

A.A. Caruana's 1891 Exploration Campaign in Victoria – Gozo

GODWIN VELLA

Introduction

The major works on the Maltese Phoenicio-Punic and Roman hypogea published during the past two decades feature an unrealistically low number of entries for Gozo. Buhagiar states that with the exception of Ghar Gerduf no catacomb on the Maltese model can be definitely identified in Gozo,¹ while Said-Zammit finds it difficult to ascertain why only eighteen Punic tombs have so far been discovered on Gozo compared to the 650 known in Malta.² Likewise, Sagona stresses that the dearth of archaeological records with respect to the Phoenicio-Punic burials in Gozo is all but unexplainable.³ The same concern is manifested by Bonanno, who interprets this scarcity of classical burials as an indication of a slower demographic growth than in mainland Malta.⁴

This scenario assumes a completely different twist, however, when reading through earlier publications, particularly the ones authored by Dr. A.A. Caruana. He quotes Count Borch who in the late eighteenth century recorded the existence in Gozo of catacombs on the Maltese model.⁵ Eventually, in his *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta explored and surveyed from the year 1881 to the year 1897*, Caruana reaffirms that the area encompassing Tal-Braġ, Vairinga, Piazza St. Agostino, and Ghajn il-Gbira is scattered with rock tombs and burial caves.⁶ Nonetheless, in this publication Caruana produces three plans only of such burial caves. Moreover, no distribution map like the one of the boundaries and extent of the ancient Graeco-Roman capital 'Melita' and of its suburb⁷ is included, and notwithstanding Caruana's quoted claim, little could be said about the necropolis of the Classical town of Gaulos.

Caruana's explorations in Gozo

Incidentally, however, an enlightening collection of manuscripts, loose field notes, and sketches generated by Caruana are treasured at the National Library of Malta together with his numerous publications. These valuable documentary sources seem to have been greatly overlooked by researchers in this field and a number of such manuscripts were not even catalogued until recently.⁸ Included in this lot was an A3 sheet of paper with pencil sketches and corresponding notes describing various underground burial compounds explored in Piazza S. Francesco and Strada Conservatorio in Rabat-Gozo during April 1891. A total of seven independent units are featured, two in Piazza S. Francesco, two in Strada Conservatorio, and three within the footprint of the Conservatorio itself (Figure 1).

These sketches show the layout of each unit, give the corresponding measurements of the length, width, and height of the respective chambers, passages, and shafts, and include a short note indicating whether any tomb furniture and related archaeological material were found during the explorations. Moreover, Caruana gives the exact location of the respective units by recording the distance separating them from easily identifiable architectural features. In this respect, the hypogea in Piazza S. Francesco are tied to the main doors and semicircular tower-like protrusions incorporated in the façade of the Hospital building (today housing the Ministry for Gozo), while the respective door numbers in Strada Conservatorio are exploited for the location of the nearby graves. The ones within the Conservatorio's footprint are related to the

¹ M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*, BAR International Series 302, (Oxford, 1986): 370.

² G.A. Said-Zammit, *Population, Land Use and Settlement on Punic Malta – A Contextual Analysis of the Burial Evidence*, BAR International Series 682 (Oxford, 1997): 4.

³ C. Sagona, *The Archaeology of Punic Malta*, Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement 9, Peeters (Belgium, 2002): 273.

⁴ A. Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic, and Roman*, Midsea Books (Malta, 2005): 93.

⁵ A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of Islands of Malta* (Malta, 1882): 110.

⁶ Id., *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta Explored and Surveyed from the year 1881 to the year 1897* (Malta, 1898): 11, 77.

⁷ Ibid.: 84.

⁸ These manuscripts were brought to the author's attention by Ms. Maroma Camilleri.

