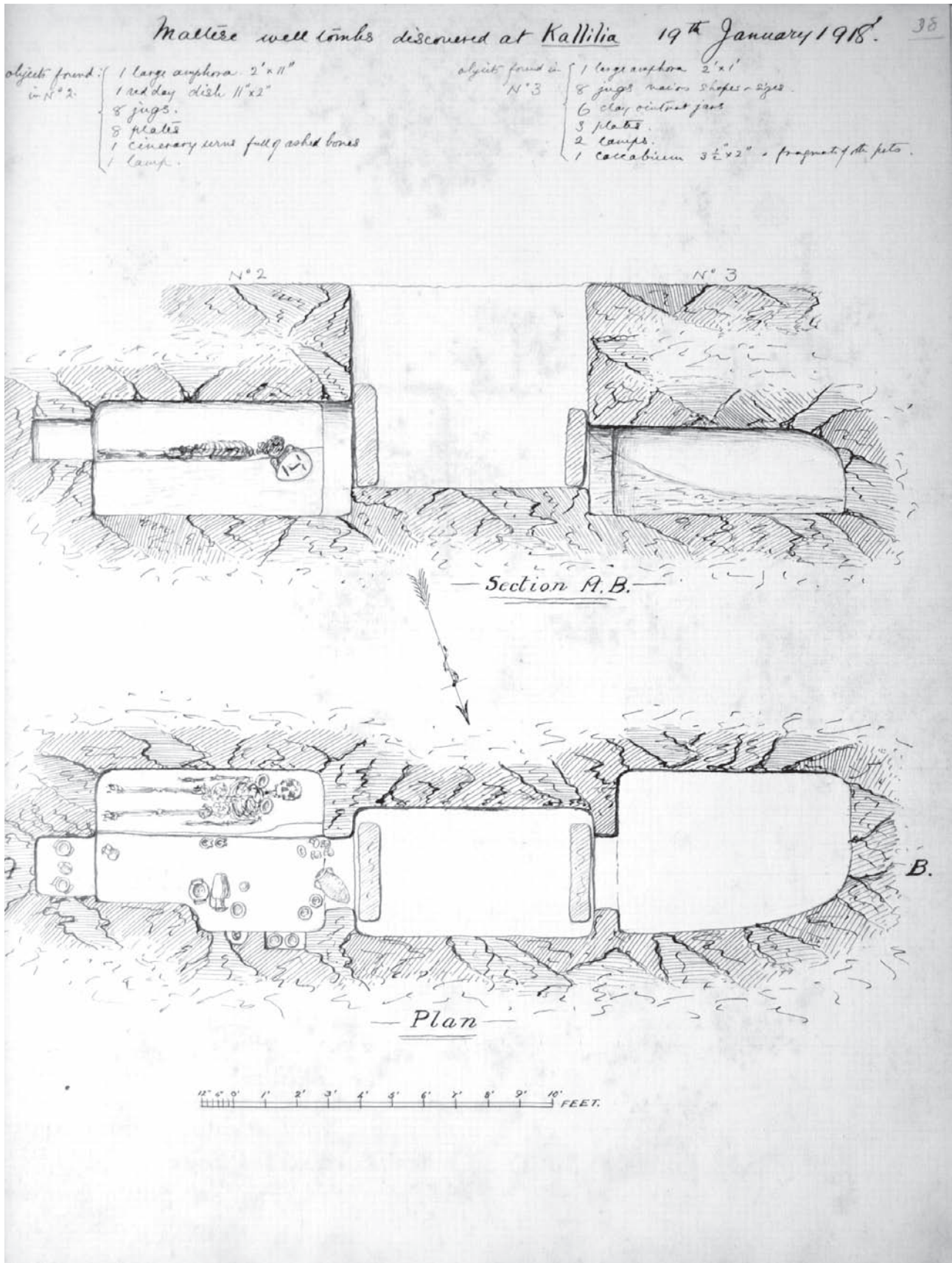


Fig. 2 – «Maltese well tombs discovered at Kallilia 19<sup>th</sup> January 1918» from a folio sketchbook compiled by Themistocles Zammit. Photograph is being reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.



a

b



Fig. 3 – a) Notes about the excavations of a tomb discovered in Qallilija on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1918 (SAGONA 2002, Qallilija 364), compiled on site by Themistocles Zammit (from ZAMMIT T. 1916-21, p. 32); b) Detail of the sculpted head drawn by Zammit (from ZAMMIT T. 1916-21, p. 34); c) The sculpted face rotated counter-clockwise almost ninety degrees with detail of the profile and ear. Photographs are being reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.



