

Erich Becker and *Malta Sotterranea* – exposing the achievements of a dark horse of Christian archaeology

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Becker's 1913 publication *Malta Sotterranea, Studien zur altchristlichen und jüdischen Sepulkralkunst* - studies of Malta's early Christian and Jewish sepulchral art - is a work often quoted and sometimes even copied by authors writing on Malta's catacombs and Late Antiquity. Its value was recognised by many scholars, but to date very few have managed to fully grasp and understand it. Certainly, one does not need to understand much German to realise that his study was exceptionally thorough and methodical. But one needs to master German and German grammar perfectly in order to follow his line of reasoning – which is why many remarkable conclusions and discoveries in *Malta Sotterranea* were at best ignored, or at worst wrongly quoted or totally misunderstood. Ironically, it is thanks to the latter that his book never slipped into oblivion.

Like every scholar, Erich Becker was a product of his time. His background and context, however, set him apart. Born in Düsseldorf, Germany, on December 5, 1883, he was the third and last child of Ferdinand and Martha Becker. His sisters Antonie and Diletta were born in 1873 and 1875, and he was probably a long-awaited son. His father was already 43 years old when Erich was born, but he exercised the most crucial influence on Erich Becker's career.

Ferdinand Becker had studied theology at the famous Humboldt University in Berlin. His passion for early Christian epitaphs and Christian art and iconography led to the publication of four books between 1876 and 1881. His main source of income, however, came from his profession as a Lutheran pastor for the army garrison. In 1871, his calling led him from Berlin to Düsseldorf, where he and his young wife Martha also enjoyed a good social life. They regularly attended and held social gatherings where they met other clerical people, a school headmaster and the director of a rescue service. At these evening gatherings they read books, followed by a discussion, a simple dinner and more discussions that often lasted until after midnight (Höhndorf, 1873). Six years after Erich

Becker's birth, the family moved to Magdeburg and later back to Berlin, Martha's hometown. Here, Erich attended the Prinz-Heinrich Gymnasium in Berlin-Schöneberg, a reputable lyceum of the upper middle-class, where he passed his final examinations with flying colours in 1902. This was followed by two years of compulsory military service in the Imperial Prussian Army and, in 1904, Becker started to follow his father's footsteps, by enrolling at the Lutheran Faculty of Theology. His choice of universities was definitely motivated by ambition: one semester at Erlangen, two at Tübingen and six at the Humboldt University in Berlin. No doubt, he chose the best faculties available at the time, and these faculties still enjoy an excellent reputation today.

Like his father, he specialised in Christian archaeology, an independent discipline within the Faculty of Theology that aims to thoroughly research the life of early Christians and Christian art since its graspable beginning around 200 AD till 600 AD by ascertaining “all that is possible relative to the manners and customs of the early Christians from the monuments of Christian antiquity” (Hasset, 1908).

This methodological investigation of the material remains from early Christianity was nicknamed ‘Monumental Theology’ by Ferdinand Piper. The most important components of Christian archaeology are burial complexes (catacombs and others), sculpture (sarcophagi), architecture and also minor art and iconography. Piper had been the founder and director of the first German Institute of Christian Archaeology at the Humboldt University of Berlin. Piper, who had also been a lecturer of Erich Becker's father, started a large collection of early Christian art and monuments and after nearly fifty years of his directorship (which lasted until 1890), the documentary value of monuments for historical theology was finally established. Despite this, Christian archaeology only occupied a fringe existence. Piper's successor, Nikolaus Müller, continued to promote the value of monuments and other material remains as an



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important source for the understanding of church history (Strohmaier-Wiederanders, 1999). Since the aim of Christian archaeology is to reconstruct the life of the early Christians from literary and monumental sources, the course itself comprised, among other, a thorough study of these literary sources and art literature, iconography and methodology. The literary material was studied in the original language: Latin, Greek and Hebrew. However, an excellent Hebraicum, Latinum and Graecum were in any case admission conditions for most faculties, including the Faculty of Theology, and part and parcel of the school syllabus and were tested in the final examinations at most lyceums. History of art was also an important component and it was dominated by iconography. Thus, a strong emphasis was put on the training of a sharp and comprehensive observation, the establishing of parallels and comparisons, and the analysis and stylistic criticism of the art object as a whole.