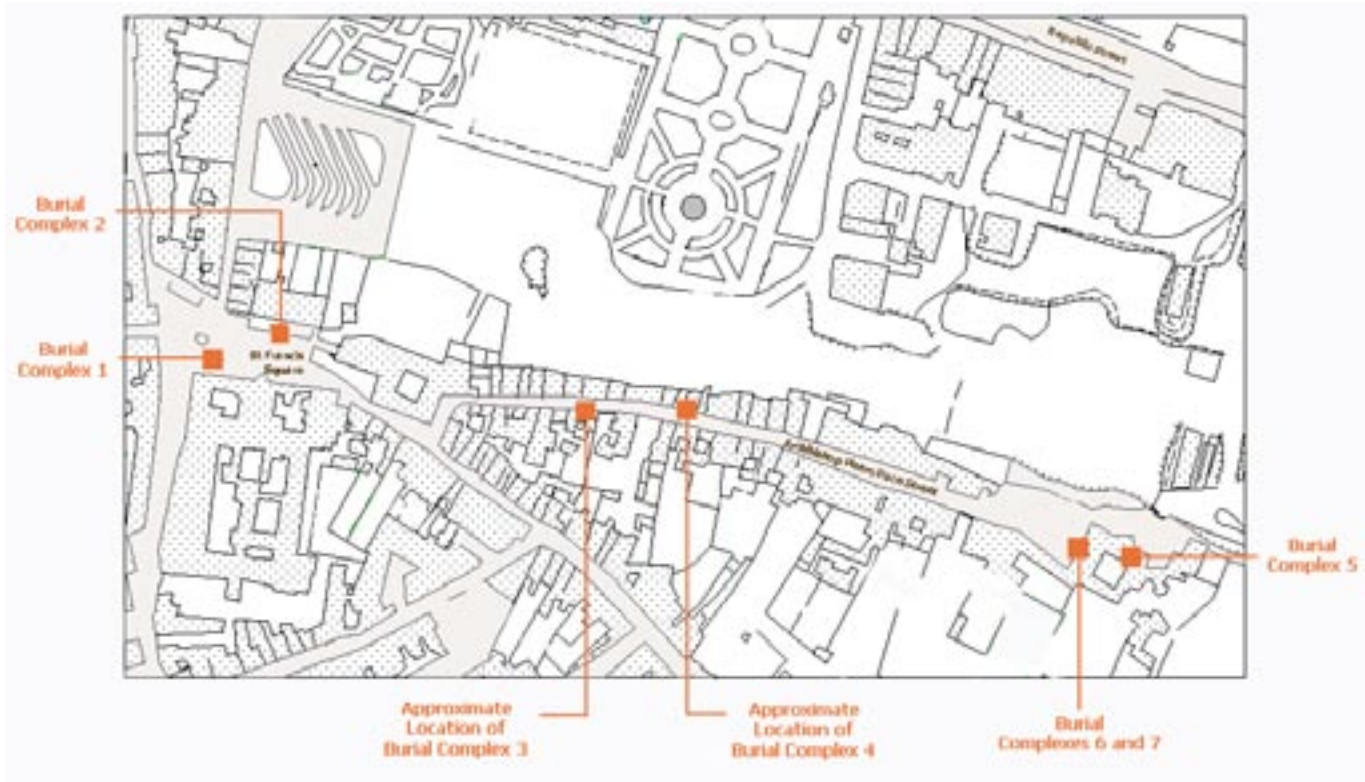


Figure 1: Distribution map of the burial complexes at Piazza S. Francesco and Strada Conservatorio.

front door and to the side wall (Figure 2).

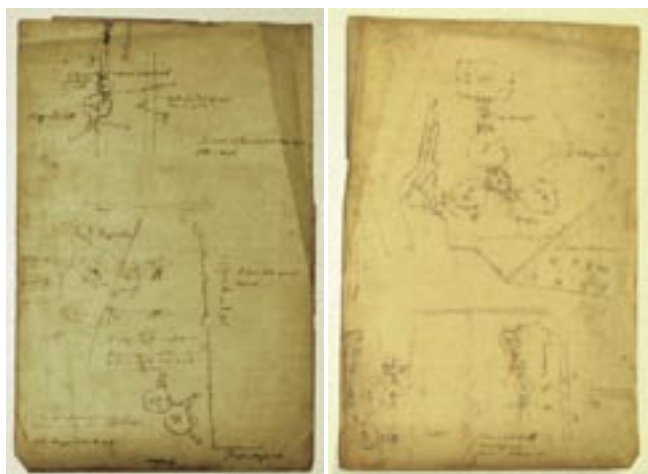


Figure 2: The two sketches executed by A.A. Caruana

None of these seven hypogea explored in 1891 correspond to the ones eventually published in Plates XVI and XVII of his 1898 *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries*. The latter were inspected in 1893 as stated by the corresponding notes to Plate XVI.⁹ This suggests that Caruana conducted several exploration campaigns over a number of years to study the necropolis of

