

# New light on Fr Magri's exploration of the Hypogeum

## Notes from correspondence with the British Museum

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In November 1903, a century ago, the Committee of Management of the Museum proposed Father Emmanuel Magri S.J. to supervise the exploration of the Hypogeum in Paola. Dr Temi Zammit, in the *Museum Annual Report* for 1903 wrote:

"The exploration [of the Hypogeum] is being carried on under the supervision of Father E. Magri, S.J., whose competence is unquestionable and who will undoubtedly give us a full report on the completion of the work."<sup>1</sup>

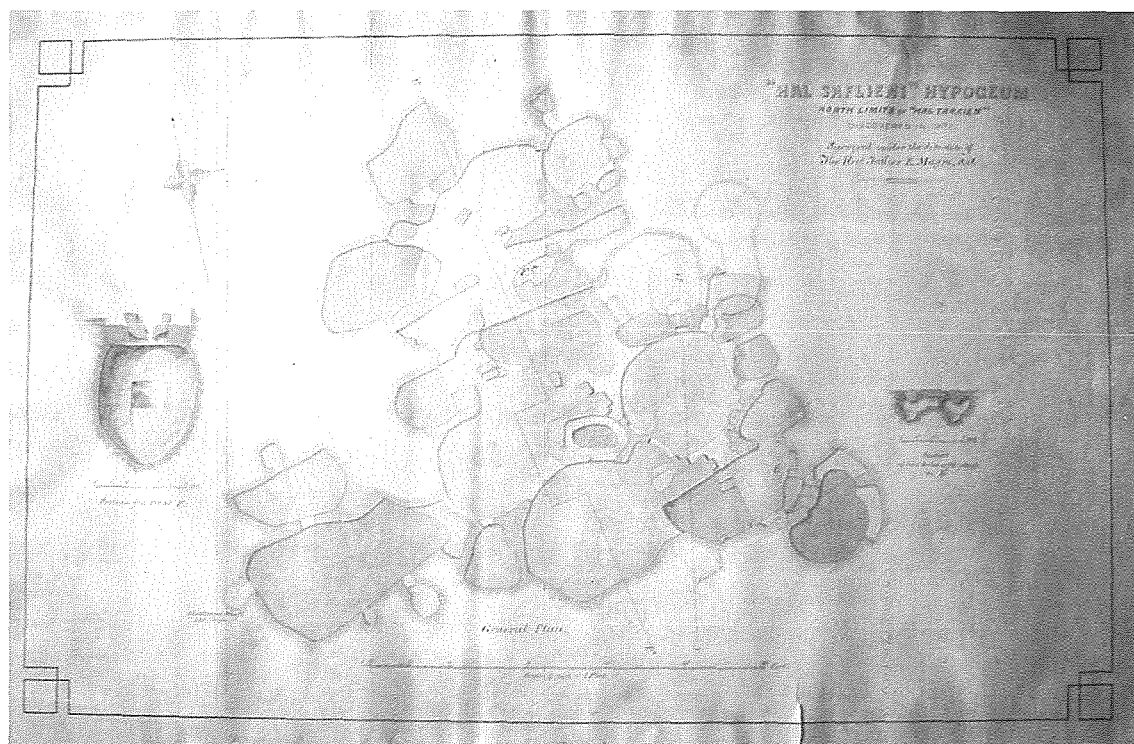
Unfortunately, Fr Magri died unexpectedly on 29 March, 1907, in Sfax, Tunisia where

he had gone to preach spiritual exercises, and celebrate Easter. With the Report undelivered, and his notes not traced, his work seems completely lost.

### Magri's notes and correspondence

Though very active, Magri left few publications related to archaeology.<sup>2</sup> His notes have never been found, no material related to archaeology has ever been traced in Jesuit archives. But is the picture actually so bleak?

Magri's correspondence proves to be a goldmine. Several letters related to archaeology have actually been traced. Some thirty-five of them, addressed mainly to the



**Figure 1.** General Plan, surveyed under Magri's direction. (National Museum of Archaeology)

Lieutenant Governor were found some years ago in the Palace Archives, Valletta.<sup>3</sup> These letters are now in the National Archives, in Rabat.<sup>4</sup>

I have retraced a new series of letters at the British Museum, eleven letters written by Fr Magri to Dr E.A. Wallis Budge, the Keeper of Assyrian and Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum.<sup>5</sup> These letters shed new light on Magri's exploration of the hypogeum.