The choice of Christian archaeology was no doubt influenced by his father, who had passed away before Erich's graduation. He makes no secret of the great loss he experiences: he dedicates his PhD dissertation to his father and adds a mission statement to which he adheres for the rest of his life: "These pages are dedicated to the man, whose work I shall continue and this will remain at all times my dear legacy". (Becker, 1909). And true to his word, in all works that he subsequently publishes, there is a reference in one way or other to his father.

Becker's specialisation in Christian Archaeology had far-reaching consequences for his career. The Institute of Christian Archaeology at Humboldt University was under Nikolaus Müller, one of the most distinguished professors at the time when Becker studied Christian archaeology in Berlin. Müller was also his tutor for his PhD dissertation. *Das Quellwunder des Mose in altchristlicher Kunst* discussed the representation of Moses' miracle at the spring in early Christian art and was partly a catalogue and partly a scientific discussion. He

emphasises the sepulchral idea of the refrigerium [Refrigeriumgedanke] and traces the miracle at the spring back to this. In his preface, he makes no secret about his innovative conclusions and their digression from the opinions of established authorities, without forgetting for a moment how much he is indebted to their contributions (Becker, 1909).

Through Müller he was introduced into the inner circle of other great Christian archaeologists of the time. While there was often tension between Lutherans and Catholics with regard to research, aims and interpretation of the evidence, this never seems to have stood in Becker's way – on the contrary, he used it to his advantage when it came to publishing or funding. In research, Becker was an open-minded person, and for him it was the method used and the interpretation of the evidence that were important, and not the religion of the author. Müller opened the doors to the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – the German Institute of Archaeology in Rome – for Becker, who gained the support of Prof. Dr. Christian Hülsen. He was also introduced to Monsignor Josef Wilpert, one of the greatest Christian archaeologists who dedicated his research to method and principles of interpretations, and to Monsignor Anton de Waal, founder and editor of *Römische Quartalschrift (RQS)*, a periodical that specialised in Christian Archaeology and Church History. This encounter proved to be crucial to Becker's career, as between 1909 and 1913 he published all his papers in the RQS. In Rome, he also met leading Italian Christian archaeologist, Prof. O. Marucchi. The research for his PhD was not confined to Rome and he spent some time also in Provence, where he studied the sarcophagi in the museums of Aix, Arles and Marseille.

He boasts of his linguistic abilities, and his publications are littered with quotations in Italian, French and English (apart from Latin, Greek and Hebrew!). But although he expected his readership to be at least equally educated – there is never any translation of the quotations – he uses a simple German terminology wherever possible, helping the reader to follow better his long sentence constructions.

Becker received excellent marks for his PhD thesis, and it was later published by Heitz & Mündel in Strassburg. Already in the preface of this publication



Fig. 1: Inscription found “near Sta. Venera catacombs”. Becker proves it to be a fake. (Becker, 1913: Pl. XXVII.3.)

he announced the forthcoming publication of two further articles on the subject, which subsequently appeared that same year in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* and in *Römische Quartalschrift*. The latter periodical also carried another five papers, the last of which was published in 1913. In 1910, there are no publications, presumably because he then was ordained as a Lutheran priest, but this did not put an end to his archaeological research. In the same year, he applied for, and received, a research and travel grant from the Supreme Lutheran Church Council of Prussia in Berlin to investigate the Maltese catacombs. This subject was Becker’s choice and he was well prepared for the trip.

