

# A Historical complex at St. Agatha - Rabat

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## *The cult and catacombs of St. Agatha*

The old City of Malta, called Melita by our forefathers, was built on high ground. It was the seat of those governing the Island, where the Praetor, the Senate and the citizens took refuge. For long centuries Melita was like a strong castle to protect her inhabitants.

At the time of the Romans, it seems that the city became more important. Roman houses and other places for public meetings were found near the Villa Romana. Other known archaeological sites have shown the importance of the City. Beautiful sculptures in marble and stone, pavements of mosaic, together with pottery and glass found at these sites made Melita an important Capital city of the island.

Although people of high rank lived in this city, nobody was allowed to be cremated or buried within its walls. As far as we know, no graves of Pre-Roman or Roman times were ever discovered within the City. It was only later, at the time of the Arab era, that tombs were discovered near the Villa Romana.

For long years, these people who died within the Old City of Malta had to be taken out to be buried outside its walls. So the suburb was used and served as necropolis. All over Rabat one can see and explore graves dating back centuries before Christ right up to the Christian and Byzantine times.

Within St. Agatha's Historical Complex, one can discover various important sites: the catacombs containing different types of tombs, agape tables and frescoes; the crypt with its important medieval frescoes; the alabaster statue depicting the martyrdom of the saint; crosses of Dedication; the historical Church of 1504 and enlarged in 1670 and wherein is kept the historical marble statue which was placed on the walls of the city of Mdina on July 20th 1551, during one of frequent attacks by the Arab corsairs on the island. Nearby stands a small Museum with various collections of fossils, prehistoric remains, minerals, pottery and many other things of interest and beauty.

The Crypt of St. Agatha and adjoining Catacombs are the most renowned sectors in this complex. These places together with the Church and all the area nearby are dedicated to St. Agatha. According to an old, strong local tradition, the young Agatha is said to have sought refuge on the Island, although no documents whatsoever are to be found to support this thesis. However, tradition and

early frescoes which are found in the Crypt could indicate that her stay on the island may have been real.

Agatha was born in Catania, Sicily about 234 AD. Her parents were of high rank but said to be pagans. Agatha, from her early years, was accepted in the church and became Christian. It was the time when fierce persecution by Emperor Decius 249-251 AD was being waged against Christians. At that same time the Praetor of Catania, Quintianus, fell in love with this young Christian Virgin, and wanted her at all cost to be one of his wives. She refused his hand because of her vow to belong only to Jesus. For this reason, it is said that she came to take refuge in Malta, as this Island was under Roman rule but where Religion was tolerated.

This tradition states that while living in the Roman City – Melita - she used to come to pray on the site where Christians were buried. After her departure and martyrdom in her native city, these places at Rabat were named after her.



*St. Agatha Crypt showing frescoes of 1480 and alabaster statue of 1666*

Visitors to the Christian catacombs of Saint Agatha first have to pass through the Crypt. Originally this seems to have been a small cave, either natural or hewn out at the entrance of a small family catacomb. Studying the present dimensions and layout of this Crypt one can see where various graves were dug. Some of these graves are still visible on both sides of the chamber and in the ceiling over the main altar; the top of another grave lies near the side altar, and small loculi for babies are also visible. In other places can be seen sections of the original floor as normally the catacombs have very low ceilings. Although there are frescoes of the 13th and 15th century, one can notice traces of earlier frescoes of the 4th and 5th century AD. Some of them can be seen under

the present medieval frescoes, partly broken while others have been plastered over, probably in the middle ages. It is ascertained that around a thousand years ago the Crypt came to form part of this present area. It is kept in great devotion by Maltese and foreigners who visit this underground church.



12th cent. frescoes  
St. Agatha and St. Paul (?)

