

## A Note on the Interpretations of the Iconography at Hal Resqun Palaeochristian Hypogeum, Gudja (Malta)

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### ABSTRACT

*The figures incised on the lintel of the entrance to the hypogeum and on the conch of the western burial chamber of the Hal Resqun hypogeum are analysed in detail and additional interpretations of the figures are given in the light of biblical and early Christian accounts.*

Keywords: Hal Resqun, iconography, Late Roman, Byzantine, burial

### *The Hypogeum*

Although the Hal Resqun hypogeum was discovered in 1887, the first reports were made decades later by Sir Themistocles Zammit (M.A.R. 1912-13; Zammit 1934). The remains were rediscovered in 1975 and later, precautions were taken to protect the hypogeum by sealing it with stone slabs. It is probable that the hypogeum still lies within a traffic island at Gudja, on the way to the Malta International Airport (Buhagiar 1986).<sup>1</sup>

The hypogeum (Figure 1) was reached through a flight of eight steps leading into a spacious room, the entrance having a semi-circular arched lintel with a graffito of birds. A triclinium funebre in a roughly semi-circular exedra lay due north. A semi-circular recess was documented half way down the steps on the north facing wall. Two burial chambers were found due east and west of the space in front of the exedra. All entrances to the chambers and recesses were flanked by pilasters decorated with vertical fluting and "barley sugar" half-columns. A reassessment of the photographs available reveals that the latter type of

decoration corresponds to 'diagonal fluting' described in the literature on architectural elements (Parker 1996). A more detailed description of the hypogeum has already been provided by Themistocles Zammit (1934) and Mario Buhagiar (1986) and readers are referred to these references for further details.

Decoration in the hypogeum does not only consist of fluted pilasters but also of various incised graffiti. The descriptions and interpretations of the iconographic elements have already been studied by Zammit (1912 – 13; 1934) and Buhagiar (1986; 1998). More recently a further interpretation has been provided by Mifsud and Mifsud (1997). The more intriguing elements in the decoration are the graffito of a pair of birds feeding a chick (found on the lintel of the entrance) and the decoration on the west burial chamber entrance depicting a possible biblical scene.

### *The Birds' Graffiti*

Zammit's interpretation of these graffiti (Figure 2) is that the birds represent the "charity and love of the redeemer" in the image of two pelicans which were reputed in popular folklore, to feed their young with their own flesh. It is not the purpose of this article to

discuss the origins of this legend but in Christian iconography it often represents the Holy Eucharist, where the body and blood of Christ is offered as bread and wine to the congregation.

Buhagiar states that the bird images “pose iconographical difficulties” because he interprets the branched lines on the head of the birds as “stag antlers”, one bird referred to as having four legs and a tail (Figure 3). A review of Buhagiar’s “queer peculiarities” reveals that these are compatible with stylisations and conventions probably used by the iconographer to emphasize particular details.

Mifsud and Mifsud (1997) hypothesize that the birds can be “identified with the extinct Maltese crane” and that the art forms are Palaeolithic in date. They suggest that later the rock was cut to form the hypogeum, leaving the graffiti intact. These authors also suggest that “the inner array of designs in the same tomb are similarly thought to be Palaeolithic.” This interpretation is considered by the present author as erroneous. The Maltese extinct crane is only known from three localities containing quaternary deposits and consists of semi-fossilized bone material (Harrison 1979; Borg 1999). The context of the Hal Resqun graffiti goes a long way to exclude a date going back to the quaternary.

If the illustrations presented by Zammit and Buhagiar (Figures 2 and 3) are faithful representations of the incised lines on the lintel, a further interpretation that can be proposed is that the images depict two crested birds feeding their chick at the nest. The legend of the pelicans as noted by Zammit could very well be the reason behind these images. The iconographer working in the hypogeum, possibly having seen for himself the pelican or known a figure of the bird from descriptions, provides a fairly accurate rendering of the birds in their breeding plumage. Pelicans exhibit a crest of feathers during their breeding season (Fitter et al 1972). It must also be noted that pelicans are a rare occurrence in the central Mediterranean and occur as vagrants in the Maltese Islands (Sultana et al 1975).