The Maltese catacombs were not *terra incognita* for German researchers. They had already been visited by Nikolaus Müller, Victor Schultze, Georg Stuhlfauth and Albert Mayr, who all either published short papers about them or included them in the larger context of the Sicilian catacombs. Additionally, the works by A.A. Caruana, Abela and Ciantar were available in the Berlin libraries. Evaluating the works of these authors, Becker felt that the catacombs deserved a more thorough study and needed to be put into context and comparison with the catacombs of other countries. After having visited many Sicilian sites and museums, he arrived in Malta from Syracuse on Christmas Day, 1910.

His arrival in Malta was greeted by local quarantine problems, and he emphasised in his preface later that things would have been different, had he not met Prof. Themistocles Zammit. His admiration for Zammit knew no bounds. No doubt, Becker’s contagious enthusiasm for archaeology and Malta’s sepulchral world convinced Zammit not only to give Becker free access to catacombs, finds and information, but also to accompany him to the

various catacombs whenever possible. Among other, they discovered together a closed floor tomb in St. Paul/ St. Agatha 14, which Zammit then had opened. To the surprise of both Becker and Zammit, this floor tomb (with one head-rest) turned out to be an ossuary for five burials (Becker, 1913: 27; Zammit, notebook 3: 83).

Becker intended his studies to be regarded as a supplement to the research done by Caruana and Mayr and he published in *Malta Sotterranea* descriptions and plans of catacombs that were hitherto unpublished. However, his descriptions of the catacombs are more than that. He draws on the findings of previous authors and adds his own interpretations.

Today, some of these plans have been lost, as have some of the artefacts that he mentioned or discovered. Furthermore, some of the catacombs he describes have also been destroyed, but at least the memory of their existence is preserved.

Becker’s findings

Divided into seven chapters, *Malta Sotterranea* is to this day one of the most thorough in-depth studies of the Maltese catacombs. In it, Becker applied all his knowledge and abilities, ranging from observation to general archaeological method, analysis and interpretation, all of which he

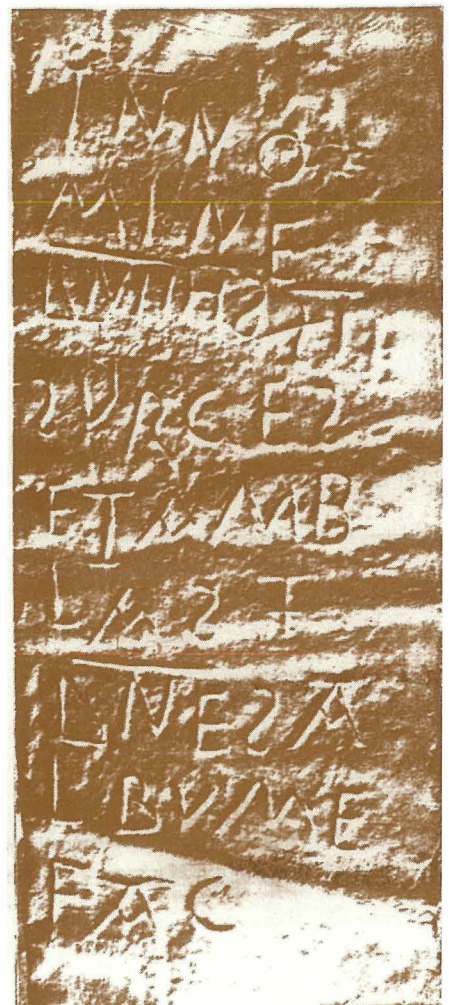
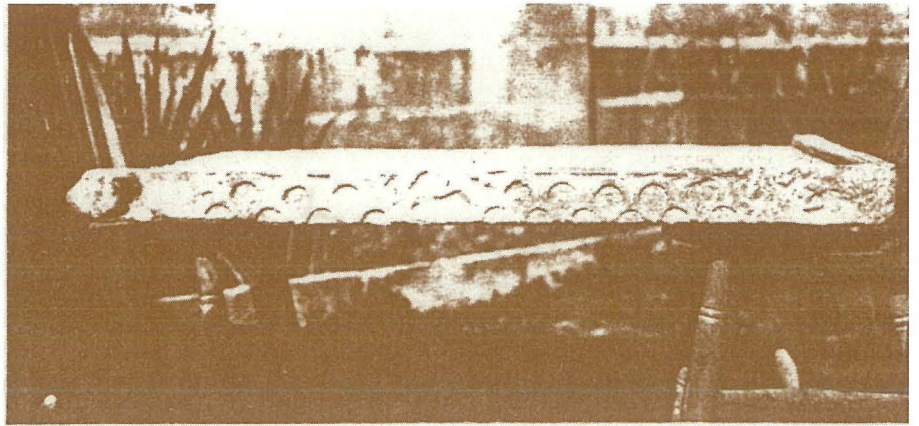


