
TWO ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES RECENTLY DISCOVERED AT L-IKLIN

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Temple

The area known as L-Iklin lies on the southernmost slope of the extensive hill on which Naxxar and Gharghur are perched. To the south the slope is enclosed by a triangle formed by Birkirkara, Balzan and Lija. The area had, to my knowledge, never produced any archaeological finds until in 1967 a group of youths were reported in the local papers to have discovered there a megalithic temple.¹ Attention to the site was drawn in the first place by Mr. Carmel Attard of Birkirkara, and eventually a short report accompanied by a rough plan of the structure was produced in a local cyclostyled newsletter.²

The new site was not, then, officially registered in the records of the Museum authorities and was never included in the survey of prehistoric antiquities of the Maltese islands published by Evans in 1972.³ My attention to the 'temple' was drawn once more by Mr. Carmel Attard in whose company I visited the place in 1979. The visible remains aroused my interest and I jotted down a few notes. My purpose here does not go beyond bringing the existence of the site to the knowledge of the archaeologist and of the interested reader.⁴

The site occupies a very small field with a surface area of about 100 metres (G.R. 510745). The surrounding stretch of land bears the name of L-Iklin and is flanked by others known as Ta' Simblija and Tat-Tabib. It is situated about 1 km from Naxxar on the narrow winding road from Naxxar to Lija and Birkirkara. The ancient remains consist of a few megaliths in part visible and in part covered by rubble walling supporting a raised field. Two of the megaliths are about 3 metres long and stand some 1.50 metres above soil level. Most of the blocks seem to have been dressed but erosion has not failed to leave its mark on them.

The alignment of these two megaliths and a group of smaller blocks a few metres to the north suggests the shape of two lateral apses, or

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1. E.g. *Times of Malta*, 22 September 1967; *Malta News*, 22 September 1967; *L-Orizzont*, 22 September 1967.
 2. D. De Lucca, ed., *Il Qedem Illum* no. 3 (October 1967) pp.16-18. I am grateful to Mr Joe Meli for these references.
 3. J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands; a Survey* (London 1971).
 4. The annexed plan of the surviving remains and later accretions has been drawn by J. Young.

lobes, of a typical four-apsed Copper Age temple. This *prima facie* similarity, however, raises serious doubts on the exact interpretation of the structure. The topographical layout of the feature suggests that whatever masonry is visible belongs to the outer shell of a megalithic temple; but this normally has a horse-shoe shape with either side forming a single, continuous curve. This is not the case at L-Iklin where we have what appear to be segments of two separate curves. In a temple context this could only be the inner masonry crust of two of the side apses. On the other hand, if this is the case there remains no visible trace of a structure which could correspond to the outer wall. Furthermore, as regards the curves of the walls, that of the line of smaller megaliths seems to be wider than that of the larger ones, suggesting a wider apse. This would appear to be in direct contrast with the norm according to which the bigger the apse the larger the blocks used.⁵ A further possibility is that one group of megaliths belongs to the outer wall and the other group belongs to the inner wall.

One other problem involves the location of the entrance. Both the Press release and the report on the discovery place the entrance on the east although in the plan drawn by L. Casapinta attached to the report it appears on the north. In the modern rubble wall there is indeed an opening on the north side which provides access to the small field, but if one examines carefully the other isolated megaliths partially hidden underneath the field wall one notices two neatly dressed blocks at the south end which face each other in such a way as to suggest that the entrance was originally at this end rather than on the north end. One should remember, however, that there exist examples of megalithic temples with two doors, one at the front end and the other right at the back. Another instance of such a duplication of access is not to be excluded at L-Iklin.

There is no doubt that these and other problems posed by this archaeological site cannot be solved until it is thoroughly and scientifically investigated by means of excavation. Until then one can only forward solutions on a hypothetical level.