### **Magri's appointment as Director**

When the Committee proposed Magri for the task, he was Rector of the Seminary in Gozo. Magri wrote to Dr Temi Zammit, laying down a series of conditions for accepting the task, which reveal the way he conceived his role.<sup>6</sup>

Knowing that he would be unable to be present on site often to direct the work, the most important condition was the appointment of an "experienced, trustworthy and educated Overseer or Caretaker". Magri proposed Mr Anthony Doublet, then temporarily attached to the Public Works Department.

"Mr. Doublet can take notes and plans and correspond with me. I consider these qualifications as necessary."

It is clear that, while remaining Director of the excavations, he knew that he needed a trustworthy site supervisor.

Magri's presence, though limited, remained important. He would be present "as often as necessary and convenient to direct the works and to prepare materials for the description of the place." He even considered the possible situation where his presence is required, but he prevented from leaving Gozo:

"I shall direct the Overseer to suspend that particular work which will require my presence and remit it to another time."

Zammit wrote to the Lieutenant Governor informing him of the Committee's proposal, and included Magri's letter. Magri's appointment was approved by the Governor.

### **Excavations**

The work proceeded in the first months of 1904. The first work to be done was the removal of construction material thrown in during the building of the houses above. This work was

such that not even the presence of Mr Doublet was considered necessary by Magri though he adds that it was

"absolutely required during the removal of the rubbish preexisting in the Catacombs. As there is a large stone table under this rubbish, the greatest care should be taken by the workmen."<sup>1</sup>

The excavations did not proceed without difficulties. A major drawback was the water which continued to seep in, a problem which was only solved in the 1990s, during the latest conservation project. Water flooded the place, rendering the excavation and surveying very difficult.

By September, work on the clearance of the hypogeum must have proceeded quite well. Magri writes his first letter<sup>2</sup> to Dr E.A. Wallis Budge with regard to the excavation of the hypogeum. He intended to forward a few of the finds from the Hypogeum to the British Museum, to ask Dr Budge's opinion. The finds were not actually forwarded before January 1905. Another letter,<sup>3</sup> sent with the material provides precious information.

### **The Site**

#### ***Architectural features***

"Only on the top we found distinctive Phoenician tombs; they were opened, etc.

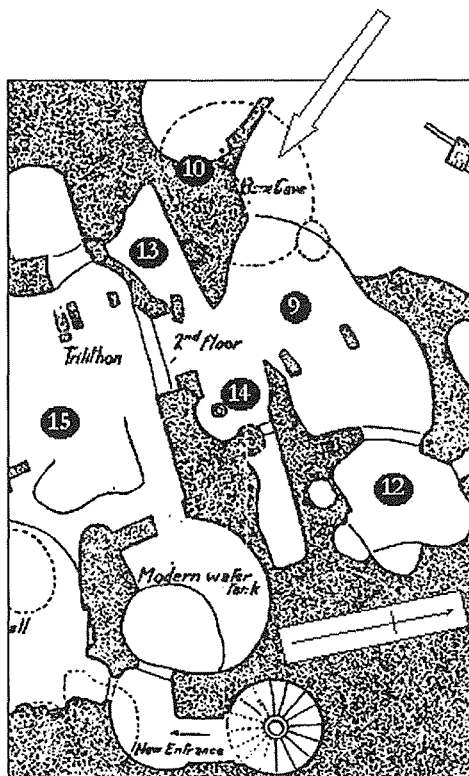
The style of architecture of the lower tombs, and of what I may call the Chapel, reminds me of the megalithic monuments of these Islands."<sup>4</sup>

Magri links clearly some architectural elements with those of the Temples; but what did he mean with the "distinctly Phoenician tombs"? Magri did, at least initially, consider the Temples as Phoenician, but no Temple period tombs were known at the time, only actual Phoenician ones.