Fig. 2: Inscription at St. Thomas Bay catacombs. According to Becker it is not an epitaph, but possibly the graffiti of a pilgrim. Photograph of the plaster cast (Becker, 1913: Pl. XXVII.1.)

put in a broad context. He made many great discoveries, but so far only a few of these have reached the English-speaking reader or scholar. Perhaps his most important discovery is that of Jewish catacombs. As such, this is not surprising since they are also found in Sicily, Sardinia and Tunis, but he was astonished that this escaped Caruana, who had even published a plan of two of these catacombs in



Ancient pagan tombs (1898: pl. XXVI – St. Paul/Agatha 14 and 17A). He is sure, however, that Mayr would have discovered them had he spent more time at St. Agatha (Becker, 1913: 70ff). Becker also gave the name to the anthropoid burial cells: window tomb. Comparatively rare in the Rabat area, the window tomb is the most frequently found tomb type in the countryside. Becker provides vivid descriptions of their varieties and decorative richness.

In his chapter on inscriptions, he applies his knowledge of classical languages, the Bible and epigraphy. His results have to date been ignored, although they are most interesting and fascinating. He makes a thorough and critical investigation of the presumed Christian inscriptions mentioned in Caruana's Report (1882) and adds some recent discoveries, including his own discovery, the Leonia inscription at St. Agatha. Again, he slams Caruana for his uncritical approach, but is highly amused that it remained to his day unnoticed that the inscription, presumed to have been found near the catacomb of Sta. Venera, is in fact a fake (see Figure 1). Originally, this inscription had been found in Tunisia and is registered in the CIL VIII.1.1100 as a "*fragment d'une pierre sépulcrale, trouvée entre la Goulette et Carthage*" [fragment of a tomb stone, found between La Goulette and Carthage]. He has no doubt that the Maltese inscription is a fake – the fragmentation is identical, and the text of the Tunisian inscription had been published in Leyden in 1858 – 17 years before the inscription was 'discovered' in Malta. Becker's verdict is quite final, especially since the Valletta Museum also had another inscription that Stuhlfauth had already proved to be a fake. This inscription, according to Caruana (1882:153), was a lead tablet epitaph, found "within the rubbish of the exterior wall of the ditch of Notabile ... in early christian style,

Fig. 3: Altar slab with pseudo-transennae relief and Christ monogram, used as a covering slab for a tomb in St. Paul/ St. Agatha No. 4. Photographed by Becker in 1911 (Becker, 1913: Pl. XIII.3). The slab has since been lost.

having a dove at the bottom bearing an olive branch." Stuhlfauth's reasoning and evidence that this inscription is a forgery could not be verified as Stuhlfauth's essay seems not to be available in any library in Malta.

The inscription found at the St. Thomas Bay hypogeum (Figure 2) is today often linked to the beginning of a North-African prayer. Yet, Becker's intrinsic knowledge of the Bible in Latin traces the wording back to two Biblical quotations, both sayings of Peter. The wording of the first six lines is strikingly similar to "*In nomine Jesu Christi Nazareni, surge et ambula*" (in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise and walk), which is found in the Acts, 3:6. The second quotation is *Domine, salvum me fac*, which is found countless times in the Bible, especially in the Psalms. It is also found in Matthew 14:30, when, Peter sinking into the water, calls out "Lord, save me!". In Becker's eyes, despite the funerary context, it is not an epitaph at all, but the inscription – or rather graffiti – of a pilgrim, dating probably to the seventh century.