Villa

The second site was partially explored by means of excavation in June 1975 before a house was built over it. Ancient remains were uncovered while a building plot was being cleared for the laying of foundations (G.R. 505737). The co-operation of the owner of the plot was acknowledged in the Department of Information Press Release.⁶ Excavations were undertaken by the

5. See, for example, the larger temples at Tarxien and those at Mnajdra and Hagar Qim.

6. See, for example, *Times of Malta*, 17 July 1975, p.9. *The Reports on the Workings of the Government Departments* for 1975/76, p.60 make only a brief reference to the discovery. It is precisely in this and similar circumstances that one misses the mine of information which used to be contained in the much more extensive

Museums Department whose Director invited the present writer to help in the supervision of the operation. The excavation was limited to the plot of land which was threatened by immediate development but there was ample evidence that the remains extended underneath the adjacent plot to the north. In fact, ancient clay bricks, normally found in association with Roman hypocausts in Malta, were visible in a vertical section previously cut into by the mechanical excavator during the clearing operation. But, as the latter plot was not in immediate danger of being destroyed, the Museum authorities decided to postpone its exploration to a later date. The two plots were flanked by newly-built houses.

Before the Museum authorities intervened the soil on the area had already been cleared by the mechanical excavator which had cut through some walls and displaced several large ashlar blocks. At least one floor, made up of lozenge-shaped tiles, had also been partially broken up. Further up the hill, to the east, one could still see large ashlar blocks of the Punic or Roman type among the heaps of earth which had been previously displaced in the clearance of neighbouring building plots. Lozenge-shaped tiles and fragments of Italian sigillata ware were collected from those heaps.

The first important feature to be discovered on the first day of excavation was a small room with a floor of lozenge-shaped tiles which lay about 5 cm below the top surface of the first layer of dressed, ashlar blocks. The room seemed to be surrounded on three sides by a large courtyard enclosed by thick foundations. Its north side was not investigated as it lay under the adjacent building plot. Because of pressures to complete the investigation in the shortest possible time, the diggers had to content themselves with simply uncovering the top surface of the visible walls. Other walls, therefore, could easily have escaped their notice. With this method another small room was identified at the south-east corner of the courtyard. The room was divided below the floor surface by a narrow wall which flanked a deep trench cut in bed-rock. A flat slab, about 13 cm thick and lying directly on the soil on the south-west corner of the room, seemed to have been a threshold. It had a channel, 11cm wide, along the whole of its length with a circular hole, 7 cm in diameter and 7 cm deep, at its north end. This hole was probably a pivot for the door post.

A few soundings were made on selected points but none of them revealed any stratigraphy. Two of them, 5 and 7, revealed channels cut in bed-rock. Trench 5 also produced two fragments of a thin slab of stone which when joined presented a round hole at the joint and traces of a similar hole on one of the broken ends. I later discovered that it was certainly part of a seat

Museum Annual Reports as they used to appear up to 1970. One hopes that in the near future this serious failure will be remedied by some other publication containing full reports of investigations made by the Museum during the year.

of a typical Roman lavatory.⁷ A similar seat had been discovered a long time ago in a room at the Roman baths of Ghajn Tuffieha.⁸ The same type of lavatory seating is often encountered in public latrines on several of the major archaeological sites of the Roman world.

This item as well as the few clay bricks noticed in the adjacent site bring to mind similar finds made at the Ghajn Tuffieha baths. Although it would be too daring to suggest anything comparable to that building, one can safely compare the L-Iklin remains to those of the villa at Ramla Bay in Gozo.⁹ The very presence of a lavatory and the proportionally large amounts of fragments of fine imported table wares discovered on the site are indicative of a certain degree of luxury and, though no traces of marble flooring or wall veneering were found, I would tend to believe that the building of L-Iklin was more probably a country resort than a rural farmstead.¹⁰ No evidence of agricultural instruments normally encountered in such contexts was met.

Unless there had been different phases in the life of the building which could not be accounted for by the hasty excavation, the fragments of black glazed ware and of Italian *terra sigillata* discovered during the operation point to the first centuries B.C. and A.D.¹¹

Cisterns

During the excavation of the same site I came to know from several individuals living in the neighbourhood of the existence of two old cisterns in the immediate vicinity. A few weeks after the end of the excavations a small team, consisting of Mr. Ivo Caruana, Mr. Tony Lautier and myself, set out to explore and record them. Mr. Lautier provided his climbing equipment and experience while Mr. Caruana prepared the drawings.