The graffiti may be considered as a form of stylised iconography with the use of conventions, which depend on and accommodate the medium used in their artistic execution. In the depiction of the supposed “four legged” creature, the two legs of the bird are represented by the spaces between the three vertical lines midway under the body. Furthermore, the tail is illustrated by the space between the two other lines at the rear of the bird, accentuated by additional lines

probably representing feathers. The right wing is depicted by a slightly curved line in the flank of the bird. Other quadrupeds depicted in the biblical scene, referred to below show the same style and conventions.

### *The Biblical Scene*

A scene with three anthropomorphic figures, several quadrupeds and fish is depicted on the arched lintel of the entrance to the west burial chamber (Figure 4; Plate 1). Buhagiar and Zammit also comment on the presence of other bird representations but these are not shown in their illustrations. In the late seventies, Stevenson (1978) published the illustration by Zammit, Buhagiar later publishing this figure the other way round (ie left shown as right). A study of the plan and photographs reveals that the illustration by the former two authors is the correct one.

Zammit interpreted this scene as “the Biblical account of God’s creation of the world...” “The Almighty appears...” “with outstretched hands...” “over the numerous creatures that came out of his hands...” (Genesis 1:1- 31). Stevenson (1978) on the other hand interprets the scene as the naming of the animals by Adam (Genesis 2:18-20) and the central ghost-like/ anthropomorphic figure as “the word of God”, the “Demiurgus”. An additional interpretation was given by Buhagiar (1986) who interprets the scene as “the heavenly paradise with three orantes, the latter presumably representing the persons buried in the tomb. These three interpreters of the scene, however, appear to have missed the main details of the graffiti.

The main ghost-like/anthropomorphic figure in the centre of the panel seems to show the Almighty, with raised hands creating all creatures around him. Fish and quadrupeds are clearly seen and identified. However the figure representing God is shown with only one full hand with five fingers. To his left, beyond two quadrupeds is another similar figure (also ghost-like but smaller and with both hands raised, the right with four fingers, the left with five). There are two interpretations to this figure. It either represents the Almighty creating the animals or Adam naming the animals in the Garden of Eden. An inverted bare breasted figure can be seen to the right of the central figure. The hands not being important to the story are not shown, but important characteristics to represent a female, (i.e. the breasts) are clearly seen. The inverted figure shows that the female is not standing but lying down. Again to the right of the Almighty is another interesting feature. A semi-circular shape appears above the figure of the female. It is divided vertically

into two quadrants. Inside the left quadrant are five slanting lines while the right quadrant has four lines slanting the other way. This feature seems to indicate a human torso with ribs. Since there is one less on the right side there is good reason to believe that it represents Adam's torso during the creation of Eve.

*“The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the air and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Genesis 2:20-22)<sup>1</sup>.*

Therefore through analyses of these details, the interpretations of this iconographical account appear compatible with the story of creation and naming of the animals. This is done with special reference to the creation of woman as related in Genesis.

Zammit's suggestion that the figures of our “progenitors appears barely sketched on the sides” as if not central to the plot of the story is quite misleading. Buhagiar on the other hand, in suggesting the theory of the three orantes, did not consider that one of the orantes was inverted, a rather unusual position for giving praise. Again the figure's missing hands do not suggest a gesture for prayer where the position of arms and hands are of significance. All three authors ignored the meaning of the semi-circular figure above the female representation.

