

# A newly discovered late Punic-Roman rock-cut tomb at Limestone Heritage, Siggiewi (Malta)

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At Siggiewi, in the area known as *Ta' Żagi*, situated at a short distance from and overlooking *Wied Xkora* is a recently discovered rock-cut tomb which was at some point in its history refashioned into a water cistern (GR 49738/67965) (Fig. 1). The tomb is located within the grounds of the Limestone Heritage park, and was recently integrated in the cultural itinerary of its visitors. A request for the study of the tomb was made by Mr Emanuel Baldacchino, the Managing Director of Limestone Heritage, to one of us (NCV). A survey of the tomb was carried out and a set of drawings were produced by the other one of us (MS) (Fig. 2). The aim of this short contribution is to present the results of the survey.

## Description

The tomb is located just off the disused quarry complex that houses the heritage park. Cut into the soft Globigerina Limestone that outcrops in the area, the tomb consists of a rectangular shaft and two burial chambers at the bottom, one opposite the other. The tomb's original entrance is now covered by a cistern head (*ħerza*) but access to the tomb can also be had from a lower level, down a flight of steps from the park's lobby, and through a hole that cuts into one of the burial chambers (Chamber 1) (Colour plate 5). In antiquity the rock-cut tomb was entered down the 2.30 m-deep shaft, probably by means of footholds dug on its side, one of which survives. The shaft has a

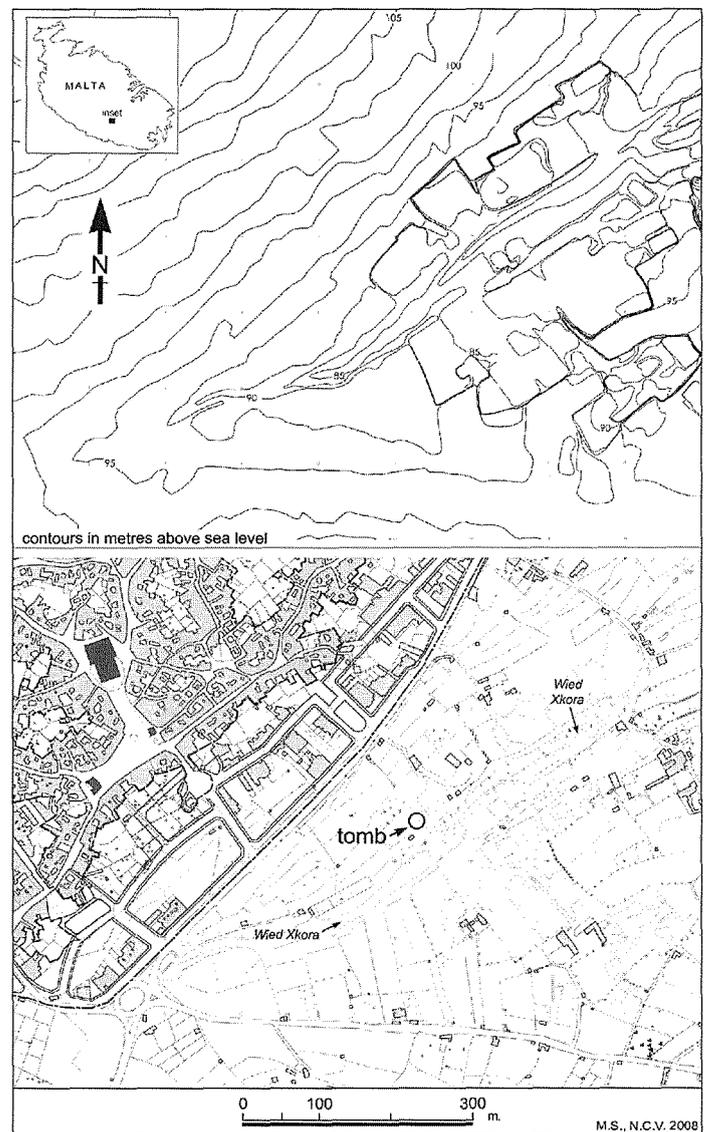


Fig. 1. The location of the tomb on the outskirts of Siggiewi, Malta. The basemap is copyright of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (2004).

rectangular plan, measuring 2.20 m by 0.90 m (Plate 1). The burial chambers are roughly rectangular in plan, measuring 1.85 m long and 1.40 m wide (Chamber 1) and 1.85 m long and

1.50 m wide (Chamber 2) respectively. They are entered through low arched doorways which narrow at floor level. Their respective measurements are: 0.72 m wide at the top, 0.66 m at the bottom, and 0.82 m in height (Chamber 1); 0.80 m wide at the top, 0.68 m at the bottom, and 0.94m in height (Chamber 2) (Colour plate 6). To the left of each entrance is a mortuary bed cut into the rock at 0.50 m above the chamber floor, measuring about 1.80 m long and 0.50 m wide. A “cushion” pillow is carved out of the rock at the inner side of each mortuary bed, facing the entrance. At the opposite inner corner of each burial chamber is an engaged pilaster, cut into the rock. This is the only decorative feature visible inside the chambers.