The cistern which is situated further uphill, to the east of the ancient remains just described, may or may not have formed part of that building. It is extremely well preserved. It is entirely rock-cut except for a few large rectangular blocks built over its openings in order to prevent soil from falling in. A round perforation, 20 cm in diameter, in one of the blocks served as a drain hole.

The cistern is bottle-shaped with a concave bottom.¹² It is almost 6 m

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7. The slab had already disappeared from the site when I visited the site only three days after the end of the excavation. Fortunately, however, I had photographed it and had it drawn soon after its discovery.
 8. T. Zammit, "Roman Villa and Thermae at Ghajn Tuffieha — Malta", *Bulletin of the Museum I*, pp. 62-3.
 9. T. Ashby, "Roman Malta", *Journal of Roman Studies*, V (1915) pp.70-74; A. Bonanno, "Roman Villa at Ramla Bay, Gozo", *Heritage* no. 32, pp.634-637.
 10. As suggested in the respective Press release: see note 6.
 11. No date was suggested in the same Press release. The plan of the site was drawn by Mr F.S. Mallia, Director of the Museums Department, with whose kind permission it is being published.
 12. As at the time of the exploration the bottom was covered with much mud and rubbish its exact shape could not be recorded, but soundings with a wooden pole

deep and 5.25 m in diameter at the widest point. Bottle-shaped cisterns are very common in Malta but the L-Iklin one has a strange feature which, to my knowledge, is not recorded in other examples. It is a funnel-shaped opening cut vertically into the east side of the cistern in such a way that an object, say a bucket, lowered down from this opening, could reach the bottom without hindrance. The cistern has thus two equally serviceable openings and the resulting shape in section elevation is that of an elongated tea-pot.

The purpose of the second opening is rather obscure, the more so since we cannot establish whether it was an original feature or cut at a later date. Among the possible explanations three seem to be the more plausible. The cistern could have been excavated beneath two separate properties in the first place so that the tenant of each had access to it. Otherwise it might have been decided at a later stage to perforate a second opening for the same purpose after a division of a previously single property. This might also have been resorted to because of a need to shift the opening due to some change in the nature of the property above.

The cistern is lined all round up to about 30 cm below the mouth edge. The lining is of first rate quality and is preserved almost in its entirety. It presents a smooth, polished surface except in the lowest metre or so, where the shiny surface has been eroded to uncover a very friable clayey layer. A sample of the lining has been extracted from an already damaged spot for eventual analysis.

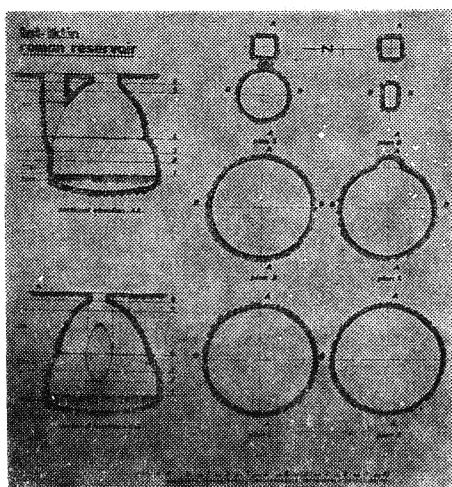
The unlined rock surface just below the opening carries tool-marks which are indicative of the cutting technique. The surface is scored by shallow grooves, about 10 cm long and 2 cm wide, which suggest the use of a wide-edged instrument like a pickaxe or chisel.

The shape of the cistern cannot, unfortunately, be used to determine its antiquity. Bottle-shaped cavities in the ground go back at least to the Bronze Age in the Maltese islands. Some of these, when found in a Bronze Age context have been identified as silo-pits.¹³ Similarly-shaped water tanks, however, are known to have been cut in very recent times¹⁴ and most of the Maltese houses built in the first half of this century have water cisterns of this shape.