It is interesting to note that as Buhagiar suggested the artistic style of this graffiti give a hint to a North African influence. The graffiti bring to mind the numerous depictions of various figures and designs on stelae from North African Punic sites. Could this be a remnant of the Punic artistic conventions barely influenced by the Hellenistic and Latin images and architecture, in which even the tombs pilasters do not copy any Hellenistic or Latin architectural orders? A non Greek/Latin language (Trump 2000: 23) possibly of a Punic origin was spoken by the local population during the first century A.D. Also of interest are Neo-Punic inscriptions from Tac-Caghqi Secondary School S.E. Hypogeum dated to the first or second century A.D. (Borg, Rocco; 1972). However Buhagiar (1986) suggests a later date on “stylistic considerations”, perhaps third or fourth century A.D. If language and writing survived so long during the Roman Period, artistic styles could very well have survived too. The Tac-Caghqi Catacomb does not indicate Christianity

but the use of the Punic language at such a late date is interesting. Cultures do overlap each other, especially in isolated populations and it is very possible that these Christian symbols and narratives were depicted in this ancient style, the art of the common people.

### Endnote

1. Biblical texts cited in this article have been taken from The Holy Bible. 1966. Revised Standard Version (Catholic Ed.). London.

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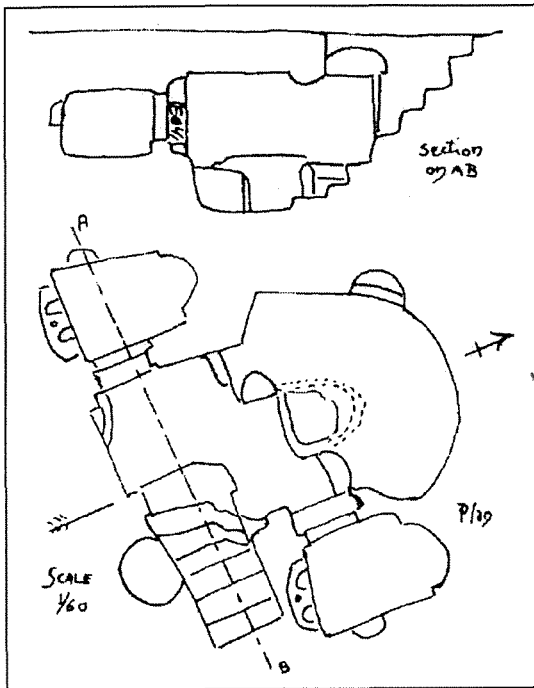


Figure 1: Hal Resqun hypogeum (redrawn after Zammit 1935)

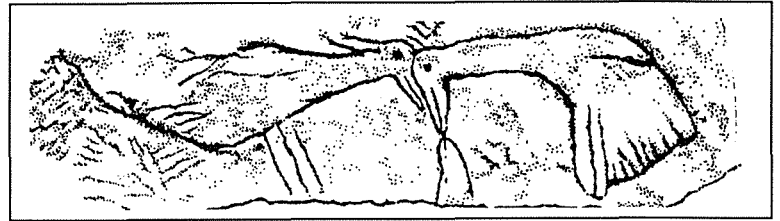


Figure 2: Graffito of Birds (redrawn after Zammit 1935)

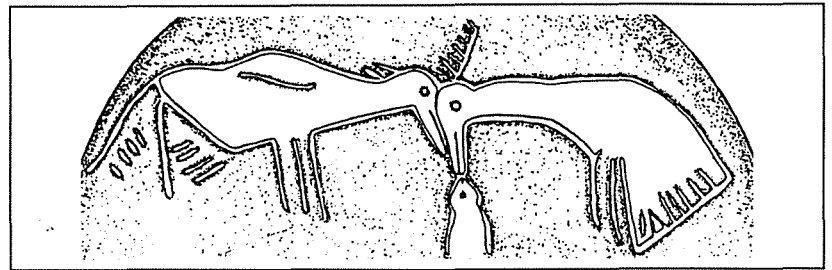


Figure 3: Graffito of Birds (redrawn after Buhagiar 1998)

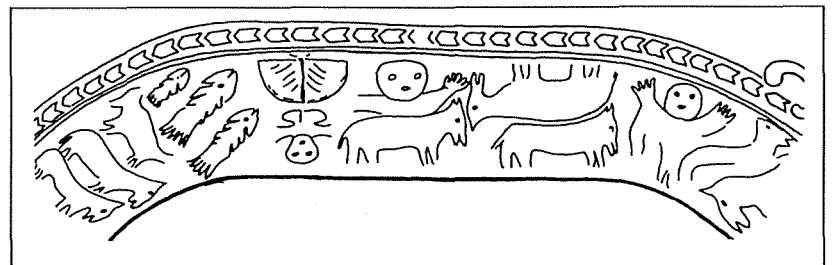


Figure 4: The Biblical Scene (redrawn after Stevenson 1978)