At some point, the rock-cut tomb was refashioned into a cistern to collect rainwater. At about 0.90 m from the level of the rock surface below the field soil, the original rectangular shaft was re-shaped to look like a massive bell (3.50 m in diameter) probably destroying other footholds that may have existed on the side of the shaft (Fig. 2). Other modifications were made to the tomb. It is likely that the original floor of the shaft was lowered by about 0.60 m (below the level of the floor of the chambers). A sump for the collection of sediment, measuring 1 m in diameter, was dug in the middle. Above the rock outcrop, the cistern was extended by stone blocks kept together with mortar. The opening of the cistern was covered transversally by blocks of stone topped in turn by the cistern head (Plate 1). A smooth mixture of lime and clay (*gagazza*) was applied over the rock surface of the cistern to make it waterproof, except on the roofs of the chambers, where water would not have reached. This rendering made the cistern waterproof but covered any ancient decorations, incisions, or inscriptions that may have existed on the walls of the burial chambers or the shaft.

The last intervention on the tomb seems to have been the attempt to channel water away from the cistern by digging a trench in the floor of Chamber 1, leading away from its modern entrance into the heritage park (Plate 1 and colour plate 5).

## Dating the tomb

It is not easy for the archaeologist to date the tomb because none of its contents have been preserved. Originally the corpses would have been laid to rest on the respective beds with their head lying, in this case, on the rock-cut “cushion” pillow, opposite the entrance. Pottery vessels, often including plates, jugs, and storage jars (amphorae), which accompanied the corpse, would have been placed inside the chamber. Each entrance would have been sealed with a stone slab or plug. The burial ritual which would have been followed here is known from elsewhere in Malta<sup>1</sup> and abroad.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it may be that the rock-cut tomb was first discovered, and emptied, when it was refashioned into a water cistern, probably after 1939, not when it was re-discovered during quarrying activities (after 1973) or during later works carried out in connection with the setting up of the park (2005).<sup>3</sup> In the absence of such material the tomb has to be dated according to its shape, layout, and according to any architectural features present within. As said earlier, rock cuttings cannot be observed as they are concealed by the *gagazza* render except on the ceiling of Chamber 2 where the original cut marks in the rock are visible. These are very different from those seen on the ceiling of Chamber 1, made with a different pick axe (*baqqun*).

Rock-cut tombs with two roughly rectangular chambers on either side of a deep rectangular shaft are common in Malta after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.<sup>4</sup> Late Punic tombs like this one were usually accessed either down a series of footholds or else down a flight of narrow steps cut in the rock of one side of the shaft,<sup>5</sup> following a scheme that finds a home in the Phoenician homeland,<sup>6</sup> and in the Punic West, in particular in Tunisia.<sup>7</sup> Examples of a rock-cut “cushion” pillow without a depression to receive the head of the corpse, as in the tomb discussed here, are not common in the Maltese islands<sup>8</sup> but they are known in the Punic cemeteries of the Tunisian Sahel in particular at Mahdia.<sup>9</sup> The appearance of this depression which serves as a headrest on the mortuary bed is a late development appearing in a transitional phase between Punic-Roman and Late Roman tombs.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, very