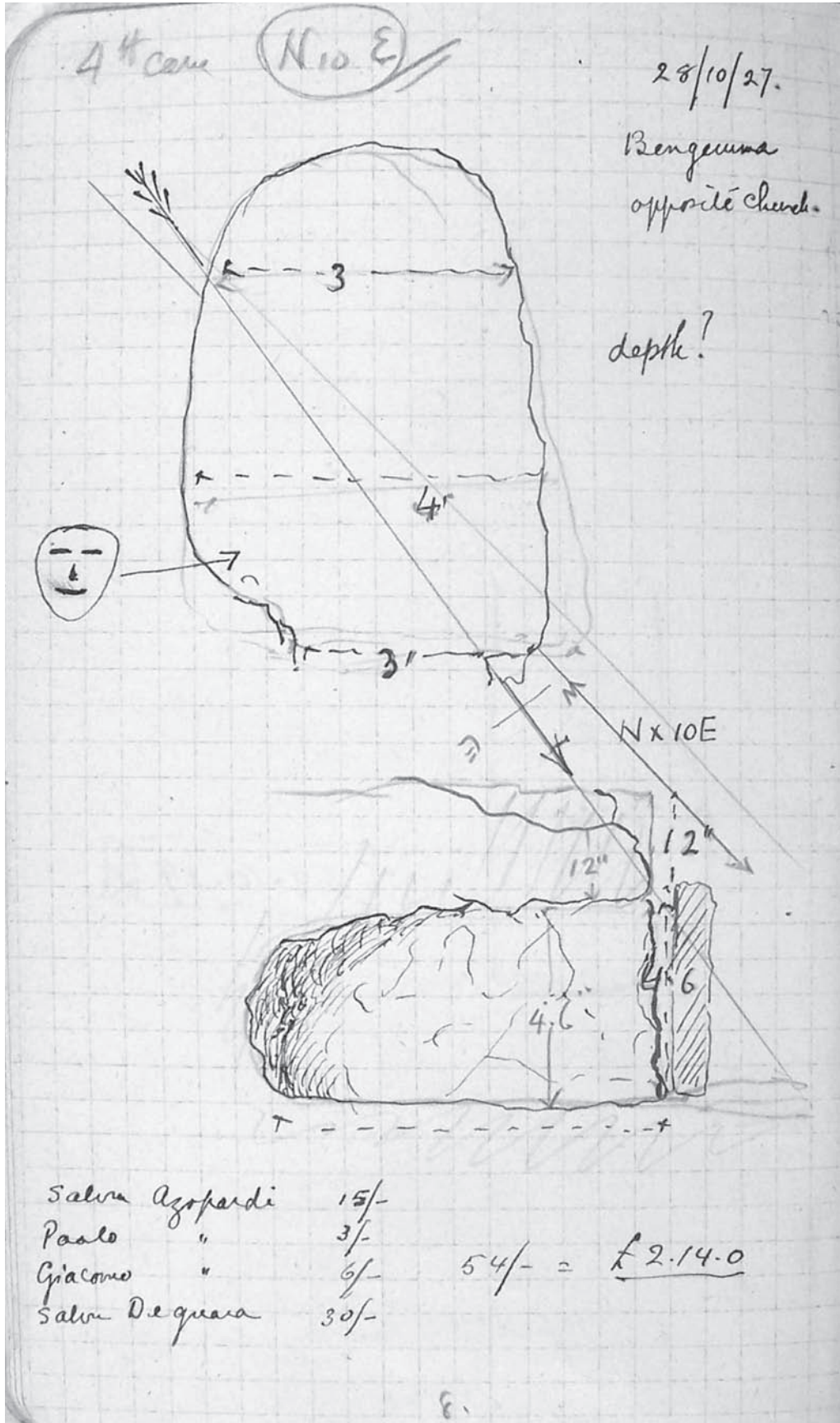


Fig. 4 – Sketch of tomb found on 28 October 1927 by Themistocles Zammit at «Bengemma opposite church» (from ZAMMIT T. 1927-30, p. 8). Photograph is being reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.