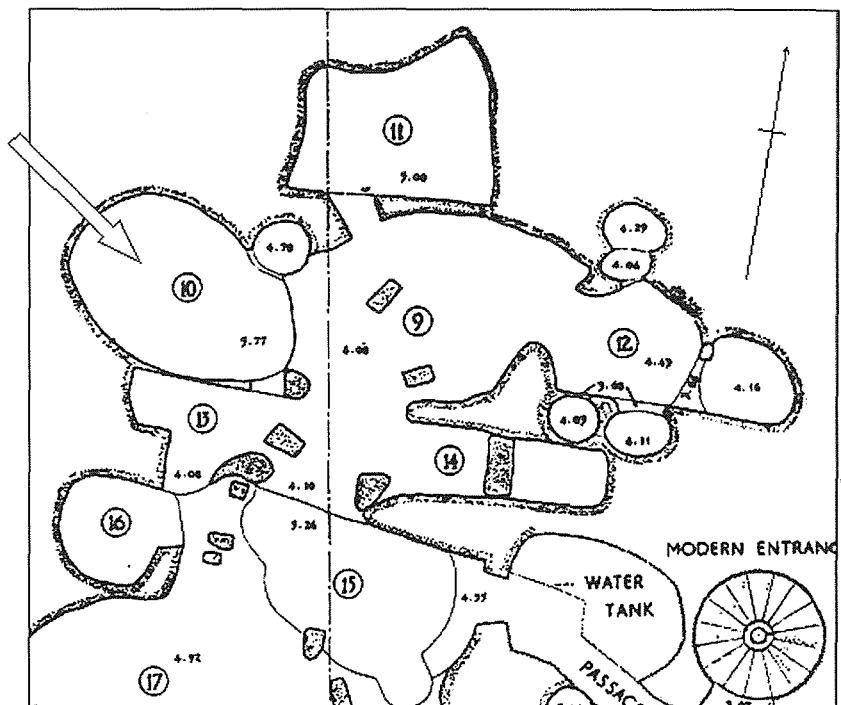
#### ***Site formation***

Magri referred to the site as the "Necropolis", and had clear views about its formation.

"Its peculiar feature is that bones, earth & broken pottery from other graves have been thrown in pellmell for successive generations in the graves, passages and on the ground floor of the Necropolis – a



after Zammit 1925



after Evans 1971, plan 14B

regular reburial, in many instances, with a few inches of earth over the bones. This system is still, to some extent, carried on in the local Christian burial grounds, the body being allowed to remain in its grave for a few years, then the bones, without the coffin, are thrown into a common pit. Care, however, must have been taking [*sic*] in our Necropolis to remove beforehand valuable articles from the original graves; for we have, comparatively, found very few things of interest.”<sup>5</sup>

## The finds

### Bones

The humidity had been very detrimental to the bones – as Magri writes:

“I have been able to save very few skulls, because the place is extremely damp; they appear to me of the Maltese or Syrian type.”<sup>1</sup>

John D. Evans’ suggestion that the bones were thrown away<sup>2</sup> must be dismissed. It would have been inconceivable for human bone to be simply discarded early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even more so in an excavation directed by a priest. Neither would the bones have found themselves in the common ossuary of the village cemetery, as the bones were clearly not from a Christian burial site.

Temi Zammit clearly indicates where the bones ended up – the “Bone Cave” (see figure 2):

“All the human bones found buried in red earth when the Hypogeum was excavated, were deposited in this cave. The bones are mostly reduced to dust for dampness and the deep layer of soil crushed the bones and disintegrated them.”<sup>3</sup>

Evans mistakes the contents of this chamber (10 in his plan, see fig. 2), describing it as “still partly filled with original deposit, containing bones and fragments of pottery.”<sup>4</sup>

### Beads, fossils, and pendants

Magri describes the finds in some detail, especially in the letter which accompanied the material sent to London:

“Nos. I and III are almost the only paste beads we have found. Of No. II we have a few dozens, made of natural whitish shell, nicely striated. They appear to me prehistoric Egyptian. Of the same material are made, what appear to be buttons (No. VI); some of these are very nicely hollowed out in the shape of a rosette; one of them bears traces of a metal (silver?) appendage.

We have found local fossiles [*sic*] of the hardest quality, approaching in composition to the phosphorus nodules of the bottom

Figure 2: The identification of Zammit’s “Bone Cave”, with Evans’ Chamber 10. (To help the reader, the numbers from Evans’ survey are added onto Zammit’s plan; “Bone Cave”/chamber 10 is indicated with an arrow.)

of the Pacific, bored with the utmost perfection.

Nos. IV and V are specimens of numerous pendants in very highly polished green stone of different hues; similar pendants, slightly different in shape, are cut in local mottled hard stone.

No. VII (natural size) is in dark stone; we have found another one in white alabaster.”<sup>5</sup>

Magri had taken great care in sending over a sample which represented the variety of material: beads, green stone pendants, and a selection of pottery. He also sent over a photo of one of the painted rooms. No. VII in the list above is, presumably, a headless statuette in stone similar to the one in alabaster.

### *The pottery*

Magri goes on to describe the pottery.