Gozo's main town. In this respect, the expeditions undertaken in 1892 and 1893 respectively,¹⁰ were preceded by another in 1891.¹¹ Another testimony to Caruana's keen interest to examine Gozo's necropolis is provided by Rev. Joseph Zammit's 'Diario'.¹² Actually, Zammit makes two entries with regards to Caruana's explorations. The former is dated 13 April 1891 and states '*dalla Piazza San Francesco si portavano alla strada del Conservatorio per gli scavi*' (on 13 April 1891 the excavation campaign was relocated from St Francis Square to the Street of the Conservatory).¹³ Eventually, Zammit¹⁴ notes also that '*Il di 27 Giugnio 1893 nella Piazza San Francesco principarano degli scavi onde trovar cose antiche. Settimana prima si fecero entro gli istituti caritatevoli*' (on 27 June 1893, St Francis Square started to be explored with the aim of unearthing ancient remains. During the first week, these excavations were held within the footprint of the charitable institutions).

Caruana's efforts to locate and record Gozo's

⁹ Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs*: 11.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Although Caruana visited a number of hypogea at ta-Librag in 1888 (vide 19 below), no evidence suggesting that he had conducted a systematic survey on that occasion has surfaced to date.

¹² The 'Diario' of Rev. Joseph Zammit DD (1841-1905) covers the period 1871-1898. It was eventually replicated in a six-volume manuscript between March and June 1975 by Rev. Can. Nicholas Vella Apap (1930-2000).

¹³ Ibid., Vol.3, f. 187.

¹⁴ Ibid., Vol.3, f.108.

hypogea must be viewed within a wider context. In April 1882, Caruana had presented papers to the government on the necessity to preserve the ancient monuments and the steps to be taken to achieve this, and by October 1884 the Archaeological Commission was in place with a budget of £200. One of the objectives was to survey and identify ancient sites and monuments outside Valletta, before the lands were lost to private developments.¹⁵

Likewise, the immediate area to the south of the ancient settlement of Rabat started to be engulfed by urban sprawl during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Apart from the major developments of the Poor House adjacent to the Male Hospital in St Francis Square and of the new primary school in Vajringa Street in the 1850s,¹⁶ the whole neighbourhood extending from St. Augustine Square to Ghajn Qatet was attracting several new private residences. In this respect, during the Council meeting of 19 June 1890 the Hon. M.A.M. Mizzi stressed the urgent need of a systematic archaeological survey of certain localities in Gozo.¹⁷ Caruana replied on 23 February 1891 by stating that these researches 'will be undertaken as soon as circumstances will permit'.¹⁸

The 1891 explorations

Caruana seems to have been very anxious to honour his commitment. Judging from the manuscript in caption the first explorations were held a few weeks later in April 1891. The two hypogea in Piazza S. Francesco include two short notes stating '*vedi abbozzo in data 8.4.91*' (consult design in entry dated 8.4.91) and '*vedi misure esatte nel field-book in data 10.4.91*' (consult precise measurements in the field book's entry of 10.4.91) respectively, while the sketch of one of the two units in Strada Conservatorio is accompanied by an annotation stating '*vedi nel field-book un abbozzo piu in grande - datato 20.4.91*' (consult larger sketch in the field book's entry of 20.4.91). These three dates, together with the aforementioned statement by Rev. Zammit of 13 April 1891 suggest that this exploration

campaign was spread over a period of some three weeks, approximately one week each in Piazza S. Francesco, Strada Conservatorio, and in the grounds of the Conservatorio.