His overall conclusion of the value of the thirteen so-called Early Christian inscriptions is rather disillusioning: two are fakes, many are ambiguous, some are clearly pagan, one is not an epitaph and thus cannot be used to date the catacomb and only one inscription is definitely Christian. All in all, he believed this critical investigation was necessary, since it would ensure that, in future, unreliable material would not be used for dating. The appeal fell on deaf ears, presumably because of the language.

Becker (1913: 15, 128-9) also discovered an Early Christian marble altar slab (Figure 3), probably originating from the crypt of St. Paul's Catacombs, which had been cut and re-used as a covering slab for an arcosolium in No. 4, St. Paul's Catacombs. Today, this slab is no longer extant and Becker's photo is the only visual testimony we have of its existence. Luckily, he also provides a detailed description of the slab and its measurements. It is for him inconceivable that a Christian would have done such a barbaric act to an altar slab, thus implying that the last tenant of this tomb was not a Christian, but possibly a Muslim.

Becker's familiarity with excavations in North Africa and the Near East and his fluency in French led to the discovery of hitherto unknown parallels to a peculiarity of many Maltese catacombs: the apse with basin. These are also found, among other places, in Tipasa, Alexandria and Petra, and he interprets them as rooms for the funeral feast. He makes extensive and detailed comparisons between Malta and these places and sees the origin of the funeral feast rooms as possibly having been a pagan rite adapted by the Early Christians. Interestingly, they are absent from the Jewish catacombs.

Although Becker quotes and tentatively agrees with Stephan Gsell that the small construction in the Basilica of Sainte-Salsa was an agape table (1913:115), this is in a purely Tunisian context. For Malta, Becker never mentions or considers the agape as a possible function, as he is convinced that they served for funeral feasts, where the mourners placed themselves on rugs or cushions around these basins in a semi-circle. "The well-known depictions of meals around sigma-shaped tables only fully come to life in Malta", he states (*ibid.*). Becker notes that the presence of the apse chambers with basins is no evidence for a post-Constantinian origin of Malta's Christian catacombs. The origin of the same construction in Alexandria's Kom el-Shoûkafa catacomb is clearly pagan, although the space was later used by Christians. The fourth century polemics against its abuses are in no way proof that this custom had only started then. Furthermore, Matthaei (1899: 42f) had concluded that "customs, adapted from antiquity without ado, were not mentioned at all or only on the side, as long as they were deemed harmless".

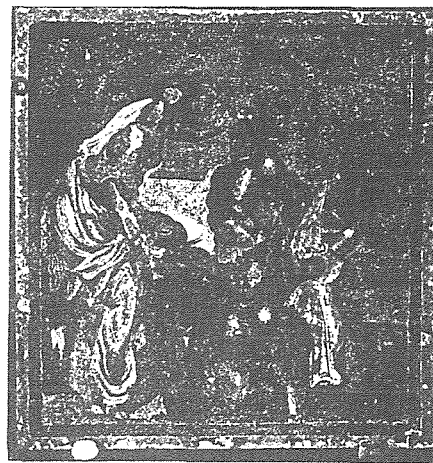


Fig. 4: Subject of many different interpretations – the emblemata at the Museum for Roman Antiquities in Rabat. In Becker's opinion it is an Alexandrine-syncretistic representation of Samson and Delilah. (Becker, 1913: Pl. XXV.2.)

