

**The Cave Churches in Malta and their
Paintings:
An Art Historical Gazetteer**

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A dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History of Art presented in the Department of History of Art, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta

June 2014



University of Malta
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To my family,
for their undying support.

Preface

This dissertation examines the cave churches of Malta, and provides a study based of the different sources which shaped the sites in question. The subject is set within the context of the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages and the cultural, political and artistic crosscurrents therein. Considered alongside the cave churches is the troglodytic phenomenon.

The necessary historical context is provided in the Introduction, with emphasis on the Norman rule in Sicily and Malta, which shaped the political and social climate of the two islands. The recurring theme of Siculo-Greek Monasticism is introduced and the wide origins of cave churches are explored, along with other underlying themes, namely the eschatological element and the Sicilian type of cave churches. The Introduction also seeks to define the differences between the urban and rural cave churches.

Chapter One deals with the urban cave churches in the areas surrounding Mdina. Underlying themes of this chapter include the Greek and Latin elements, the Siculo-Byzantinesque idiom and the importance of the paleochristian hypogea as sites of religious revitalization. Chapter Two, on the other hand, tackles the rural cave churches, particularly those North and around the Great Fault. Alongside the move into the countryside, the troglodytic phenomenon is here given great importance, as it is a formative element of the Maltese cave churches, particularly those found in rural areas.

Providing an idea of the physical structure of the different sites is the gazetteer at the end, providing an appendix of plans of a number of the cave churches discussed in this dissertation.

Acknowledgements

This study on cave churches in Malta could not have seen light of day were it not for the help of a number of people. Foremost among them are my supervisors, Ms. Charlene Vella, who was there when I needed her, providing advice which better helped me understand and tackle the subject at hand, and Professor Mario Buhagiar, whose support and encouragement through rough patches was of invaluable importance, and whose experience and scholarship was a guiding light. Thanks go to Professor Keith Sciberras, Head of Department, for his guidance and understanding, not only as regards this dissertation, but throughout the three years of the course. I would like to thank all the other lecturers within the Department of History of Art at the University of Malta for always being open for questions and discussion.

Special thanks go to Mr. Keith Buhagiar, visiting lecturer in the Department of Archaeology, who kindly shared his research with me and provided directions to the more secluded sites. I would like to express my gratitude to those who allowed me access into the various sites, which are usually inaccessible to the public, namely Mr. David Cardona (Heritage Malta), for opening the Abbatija tad-Dejr for me and showing me through, and Br. Dominic Cardona, curator of the St. Agatha historical complex. Thanks go to the staff at the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat and Fr. Louis Suban.

I would also like to show gratitude for my fellow undergraduate students within the Department of History of Art, who always showed support and interest, particularly Francesca Attard, who accompanied me to several sites.

I would be remiss not to thank my family, especially my father, who joined me in the visitation of most of the sites, my mother for her support and encouragement and my sister, who is always there when I need her.

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Introduction

The Historical Context

The islands of Malta and Gozo, which, prior to the year 1091, were under Muslim rule,¹ came into the process of Latin Christianisation rather late, in comparison with Sicily. This process began with Roger de Hauteville, Count of Sicily, and his campaign to establish Norman rule in Malta in 1091, recorded by the Norman chronicler Goffredo Malaterra.² The Malta which Count Roger landed on was populated mostly by Muslims, and only a few Greek Christians,³ which were too few for Count Roger to leave on the island and give authority to.⁴ These non-Maltese slaves were freed by Count Roger and taken back to Sicily, where they were given the choice to either stay in Sicily or leave for their homeland; the latter option was chosen by all the freed slaves.⁵ Culturally, this left Malta arguably more Muslim than before, seeing as the remainder of the population was supposedly made up wholly of Muslims. Count Roger's departure also saw Malta retain North Africa as one of its main spheres of influence.⁶ Peace terms had been agreed upon between Malta and the Normans, in the shape of an oath of faithfulness and a yearly payment or tribute. This shows that Count Roger was not interested in suppressing the Muslim population or changing the spheres of cultural influence in Malta, but merely in securing Malta's strategic and tributary position under Norman rule.⁷

A considerably more absolute Norman conquest of Malta, along with a stricter latinisation, occurred in 1127 under the son of Roger de Hauteville, King Roger II of Sicily. The latinisation of Malta was somewhat delayed, especially when compared to other Muslim conquests, such as Sicily. Maltese inhabitants were called *tam christiani quam saraceni* (both Christians and Saracens), that is before the

¹ For more information about the Muslim period of Maltese history, see G. Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta', in *Malta – Studies of Its Heritage and History* (Malta, 1986).

² For more, see G. Malaterra, *Imprese del Conte Ruggero e del Fratello Roberto il Guiscardo* (Palermo, 2000).

³ M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs and related burial places in the Maltese Islands* (Oxford, 1986), 6.

⁴ G. Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta', in *Malta – Studies of Its Heritage and History* (Malta, 1986), 91.

⁵ M. Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta: Catacombs, Cult-Centres and Churches to 1530* (Oxford, 2007), 80.

⁶ A. T. Luttrell, 'Approaches to Medieval Malta', in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A. T. Luttrell (London, 1975), 30-1.