Unfortunately, the quoted documents reveal no information on the surveying and fieldwork techniques adopted and on the resources employed for the location and eventual clearance of the respective hypogea. The locals probably knew the exact location of a few of the hypogea in caption. These were rifled at an earlier date as betrayed by the insignificant amount of objects reclaimed in 1891. Likewise when commenting on the tomb cave discovered in 1888, Caruana remarks that '*the whole hill Tal-Braġ at Gozo is perforated by an extensive suite of these Phoenician and Roman tombs, some of which are very large and have been rifled long ago when they were returned into a place of refuge like those at Malta*'.¹⁹ Nonetheless, some of the seven hypogea inspected in 1891 must have been still sealed, as indicated by the items recouped and tomb arrangements recorded. To locate them, Caruana was most likely assisted by employees from the Public Works, as had happened a few years earlier when conducting a similar systematic surveying exercise in southern Malta.²⁰

Piazza S. Francesco

The first hypogeum to be inspected in Piazza S. Francesco was a few feet to the north-west from the prominent doorway on the right-hand side of the Hospital façade (Figure 3). It consisted of two interconnecting and roughly circular chambers forming an 8-shaped plan, and measuring about seven and nine feet in diameter respectively. On the southern and eastern sides, Caruana recorded two rectangular recesses, some eight feet long and two feet wide. This suggests that the resultant vault evolved in two distinct stages. Actually, the 8 shaped burial chamber is an amalgamation of two independent Phoenicio-Punic rock graves, while the rectangular recesses represent the vertical shafts leading down to the respective chambers. The site seems to have been rifled before being inspected by Caruana on 8

¹⁵ Sagona, 15.

¹⁶ *Blue Books*: Poor House – 1851, f. 60; Primary School – 1855, f. 52.

¹⁷ National Library of Malta, Letters Book, Vol. II, f. 201.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 74.

²⁰ Sagona: 15.

April, as he stated that *'in essa pochissime cose si trovano, tra esse anche un pezzo di moneta'* (very few remains were found in this tomb, including a coin fragment).

On 10 April Caruana recorded a more extensive underground sepulchral complex in the same square. This was underlying the boundary wall along the northern perimeter of the square, opposite the conspicuous doorway on the left-hand side of the Hospital façade (Figure 3).

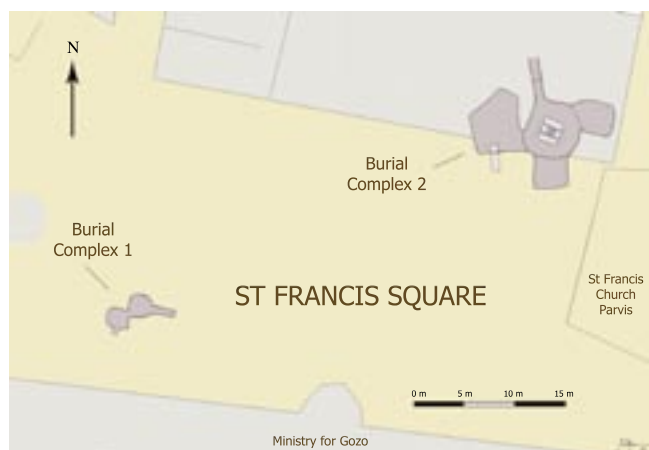


Figure 3: Plan of the burial complexes in St Francis Square

The plan features a central and squarish hall flanked by three spacious alcoves along the eastern, southern, and western walls respectively. Access seems to have been provided via a narrow corridor heading northwards to the foot of the low cliff overlooking the bus terminus. The burial chambers had a fairly lofty ceiling, reaching in many places the 12 foot mark. Conversely, the access passage was four feet high only. Caruana gives no indication about the tomb furniture discovered, though he indicates what looks to be a group of three sarcophagi at the centre of the main burial chamber.²¹ These were aligned along a northwest/southeast axis, and about eight feet long.