The chronology and dating of the catacombs was a challenging task and indeed a big headache for Becker, but he gets clearly enraged when scholars use the wrong methodology: "*The traditional view puts the beginnings of Malta's Christian catacombs in post-Constantinian times – but how can this be proved? For truth's sake it must be stated here that the answer cannot be based on the monumental evidence. There is no fool-proof evidence for the Constantinian period, neither is there any against it that Christian catacombs already existed here in pre-Constantinian times. It is absolutely necessary to categorically fight against the completely unmethodological procedure to conclude the age of catacombs from various finds, earthenware lamps, even from the isolated inscriptions or symbols. It is amazing how often results are obtained precisely in this way, which are supported by wholly unmethodological means. As if one could simply date the catacombs with some lamps! Lamps, monograms and inscriptions can only tell us in what period the cemetery in question was last used, by their nature they characterise always the last era of use*" (Becker: forthcoming).

Becker and other authors

The above is a good example of Becker's outspokenness, but sometimes he goes even further. In the first chapter of his book he gives a detailed resumé of the history of catacomb research in Malta. In it, he mentions a long list of nineteenth to early twentieth century German researchers who studied the Maltese catacombs either on their own or in conjunction with the Sicilian ones. Among these authors are many well known personalities and authorities in Christian Archaeology: Nikolaus Müller (his former tutor), Victor Schultze and Josef Führer, Georg Stuhlfauth and also Albert Mayr. He draws upon their studies and uses them as stepping

stones, but does not hesitate to add his own observations. Thus, he more often differs from their conclusions than agrees with them and, as a result, argues extensively to justify his differing opinion. Albert Mayr's studies are a major source of inspiration. He has great respect for Albert Mayr, whose results often lie at the basis of Becker's own research to the point that it sometimes seems as if he fervently tries to find an answer, where Mayr could not find one. And in fact, he often does. However, Becker's conclusions sometimes appear to be equally dubious. One good example is the interpretation of the *emblema* at the Museum for Roman Antiquities in Rabat (Figure 4). Mayr admits that he did not understand the scene, which sparked Becker's ambition to find the answer. Since Mayr was not aware of Jewish catacombs in Malta (Becker admits that it was by sheer luck that he discovered them) he could not put the *emblema* in a Jewish context, Becker argues. In this light, Becker interprets the *emblema* as a representation of Samson and Delilah. He concludes and emphasises: "the discussed mosaic of Notabile [Rabat] is only understandable as a product of Alexandrine syncretism – the Jewish narrative of Samson is here merged with components of Greek mythology, especially with the myth of Herakles and probably also with the myth of Nisos" (Becker, forthcoming). An intriguing conclusion, which certainly deserves a closer investigation.

Nothing enrages him more than a shoddy and ignorant approach to archaeology combined with bad methods. Becker sometimes just could not believe Caruana's uncritical approach and carelessness when it came to recording and interpreting the data. Already in his first chapter, he does not disguise Caruana's shortcomings. He thus finds a refreshing contrast in Caruana's eventual successor, Themis Zammit, whom he praises incessantly and compares to Paolo Orsi.

Other authors and Becker

Becker's book was published in 1913 and many authors writing subsequently on the same subject quoted his work. It is not known when his book arrived in Malta, as it is neither listed as an acquisition nor as a donation to the Museums in the Museum Annual Reports. Yet, in 1915, Rushfort (79) dismisses the Samson and Delilah interpretation, but does not mention its source. The following is a selection of authors who quoted *Malta*

Sotterranea, but the list is by no means complete. Probably the first person to quote – and misquote – Becker is Bellanti in his *Studies in Maltese History* (1924: 151). Without citing the page from where Bellanti supposedly took the phrase, his 'translation' is an unhappy combination of his own wishful thinking and a footnote in Becker, where the latter quotes other authors' opinions. Becker never said what the 'translation' states.