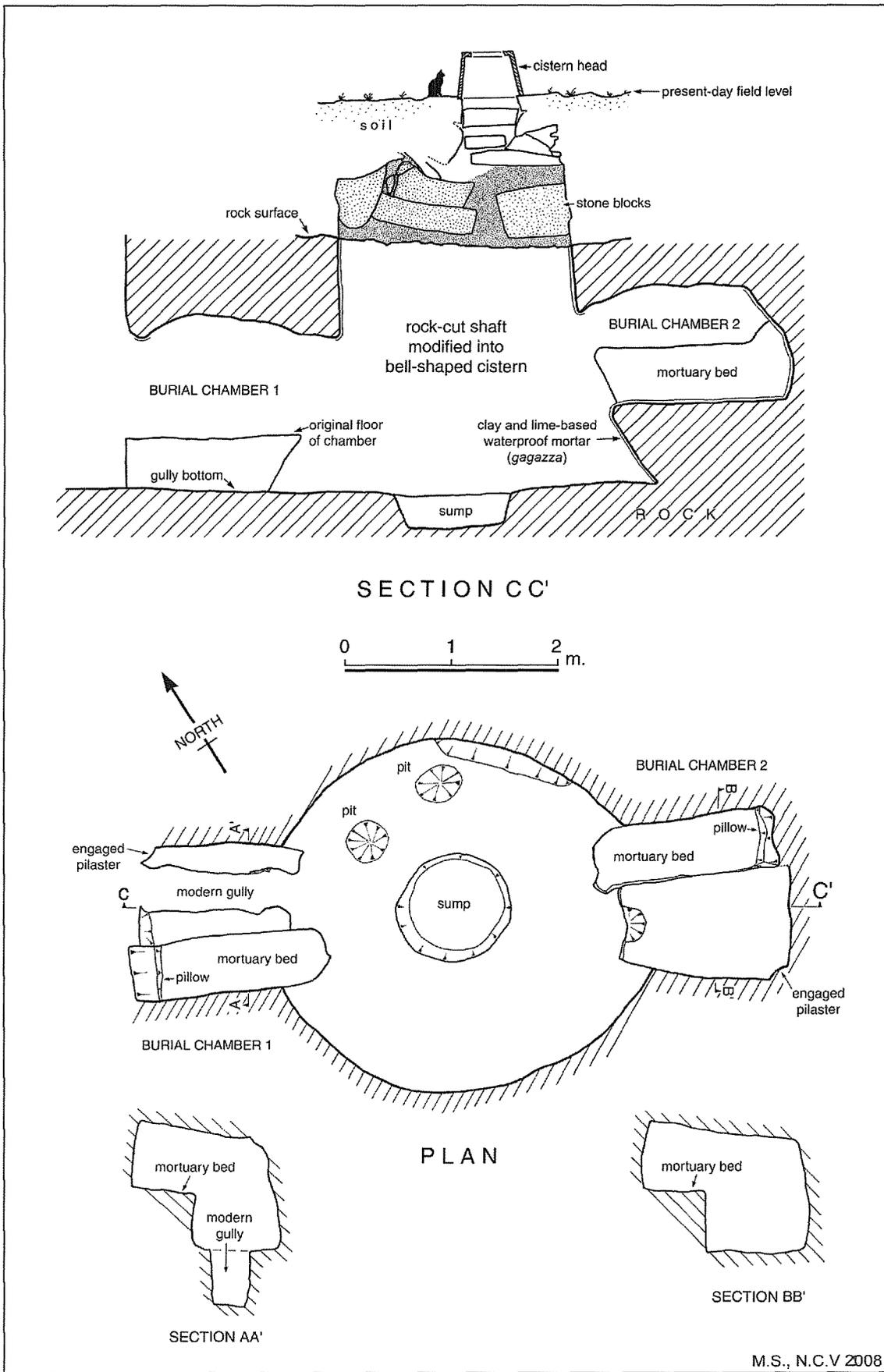
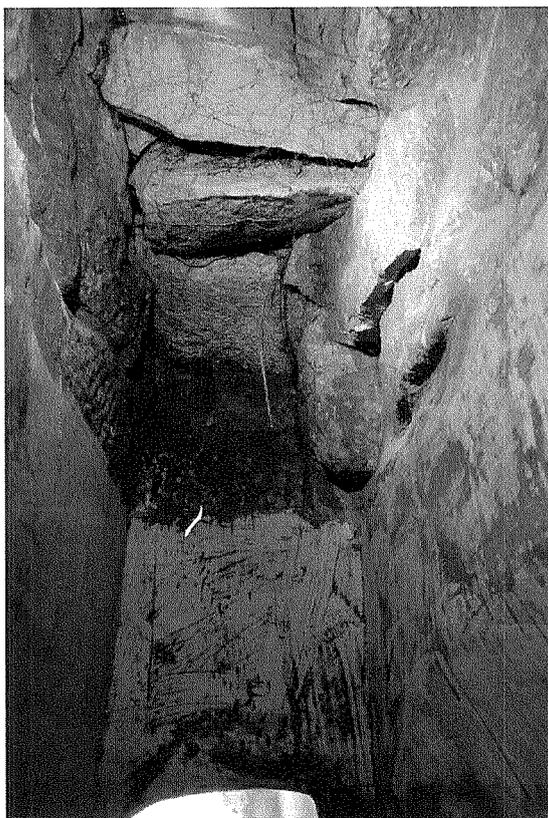


Fig. 2. Section drawings and plan of the rock-cut tomb. The adaptation of the rock-cut tomb into a bell-shaped cistern is clearly visible in Section CC'.