Other burials were successively discovered in Piazza S. Francesco. According to Rev. Zammit, in July 1891 more *'caverne sepolcrali'* (sepulchral caverns) were unearthed *'nelle pedamenta'* (in the foundations) of the *'faciata di San Francesco'* (façade of the St Francis)²². Likewise, Caruana

conducted a second exploration campaign two years later in June 1893, when at least three more hypogea were located.²³

Strada Conservatorio

Having explored the two hypogea in Piazza S. Francesco, Caruana moved on to Strada Conservatorio, eventually renamed Archbishop Pietro Pace Street, to investigate two more hypogea. The former was located along the southern side of the street, more precisely 20 feet to the east of door number 55 (Figure 4), while the latter was on the opposite side of

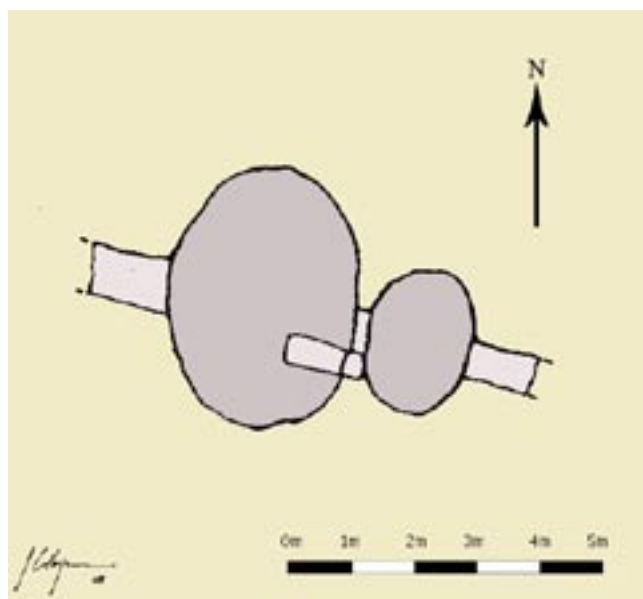


Figure 4: Plan of the first burial complex at Strada Conservatorio

the street and faced door numbers 37 and 38 (Figure 5). Since the last decade of the nineteenth century the door numbers have been changed and the existing façades do not preserve any of the contemporary door numberings. However, when taking into consideration Caruana's dimensions relating to the width of the street it is most likely that these hypogea were sited in the western half of Strada Conservatorio, namely the stretch between the back of the Franciscan Friary and the private residence of Archbishop Pietro Pace's family.

²¹ A large sarcophagus built of tiles was discovered in a close by hypogeaum in 1893.

²² Zammit, Vol. III, f. 195.

²³ Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs*: 75, 77.

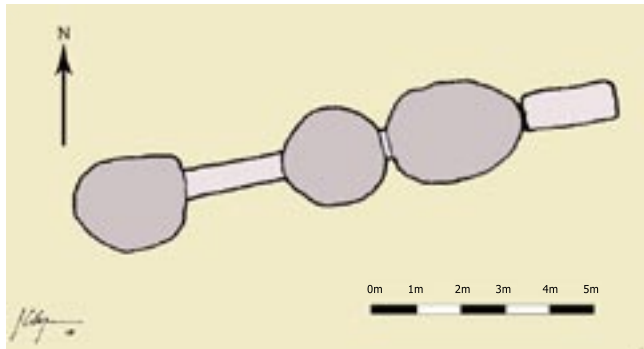


Figure 5: Plan of the second burial complex at Strada Conservatorio

Caruana's team seems to have entered the first complex by excavating a trench through the ceiling of one of the burial chambers. The layout consisted of two interconnecting and roughly circular vaults plus two low passages extending from the respective extremities. The burial chambers measured 7 x 3.6 feet and 13.3 x 10.6 feet respectively, and were linked to each other by a small opening barely 3 feet high. Correspondingly, the end passages were very claustrophobic, being a little more than 2 feet wide and 4 feet high. These passages lead to other burial chambers that Caruana had no access to, owing to their occupation by third parties. In this respect, it is quite evident that this hypogeum was rifled at an earlier stage, though Caruana included a note suggesting the discovery of several objects.