“The pottery is very peculiar. Series X – XVI is covered with black, or rather blackish, varnish, the incised pits being red. The latter colour may, however, be due to red paint, often found in our tombs. No such potteries have been found at Carthage. Very likely this is due to the fact that the excavations there have not gone deeper than the graves of the VII or VIII cent. B.C.

If the motive in No. XIII & XIV is an olive, or holm oak leaf, we certainly have it on local monuments approaching our era. [...]

No. XVII is a fragment of a vase made of local clay (reddish when baked), the two holes on both sides, being intended for inserting fingers to hold it.

I have discovered a similar vase in the foundations of a megalithic ruin in Gozo.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Statuettes*

It is from the first letter, however, that we may recover a description of the statuettes that came to light during the excavations.

“A few alabaster and terracotta statuettes. The former represents one of the “Hagiar Kim” gods (see Perrot & Chipiez’s History of Art, the Maltese Temples). It has the Egyptian close fitting cap and holds his hand on his breast: he is close shaved and looks very quiet. Among the terracotta statuettes we found a

lady wearing what may represent a crinoline. The lady reminds me of the “Princess of Punt”; only she is not grotesque at all. Many fragments of busts (no heads) with flabby, long and empty (not bulky) woman’s breasts as those found in the “Hagiar Kim” further excavations.”<sup>1</sup>

### *Surface Tombs and the “slingstones”*

A further letter, dated 19 April 1905, speaks about other finds in the neighbourhood, including the “slingstones”.

“The fragment of the pottery dated 2000 B.C. was not found at the Necropolis, but in the neighbourhood. When I inspected the place, I found the remains of several graves dug in the rock in rectangular trenches; they belong to poor people; their contents had been removed. Talking with the landlord I was presented with two stone “glandes”<sup>2</sup> found in excavating the foundations of new buildings. On further inquiry and fresh excavation many similar glandes were found, lying closely together, covered by a layer of beaten earth. They are of different size, ranging between four and eight inches. They are perforated on one side, but not provided with letters, as those found at Carthage a few years ago. The use of the sling is very common here. Old people made it with a sort of netting. We found two or three similar glandes in the lower parts of the necropolis.

I fail to find a plausible explanation of these glandes, used as a foundation to a beaten floor or pavement. Stone is so common here that no one would think of using a wrought and polished war implement instead of it. It is true that earthenware jars in juxtaposition have been found in Malta as a foundation to a road or floor.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Dating the Hypogeum*

An issue of particular interest is the date Magri assigns to the Hypogeum. A development in his thought emerges.

In the first letter Magri notes:

“All this [*the statuettes, vide supra*] may give a clue to the Nationality of the Megalithic Monuments of Malta. Perrot holds they are Phoenician; more modern writers say they are Libyan and, I hear quite lately, Mr [Arthur] Evans holds they

are connected with the ancient civilisation in Crete.”<sup>4</sup>

And when actually sending the material, he states

“It is very important to determine the epoch of our finds, as they are connected with the antiquities discovered in the large stone monuments of these Islands.

The top graves of our Necropolis are certainly Phoenician of the Greek period; we must determine the origin of the rest.”

The answer Magri received appears to have been quite unexpected. We learn from another of Magri’s letters that Mr Read, of the Ethnology Department, to whom Dr Budge had shown the material, had dated some important finds to 2000 B.C.: the two green stone pendants, one of the shell “buttons”, and one of the sherds of the blackish incised series with red infill.<sup>5</sup>

Magri inquires:

“And now the great question arises: to what nation belong the pottery 2000 B.C.? Incised and pitted pottery is still made in these Islands; the motives are still geometrical with the addition of very poor attempts of floral decoration. Could the first settlements of the Phoenicians in Malta be stretched to 2000 B.C.?”<sup>1</sup>

Magri goes on to draw in from his knowledge on Maltese popular narrative, which he took very seriously.

“The ancient and modern tradition of the Maltese is that they are the children of the Phoenicians, who when they landed here found the place uninhabited, no buildings, no trees, but only some cave. If it will be found really necessary to admit that several megalithic temples in Malta were first built by the Libyans, the same tradition appears to give us a clue to solve the difficulty: the Phoenician stole two young Libyans, a boy & a girl, from the Continent, and married the girl in Gozo, and the boy in Musta (Malta); the “girl” introduced that style of architecture.

Of course the data would have to be developed and corroborated by topography and anthropology, it is a fact that the Maltese

skull and Semitic instep are in favour of the local tradition; there is only one place in Malta, viz. Lower Zeytoun (“Zeitun”), where the inhabitants have flat feet, and often blue eyes and fair hair. They are not liked by their countrymen.”