*Plate 1. The shaft of the rock-cut tomb. The slabs visible at the top of the photograph hold the cistern head. The entrance to Chamber 1 is just visible at the bottom of the photograph.*

few stylistic developments are found within rock-cut tombs that bridge the Late Punic and Roman periods.<sup>11</sup>

Later in the Roman period (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD), while the tomb was still being designed to a rectangular plan (both shaft and chamber), changes or refinements were made to the architectural details. Unlike the Late Punic type, the chamber was now situated at a few centimetres higher up from the shaft floor.<sup>12</sup> The Punic square-shaped chamber entrance started to attain an arched configuration; moreover, even the mortuary bed was no longer level with the chamber floor but was elevated to a higher level.<sup>13</sup> The integration of engaged and plain pilasters inside the chamber recalls the later window-like tomb, where it is a common feature.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, during this later Roman period the shaft was also

subject to changes. The footholds were replaced by a flight of steps cut along the side of the shaft. At times, the shaft was extended to provide for a small forecourt in front of the chamber entrance.<sup>15</sup>

In the light of the tomb development outlined above, the rock-cut tomb under study has a shape which can be Late Punic or Roman in date. Moreover, there are also elements present which are ascribed to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD. These elements include the position of the mortuary bed, the presence of an engaged rock-cut pilaster, and the shape of the entrance. It is not certain whether the chambers were originally level with the floor of the shaft or whether they were at a higher level. However, most probably – as suggested above – the shaft floor was lowered when the tomb was altered into a water cistern. These three elements are crucial for the date of the tomb being put forth here.

To conclude, therefore, if these elements were all fashioned at the same time as the tomb, it is likely that the tomb is of Roman date. The other scenario would have the tomb cut in Late Punic times and remodified in the subsequent Roman period when both mortuary chambers were refashioned in the shape we see today. The practice of reusing older tombs is, after all, a practice that was common in ancient Malta<sup>16</sup> and elsewhere like in Marsala, Sicily and in the necropolis of “Puig dels Molins” in Ibiza.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

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- 2 M. Gras, P. Rouillard and J. Teixidor, 'The Phoenicians and Death', *Berytus* 39 (1991), 127-176.
- 3 1939 is the date of publication of the Six Inches to One Mile map (No IX) published by the Ordnance Survey, UK. The two wells shown in the area (marked with the letter 'W') do not correspond to the cistern studied here. One of these wells can be seen in the northern quarry face of the complex. The quarries are not shown on the 1:2500 survey sheet no. 4867 (Series M8910) last updated in 1973 and published in 1974 by the Directorate of Overseas Surveys for the Government of Malta. The quarries must post-date this survey.
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- 8 Sagona, 935-940.
- 9 S. Lancel, *Carthage: A History*, (Oxford. Blackwell, 1995), 301 ; Ben Younès, 'Nécropoles puniques de Tunisie: apports et perspectives', in G. Sotgiu (ed.), *Attività di ricerca e di tutela del patrimonio archeologico e storico-artistico della Tunisia. Seminario di studi Cagliari 7-11 aprile 1986*, 33-49 (Cagliari. Editrice Universitas, 1991), 40, pl. 15 ; and Ben Younès, 79.
- 10 Buhagiar, 17, and M. Buhagiar, 'Four new Late Roman and early Byzantine burial sites in the island of Malta', *Melita Historica* 13/1 (2000), 35.
- 11 Buhagiar (1986), 14, and Sagona, 252.
- 12 Buhagiar (1986), 18.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 19-20.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 16 Buhagiar (2000), 13; Sagona, 259; and P. Vidal Gonzáles, 'Du rituel funéraire punique à l'époque romaine: le cas maltais', in M. H. Fantar and M. Ghaki (eds.), *Actes du III<sup>e</sup> congrès international des études phéniciennes et puniques*, Volume II, 443-448 (Tunis. Institut National du Patrimoine, 1995), 444.
- 17 Vidal Gonzáles, 447.