The frescoes look like tapestries painted on the walls. Three of these, of Byzantine style, are of the 12th century, portraying characters with grave-looking faces and dressed in straight stylised attire. One of these frescoes is composed of two saints, a male saint and a female one. The first one is either one of the Fathers of the church or may be St. Paul, as the Saint is holding a book in his hand and what seems to be a sword - a straight yellow line, wide at the top and tapering towards the lower part. The saint is represented with a very long beard, and having a green/blue veil. Very probably this fresco represents St. Paul. Within the same panel of this fresco, beside the head of the female saint, there is what appears to be the letter 'A'; and still clearly visible on the other side of the head: 'TH'. So, probably, these letters form part of the name: 'Agatha'. The head of the saint is decorated with a gemmed halo, and she is holding a cross in her right hand. This cross has three horizontal lines - the symbol of a martyr. A little child is visible, kneeling at the feet of the Saint imploring grace. Can we conclude from this iconography that we are presented with a petition to St Agatha, who is also one of the three saint protectors of Malta, together with St Paul and St Publius?

The next 12th century painting is the Madonna holding Baby Jesus. It is a pity that the head of the Madonna was destroyed many years ago. At the back of these three pictures was a cistern full of water, which was damaging the frescoes. Later on, the water was removed and a door was opened from near the side altar, while a window was broken through for ventilation. This cut right into



Damaged fresco of the  
Madonna

the picture and it damaged one of our earliest paintings of the Madonna on our island.

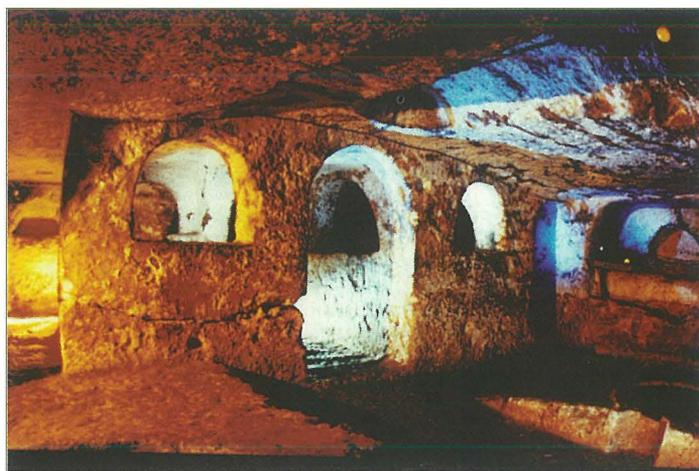
The whole Crypt is decorated with twenty-nine other frescoes, painted in 1480 AD, and are attributed to Salvatore d'Antonio. Many of the pictures show St. Agatha as seen in her iconography: a young lady wearing a dark green dress and a red veil on her shoulders; she is holding a book in her hand and a plate with a severed breast on it. At times she is also represented holding a shears with a cut breast. This is the martyrdom symbol of St. Agatha, for when she was tortured during the persecution of Emperor Decius, she is said to have had her breasts cut off. Other frescoes represent St. Lucy, St. Venera, St. Margaret of Antioch, St. Blaise, St. Leonard, Bishop St. Publius, and the Madonna. All these frescoes show that this place is to be considered as archaeologically important, and at the same time an ancient holy place.

The present main altar was built in 1666 AD to accommodate the alabaster statue of St. Agatha, and to cover the original rock altar, as is mentioned and documented by Commendator Abela in 1647. Above the altar still exists a niche, where the alabaster statue of St. Agatha, donated by Bishop Lucas Buenos in 1666 AD, who was the bishop of Malta at that time, was kept. This statue is kept at the nearby museum for better viewing and preservation. In the niche, at present, stands another statue donated by Prof. Anton Agius.

Of great importance to Christian Archaeological art are the catacombs, also dedicated to St. Agatha. These constitute a whole complex of graves and agape tables which spread underground - below the church, the Motherhouse of the Missionary Society of St. Paul, and

under the gardens of the same buildings. As a complex they extend to 4100 square metres. Beside the catacombs, attached to the same Crypt, are other smaller ones within the area of the same complex.