The dating of the pottery, and the cultural connection, was an important issue for Magri. He forwarded to Dr Budge some pottery from Ġgantija and from Rabat, Gozo.<sup>1</sup> Magri realized that the dating was a complex issue:

“What you write on my fragments of pottery and Mr Read has given me great consolation; for if Mr Read with his great knowledge, experience and so many specimens at hand requires study to date my ware, I may be allowed to indulge in the persuasion that with my little knowledge & experience, I am not loosing [*sic*] my time in collecting material for a future historian of these Islands.”<sup>2</sup>

This interest in pottery emerged even in the Xewkija report. Magri clearly understood that only the slow construction of a pottery typology could then enable the dating of the sites, including the Hypogeum.

## Epilogue

Leaving for Sicily, Magri seems to have considered the exploration complete, at least for the time being. Magri actually come down to Malta in November 1906, as part of his work on the Report.

Magri then writes to the Lieutenant Governor, from Catania on 2 January 1907.<sup>3</sup> He postulates that the original entrance could be found through another tenement which he suggested buying.

He mainly brings up practical issues (especially the problem of the water seeping in the Hypogeum), and some proposals to enable visitors to enjoy the site. He also proposed placing some slabs back *in situ*, but wanted to be on site for this operation.

Magri then died suddenly. Considered so competent during his life, he left little published testimony to it. This is ample reason to hope that, painstakingly collecting his papers, we may arrive at reassessing Magri’s contribution to Maltese archaeology at the beginning of the 20th century.

### Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank the staff at the National Archives in Rabat; and *Heritage Malta* for access to the plans of the Hypogeum, surveyed under Magri's direction.

Sincere thanks also to D<sup>r</sup> Nicholas Vella, for his encouragement, comments, suggestions, and help.

### References

- 1 *Museum Annual Report* 1903, no. 14
- 2 *Three Punic Inscriptions Re-discovered in Malta. Edited with translation and commentary by the Rev. Emmanuel Magri, S.J.*, Malta, Government Printing Office, 1901. *Ruins of a Megalithic Temple at Xéuchia (Shewkiyah) Gozo. First report.* Malta, Government Printing Office, 1906.
- 3 S. Mallia, "Fr Manwel Magri's Contribution to the Conservation of Malta's Archaeological Heritage" in *Melita Historica* 9 (1985): 2, 145-169; and a postscript in *MH* 9: 3, 245-246
- 4 National Archives of Malta, Chief Secretary to Government fond. (henceforth NAM, CSG). The files form part of CSG 01 (Departmental files) and CSG 02 (Petitions).
- 5 The letters are part of the correspondence of the *Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities*. This department was split in 1955, to form the departments of *Ancient Egypt and Sudan* and *Ancient Near East*. The bound volumes containing combined correspondence are kept in the library of the Ancient Near East department.
- 6 NAM, CSG 01, Misc. 3965/03. Letter of 17/11/1903
- 7 NAM, CSG 01, Misc. 808/04. Letter of 20/04/1904
- 8 BM (British Museum), ANE (Departmental Library of the Department of the Ancient Near East), BC (Bound Correspondence of the Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities Department), 1904, 652. [Letter of 16/09/04]
- 9 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 463. [Letter of 03/01/05].
- 10 BM, ANE, BC 1904, 652. [Letter of 16/09/04]
- 11 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 463. [Letter of 03/01/05]
- 12 BM, ANE, BC 1904, 652. [Letter of 16/09/04]
- 13 Evans postulates that the bones were "presumably later thrown away since nothing further was heard of them." (J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands*. Oxford, Athlone Press, 1971, p. 45.)
- 14 T. Zammit, *The Hal-Saflieni Neolithic Hypogeum at Casal Paola*. 2nd edn., Malta, 1926, p. 39
- 15 J.D. Evans, op. cit, p. 47
- 16 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 463. [Letter of 03/01/05]
- 17 same letter
- 18 BM, ANE, BC 1904, 652. [Letter of 16/09/04]
- 19 slingstones (in Latin, *glans/glandis*, pl. *glandes*)
- 20 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 465. [Letter of 19/04/05]
- 21 BM, ANE, BC 1904, 652. [Letter of 16/09/04]
- 22 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 464. [Letter of 26/03/05]
- 23 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 465. [Letter of 19/04/05]
- 24 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 468. [Letter of 26/09/05]
- 25 BM, ANE, BC 1905, 469. [Letter of 05/12/05]
- 26 NAM, CSG 02, M 21/07. [Letter of 02/01/1907]