The other hypogeum located in Strada Conservatorio comprised three burial chambers and what looked to be two shafts. This layout betrays a piecemeal development, namely the amalgamation of two independent rock graves. One of the chambers had a circular plan and measured 7 x 7 feet, while the remaining two had an oval shape and measured 6 x 8 feet and 7 x 10 feet respectively. The shafts followed a typical rectangular layout and measured 3.6 x 7 feet and 2 x 8 feet respectively. Apparently this site was wrecked before Caruana's investigation, as he records only the discovery of few objects of terracotta.

The Conservatorio

Underneath the Bishop's Conservatorio, Caruana discovered a capacious burial

compound featuring six chambers and two shafts arranged in a T-shaped layout (Figure 6). Most probably, he reached this complex by digging at the foot of the Conservatorio's side wall bordering the '*passaggio per la contrada tal IbraD'*' and breaking through the ceiling of the northernmost chamber. Again, this complex looks to have had an organic development through the amalgamation of earlier independent units. As a matter of fact, the two sections labelled by Caruana as '*spiraglio*' indicate the shafts of the original Phoenicio-Punic rock graves. Five of the resultant burial chambers had a circular or oval plan and their dimensions varied from 6 x 6 feet up to 22 x 12 feet. The sixth and remaining void had a rectangular plan and measured 11 x 6 feet. Generally speaking, these burial chambers had a relatively low ceiling, exceeding the five foot mark in one instance only. Most probably, this hypogeum was ransacked before or during the construction of the Conservatorio during the 1780's,²⁴ as Caruana makes no reference to the discovery of any objects or related tomb furniture.

Likewise, in the Conservatorio's forecourt the 1891 expedition investigated two more Phoenicio-Punic rock graves. The larger was very close to the main door and featured a central shaft and two burial caverns, while an independent single-chambered crypt had its shaft positioned 31 feet and 6 inches to the west of the same door. The respective shafts measured 6 x 2 feet, and the chambers had a slightly oval layout. The ceiling of the vaults was 5 feet high only, while the more spacious crypt measured 12 x 10 feet and belonged to the second unit. Once more, no finds were found according to Caruana's manuscript and it is assumed that these rock graves were looted at an earlier stage.

Conclusion

The description above presents a fairly homogeneous picture. Except for the second hypogeum in Piazza San Francesco, the 1891 expedition recorded the existence of several typical Phoenicio-Punic rock graves consisting of a rectangular shaft with one or two burial

²⁴ A. Gauci, *Gozo – A Historical and Tourist Guide to the Island*, St. Joseph's Home Printing Press, Hamrun (Malta, 1969): 45.