These catacombs and others very close by extend to the whole area of Rabat, as this served as the necropolis of the Old City for hundreds of years. Although in the early centuries Christians used catacombs for cemeteries, the idea of burying underground goes back to the Phoenician and Roman - Punic times. So it dates back to many years before Christianity was ever introduced into Malta.



Section of catacomb showing canopy (baldacchino) tomb and agape table

Much has been written on catacombs, both those found in our Island and abroad, especially in Italy, Sicily, North Africa, Palestine and other countries. A short study is being presented here in the hope of inducing those interested in local history to pay a visit to this Historical Complex.

The stairs down into the Catacombs lead directly into the crypt. There, to the left hand side of the altar, just between the main altar of St. Agatha and the side altar dedicated to our Lady of Graces, a narrow entrance leads to one of the major sections. This was cleared of stones and rubble in 1890. We know that most of the ancient monuments, all over the world, including Malta, were ravaged by grave robbers in search of precious things and pottery. They broke through, and besides removing what was of interest, damaged the graves, agape tables and decorations. Later, the farmers who owned the fields above, threw in the stones and rubbish which accumulated in their fields. So most the entrances and corridors and shafts for ventilation were filled with rubble right up to the ceiling. Another section to the right, almost near the entrance, was cleaned between 1953 and 1960, and is now open to visitors.

*Ad Catacumbas*: "Leading to the Graves". This inscription is to be seen over these places which from the beginning were used for burial. It used to be thought that some of the catacombs were used for hiding places in times of persecution, or as living quarters. These theories are difficult to sustain, as history and research studies show no signs of persecution on our island. The absence of inscriptions or symbols of any martyrs in the Maltese Christian catacombs confirm that the Christians encountered no trouble from the Romans. The second idea of people living in the catacombs seems very absurd, as these underground cemeteries are very humid, and are just low narrow passages with many graves on either side. Although there are so many round tables - Agape tables - these were only used for the "Coena funebris" or funeral meal which was given as a sort of *Refrigeria* in honour of the dead. As these are only found in Christian cemeteries, we can say that they served as a table where the replica of Eucharist was held. Few frescoes have been found in the vast catacombs of Rome, in which people are depicted as reclining round the agape table partaking of a farewell repast. But in one of the frescoes, a man dressed in white tunic and reclining like all others, is stretching his hand on a dish in which is a fish - the symbol of Christ. *ICHTUS*, the Greek for fish, is an acrostic which stands for: Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, Saviour. This fresco, then, probably portrays a priest who is offering the Eucharist. Hence, the agape table served both as an altar for the divine service and as a table to eat on.

Agape Tables are of importance in our catacombs as they distinguish them from Pagan and Jewish catacombs. The agape tables are cut from solid rock, but are not all of the same height, and slope on the sides so that those attending have to recline round the table according to the Roman style in the *trichlinium*. The top of the table is flat, having a rim round the edge, perhaps to prevent the dishes and utensils from falling off the table. At the front, one can find a breach in one part of the rim to allow cleaning the table after the meal was over. At times one can find a seat on each side, maybe for elderly people who could not recline so low round the table. At St. Agatha's catacombs one can see round, square and oblong seats at the front of the table. It is to be said that the Church came to prohibit these funeral feasts on the agape table. So in the 5th century many of these tables were destroyed or not hewn out any longer after the era. Through the years some abuses developed, especially of overeating and drinking during these feasts, so the church abolished such celebrations during the sharing of the Eucharist.