A great deal more may possibly be deduced on the chronology of individual cisterns when a comparative study of the linings used in different periods is completed.¹⁵ It is with such a study in mind that the present writer ex-

revealed the inclination of the floor towards the centre.

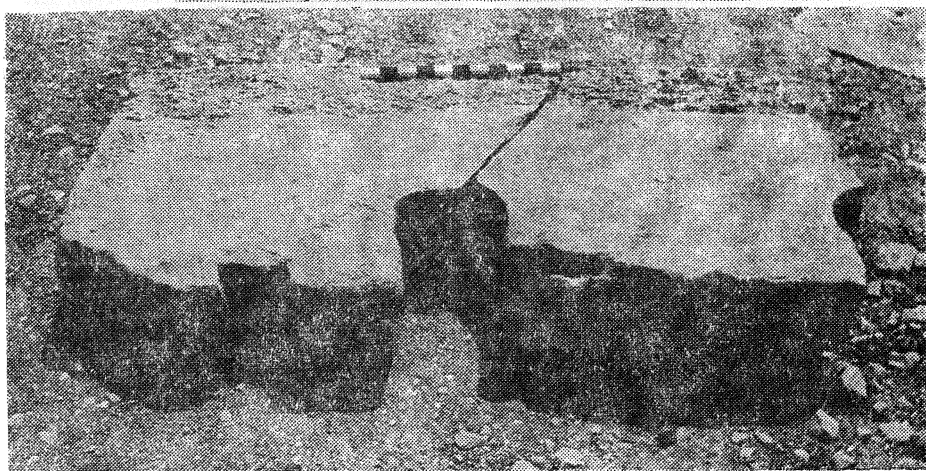
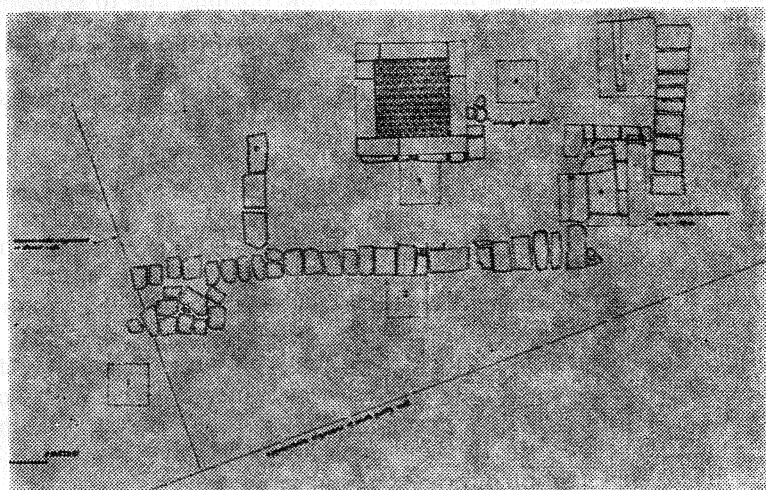
13. E.g. *Museum Annual Report*, 1960 p.4-5, fig.1; *ibid.* 1970 p.2. A number of such bottle-shaped pits were excavated in 1972 by Mr T. Gouder, Curator of Archaeology, at Il-Wardiġa ta' San Gorg, near Dingli Cliffs (report in preparation).
14. A good example is the unfinished one cut right into a chamber of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum in the beginning of this century.
15. Studies of this type have been conducted with impressive results in north Africa, e.g. M. Solignac, "Recherches sur les installations hydroliques de Kairouan et des



Plans at various levels and sectional elevations of bottle-shaped cistern at L-Iklin. (top)

Plan of ruins of Roman building at L-Iklin. (middle)

Fragment of a stone latrine seat. (bottom)



tracted samples of the lining in this cistern. Excavation of the deposit inside the cistern might also throw some light on the periods in which it was in use.