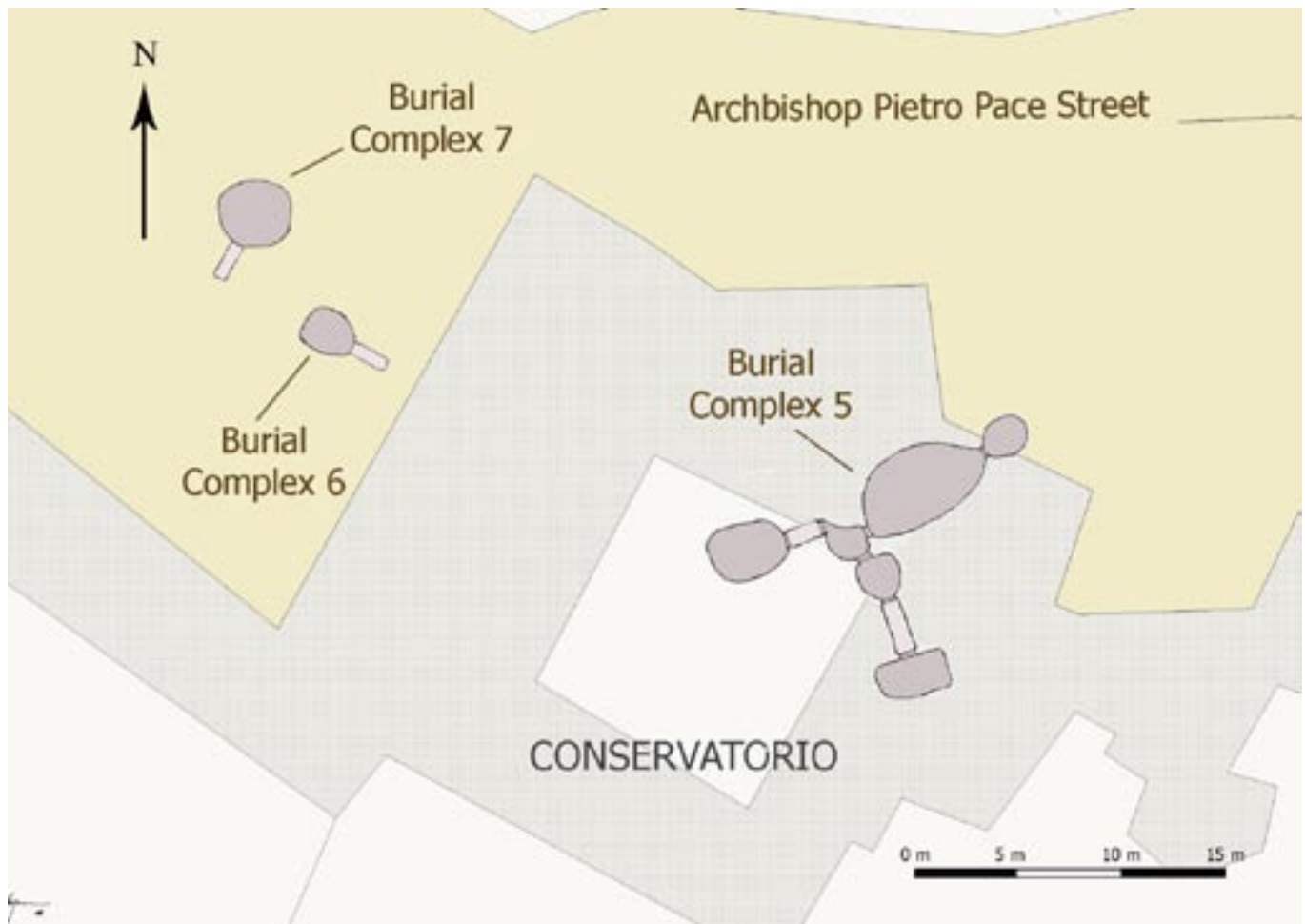


Figure 6: Plan of the burial complexes at the Conservatorio

chambers in opposite walls. Besides, in four cases, two or more of these originally independent rock graves were dug very close to each other to the point that either by accident or by design the chambers were amalgamated with each other to form small hypogea. This scenario was eventually confirmed by the 1893 explorations in the whereabouts of Piazza San Francesco, when at least three similar arrangements were documented.²⁵ Similarly, Sir Temi Zammit observed a number of matching instances at Taç-Ċaġhqi in Rabat-Malta.²⁶

Moreover, the layout and size of the respective hypogea present other conforming characteristics. Generally speaking, the burial chambers follow a circular or slightly oval plan, thus providing the only clue vis-à-vis their dating. Based on Sagona's tomb development scheme,²⁷ the majority of the graves discovered in April 1891 by A.A. Caruana are to be linked

to the early Phoenician Period, datable to the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Besides, such a consistent number of early Phoenician tombs suggest that, by the opening years of the first millennium BC, the neighbourhood of Rabat was supporting an established settlement. This implies also that by 1000 BC Rabat had established itself as the most thriving settlement in Gozo. The relocation of Gozo's centre of settlement from Xaghra to Rabat during the late Bronze Age was determined by the strategic combination of security and ample space for urban development offered by the naturally fortified hill of the Gran Castello and the underlying extensive plateau of Rabat.

Mr Godwin Vella is the Manager Gozo Museums and Sites within Heritage Malta.

²⁵ Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs*: 75, 77.

²⁶ T. Zammit, *St Paul's Catacombs and Other Rock-cut Tombs in Malta*, (Malta, 1923): 6.

²⁷ Sagona: 15.