The fact that *Malta Sotterranea* was only published in German was its biggest drawback. Someone had very early realised the need to have it translated, and in 1924 the last fifty-five pages of Becker's book were excellently translated into French by Constantin Voensky de Brézé. Although not complete, it still contains many of Becker's important discoveries. One would think that French is much easier to understand than German, but it seems that the existence of this French handwritten manuscript at the National Library in Valletta remains largely unknown to this date. None of the subsequent major authors on the Maltese catacombs ever used this translation (although they readily quoted other French authors), and if this was so because they preferred the original, then they failed miserably. Due to the difficulty of the German language, rumours abound and persist. The translators made both Vincent Borg (1986: 76) and Mario Buhagiar (1994: 88) lament that Becker does not give the measurements of the possible altar slab from St. Paul's Catacomb, when in fact Becker gives a detailed description with the measurements in another chapter (1913: 128-9).

Buhagiar's very important work on the Maltese catacombs (1986) makes ample use of Becker's book, but it seems that, sadly, the translations rarely stated what Becker really said. Probably also owing to a wrong translation, Buhagiar (1993:139) further states that Becker used "right angled arrangements of galleries as an argument for a Christian origin", but falls short of giving the page number where Becker is supposed to say so. No surprise, as Becker never said this at all.

Fig. 5: The present day entrance to Catacomb 5 at the SSPaul/Agatha complex.



Most curious are the misconceptions of Becker by Giuseppe Galea Scannura (1996: 110-120), who presumably picked up the wrong translations and interpretations here and there and then literally accuses Becker of “christening the Phoenician flour mills agape tables”. After wondering “Who is this Becker anyway?”, his polemics culminate on p.119 where he asks: “why, you agapephiles, Becker’s followers, are you calling them agape tables?” As stated above, Becker never called them agape tables.

After Malta

It took Becker two years to finish researching and writing *Malta Sotterranea*. By 1912 Becker had become inspector of studies at the reputable seminary for Lutheran ministers in Naumburg/Silesia. He lived in Naumburg for several years until he took over a small parish in Pommern, again following his late father’s footsteps. Apart from his work as a minister, Becker also lectured at the Martin-Luther-University in Halle-Wittenberg. In 1944, when the war was at its worst, Becker moved to Berlin where he headed the Paulus parish until he died on 22 October 1959. Being a Lutheran minister provided ideal circumstances for Becker: he had a regular income and the Lutheran Church supported and funded his many trips to the Near East, where he worked at the side of Albrecht Alt, his old friend from his days at Erlangen University.

Although Becker stopped publishing his studies in book format, he wrote numerous newspaper articles about his trips to the Holy Land and was regarded as an archaeologist of the highest reputation. He died single and without children. Thus, while his father had passed on his love for Christian archaeology to his son, Erich Becker could only pass it on through his writings. So far this legacy has only reached German readership. However, this will be remedied by an English translation of *Malta Sotterranea* that will be published later this year (Becker, forthcoming).

Acknowledgements

It was quite a challenge to research about an author of whom nothing more than the date of publication of his book was known. I am grateful to Andreas Engisch for finding Becker’s date and place of birth and for the short *curriculum vitae* until his PhD graduation in 1909, and to Juliane Simon for sponsoring the research to find his date of death. Serendipity and sheer luck led me to Superintendent

Reverend Roland Herpich of Berlin-Wilmersdorf, who most kindly filled in the big information gap between Becker’s Ph.D. graduation and his death by locating and viewing Becker’s file in the State Archive of the Lutheran Church. Also, most sincere thanks to Reverend Herpich for providing the only available photo of Erich Becker. Many thanks to Prof. Anthony J. Frendo, for his helpful advice and for kindly acting as a referee for this article. Bits and pieces of useful advice, ideas and comments were provided by Dr Nicholas C. Vella, Prof. Dr Patrick J. Schembri, Ivan Fenech, Hanna Stoeger (Mrs Albert Mayr), Patricia Camilleri, Reuben Grima, Klaus Haemmerlein, Dr Carla Steinorth, Prof. Helga Mach, Prof. Dr Reiner Soeris, Prof. Dr Gerlinde Strohmaier-Wiederanders and many more. And thanks to the persons, who invented the Internet, without which this research would have been a daunting task.

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