The reason that truly explains these underground catacombs is the burying of early Christians. There was no persecution of Christians, but we can state that the custom of burying Christians in this fashion was derived

from earlier non-Christian generations. Various other religions had their own private cemeteries; and moreover, the fact that so many graves differ in size, shape and style lie one next to each other lead us to believe that everybody was buried inside the catacombs irrespective of social class. But we can read into the social status of the deceased from the type of grave one was buried in. Some of the graves are a simple shaft hewn into the walls or dug in the ground. These are called *loculis* and *forma*; others are of a higher order, like the window grave or *arcosolum*; and the canopied table grave. At times, some of the graves were decorated with frescoes and sculptures. At St. Agatha's catacombs we find also a grave which is hewn right under an agape table. A square stone table slab closes the entrance to this grave. Most of the graves were intended for a couple, a few were for single occupants, while others could contain even up to six persons in every grave. This can be seen from the rock pillow and from the headrest in each pillow. These last graves were for families, in fact very near by are many baby graves as at that time infant

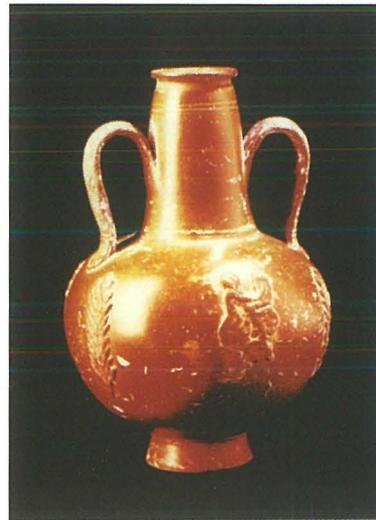


*Roman glass*  
(Malta)

mortality was very high. In some instances, guilds had their own small cemeteries - tools of various trades are sculptured on the walls of graves or on the tomb slab which sealed the entrance of such places. At Rabat, various small catacombs of varying dimensions are scattered all over the locality. As the island is small, sometimes cemeteries of different faiths can be found almost next to each other. This can be verified both in St. Agatha's and St. Paul's Catacombs. The different denominations can be distinguished from the type of tombs, the different symbols and pottery. It is a great pity that many graves and catacombs have been robbed and devastated years ago. Collections of pottery and artefacts of the era can be seen in museums and in private collections.

Right above St. Agatha's catacombs, one can find too St. Agatha's Museum which is next to the historical Church. Most of the various collections found in the museum were the inheritance of Mons. Joseph De Piro. When he founded the Missionary Society of St. Paul, he transferred these priceless remains to the early houses of his fledgling congregation, and later to the present Motherhouse. Through the years, other collections and

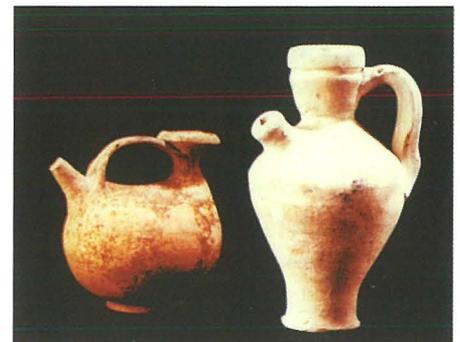
items were donated to the museum. Of particular interest is the archaeological collection consisting of amphorae, stomas, many type of dishes, bottles, cups, oil lamps



*Samian ware*  
(2nd cent. bc)  
(Malta)

and many other different artefacts. One showcase contains Etruscan pottery, and a beautiful marble statuette of Aphrodite. Roman glass cups and perfume bottles together with a collection of Roman clay statuettes display the art of antiquity.

*Feeding bottles,*  
*Roman*



In a different hall is seen the interesting statue of St. Agatha in white alabaster, which is a masterpiece of intricate workmanship in prestigious marble; unique stone votive slabs of 1500 AD; a small collection of paintings; and a numismatic section. Another small hall contains Church vestments, old candlesticks, statues and the relic of St. Agatha, all gilded in gold.

Because of lack of space, many other items are found in this same hall. Old glass cruets, finger bowls used in the church, various chalices, and work in ganutell; manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Latin, and Italian Languages further enhance the collections found in the museum. Although this is a Private Church Museum, it is open daily for all those who have at heart Maltese History and Culture.