The second cistern in the area was much more likely connected with the villa because it certainly belonged to the Roman period and was situated only a few metres downhill from the building in a very good position to receive the rain water from its roofs. The cistern is rectangular in shape and measures 7.5 m by 5 m. At the time of the exploration the bottom was covered by about 50 cm of silt and it was not possible to ascertain whether there was a depression below any one of the four openings, as is normally the case in large cisterns of this sort.

When the cistern was explored access into it was through a square hole in the south-west corner of the roof, but there were three other openings which were then blocked up. It is very likely, however, that a further opening existed in the south-east corner where a staircase has been spared in the living rock to provide physical access to the bottom. The upper part of the staircase has been built up most probably to support some cracked capstones above.

The most remarkable feature in this cistern is the way it is roofed over. The actual tank is a rectangular depression hewn in solid rock but the roof is entirely constructed. The latter consists of four rows of thick, rectangular slabs of globigerina limestone, each approximately 2 m by 1 m, supported on three flat arches. The arches are made up of large, tapering voussoirs of varying lengths. The first and second arches have eleven voussoirs each whereas the third arch has thirteen. The voussoirs are roughly dressed on the exposed surfaces, but the joints are cut with great precision to form a perfect fit. No mortar seems to have been used in the joints.

The waterproofing lining, which covers all the visible vertical surfaces as well as, presumably, the bottom surface, is preserved in good condition. Samples, have been taken from damaged areas where two layers of different date can be identified, one superimposed on the other. The wall built over the staircase is covered by a lining of a different kind altogether. It is very thick and consists of three layers bound together.

Cisterns of the same shape and period are well attested in Malta. A very well known example is that close to the Ta' Kaċċatura villa complex. The slab roof of the latter, however, rests on a series of massive square pillars.¹⁶ Another example with pillar supports is the cistern near the Ta' Gawhar Tower.¹⁷ On the other hand flat arches, of seven voussoirs each, occur in combination

steppés tunisiennes du VIIe au XIe siècles", *Annales de l'Institut d'Etudes Orientales: Faculté des Lettres de l'Université d'Alger*, X (1952) pp.5-273; XI (1953) pp.60-170; Id., "Remarques de Méthode sur l'Etude des Installations Hydriques Ifriquiennes au Haut Moyen-Age", *Cahiers de Tunisie*, 47-48 (1964). References owed to Dr A. Luttrell.

16. *Museum Annual Report*, 1914-15, p.3; Ashby, p.64.

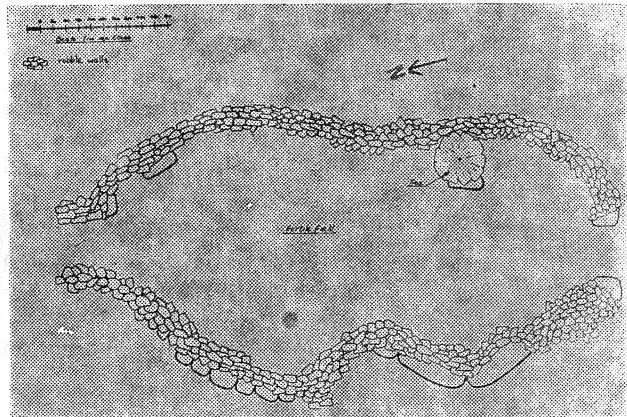
17. *Museum Annual Report*, 1915-16, p.8; 1960, p.6.

with vertical pillars in a cistern at Tal-Brolli.¹⁸ The cistern discovered in 1915-16 at Wied is-Sewda is almost identical to the L-Iklin one: it has five flat arches and a staircase on one side.¹⁹

At the time of the investigation it was reported by one of the residents of L-Iklin that the government had plans to preserve the cistern and reinforce it with concrete. Such a project is highly recommended as it would preserve a rare example of an ancient Maltese technique in water preservation, and at the same time provide a practical and much needed service.



Map of L-Iklin hill. Field with megaliths indicated by arrow. **(above)**



Plan of small field at L-Iklin showing rubble walls built over megaliths. **(below)**

18. Ashby, p.64; D. Trump, *Malta, an Archaeological Guide* (London, 1972) pp.84-85.
19. *Museum Annual Report*, 1913-14, p.4.

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