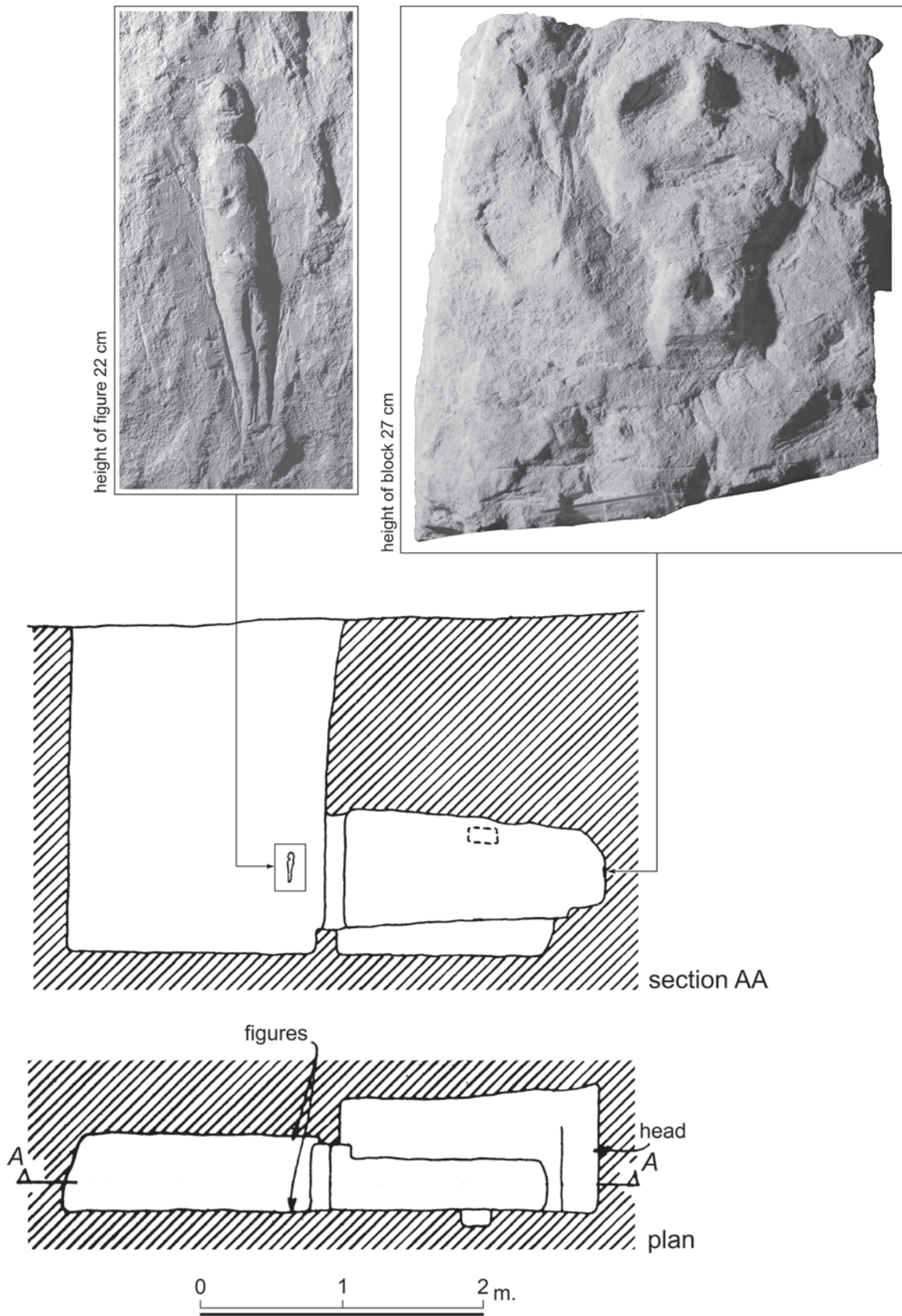


Fig. 5 – Plan and section of a tomb discovered at Misrah Sinjura (adapted from TRUMP 1961, fig. 4). The photographs show one of the figures sculpted in relief in the tomb shaft (left) and the face that originally stood in the tomb chamber (right); photographs are being reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.