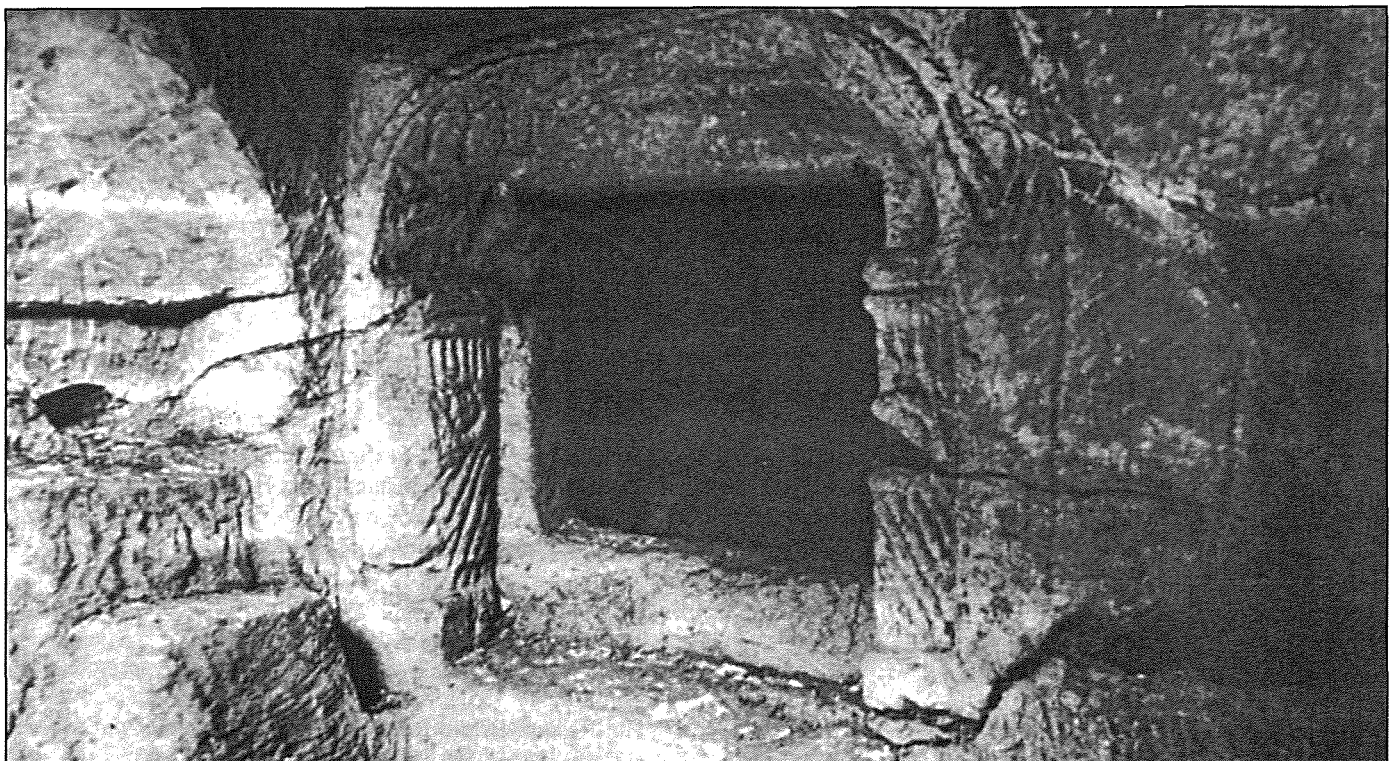


Plate 1: Graffito on the arched lintel to the west burial chamber (after Stevenson 1978)