⁷ C. Vella, *The Mediterranean artistic context of the art and architecture of Late Medieval Malta, 1091-1530*, (Italy, 2013), 16.

ousting of the Muslim community from the Civitas between 1221 and 1225,⁸ as a result of a religiously intolerant Latin garrison. A number of native Muslims may have resisted conversion to Christianity and sought refuge in the countryside, where they could practice their beliefs with considerably more freedom. Such a move also occurred in Sicily and Pantelleria.⁹ It is believed that this move triggered the development of the Maltese town as well as the troglodytic phenomenon in the outskirts of the Civitas and the countryside.

Siculo-Greek Monasticism and the origin of cave churches

Despite the fact that no documentary evidence has been found on Greek monastic activity on the Maltese islands following the Norman re-conquest of 1127, its presence is evidenced in such non-written sources as iconography, architecture, hagiography and toponymy. These sources are to be considered within the backdrop of the Sicilian context, to which Malta was a satellite state. It is believed that Siculo-Greek monasticism, and the customs that it upholds, namely in the form of cave churches and the cult for certain saints, were brought to the islands through this Sicilian channel.¹⁰

The roots of the ascetic and eremitic traditions stem from the Orient, particularly Syria and the Nile Delta. In Sicily, Greek-monasticism stems from several sources, which include the early Christian ascetic coenobitic tradition as well as the presence of Middle Eastern monks on the run from the Iconoclastic persecution of the Byzantine Empire.¹¹ An overarching connection to the Byzantine East had occurred in the mid-eight century when ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Calabria and Sicily passed from Rome to the Patriarch of Constantinople, under Leo III.¹² Aldo Messina has suggested that the diffusion of cave churches and habitations in Sicily is owed to the move of a Syrian-Palestinian community to Sicily in the sixth century, in whose native lands the phenomenon was known at least since the 4th

⁸ A. T. Luttrell, 'Giliberto Abbate's Report on Malta ca.1241', in K. Sciberras (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week 1993* (Malta, 1997), 10 – 12.

⁹ M. Buhagiar, 'The Re-Christianisation of Malta: Siculo-Greek Monasticism, Dejr Toponyms and Rock-Cut Churches', *Melita Historica* Vol. XIII, no. 3, 253-283 (Malta, 2002), 253; M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 2005), 40.

¹⁰ M. Buhagiar, 'The Re-Christianisation of Malta', 262.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 270-272.

¹² A. Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (Edinburgh, 2009), 5.

century where it found a habitat ideal for its propagation.¹³ The rock-cut hermitages reflect the Greek monastic interest in Eastern eschatology and anchoritic practices, which called for seclusion from urban life.

Aside from and connected to the anchoritic custom, among the reasons for the preference of caves and rock-hewn spaces as cult centres, there is the eschatological element, which is an allegorical affiliation with death and the grave, the tunnel through which man must pass for eternal life.¹⁴ The cave church serves also as an echo of the Holy Sepulchre – the assumed site of Golgotha, where Christ's crucifixion took place, and one of Christendom's holiest shrines, to which pilgrims flocked. The pious who could not embark on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem could make the spiritual link through the cave, serving as a symbol of Christianity's greatest mystery – the Resurrection of Christ.¹⁵

The fascination with rock-cut spaces leads to a number of Sicilian-Greek saints setting up home and hermitages in caves. These include Gregorius Decapolita, Calogero, and Philip of Agira, the latter of which was a principal figure in Sicilian-Greek monasticism and whose cult following in Malta remained markedly strong.¹⁶ Eastern Sicily was the core of Greek monasticism, especially around Syracuse, the Val di Noto and the Val Demone, where asceticism and troglodytism were central features of belief.¹⁷ Aldo Messina observes that Sicilian diplomatic sources from the twelfth century made no distinction between rock-cut and built churches, and frequent reference to cave habitation is made.¹⁸ The Norman and Swabian periods strongly featured the troglodytic phenomenon, into whose context these buildings should be considered, and although difficult to date, they hint to the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.¹⁹

The creative and intellectual reawakening that took place in Sicily at the turn of the twelfth century, following the Norman conquest, was reached in great part due to travelling Calabrian monks who injected the Siculo-Greek community with new beliefs and traits, such as the cult of the obscure Irish saint Catald, mostly in

¹³ A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Siracusano* (Palermo, 1979), 20.

¹⁴ M. Buhagiar, 'The Re-Christianisation of Malta', 261.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 256-257.

¹⁸ A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Siracusano*, 9-10.

¹⁹ M. Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands, 1400 – 1900: Painting* (Malta, 1987) 58.

Taranto.²⁰ The cult of Saint Catald also reached Malta, where a partially rock-cut church dedicated to the saint was built in Rabat above an Early Christian cemetery.²¹

The presence of Siculo-Greek Monasticism in Malta probably owed its origin to Basilian monks, who travelled from Sicily to Malta as part of their missionary work. Part of the mission of these monks was to convert the natives, and it is presumed that the Muslims living in caves were deemed a likely community for conversion,²² and if the surviving frescoes in the Siculo-Byzantinesque style prove testimony enough, then this conversion might have proved successful. As was the case in Sicily and Pantelleria, followers of Islam preferred to convert to Greek-rite Christianity rather than the Latin-rite, which they presumably related to their Norman overlords.²³ Stylistic idiosyncrasies between murals found in Maltese, South Italian and Sicilian cave churches attest to this connection and similarity of influences.

The troglodytic settlements of Malta

The different types of cave churches and troglodytic settlements of Malta can be divided into two: urban and rural settlements.²⁴ However, there are no major differences between the two, and they are a result of the same religious and social realities. The urban cave churches are mainly found in the proximity of Mdina, most of which are hewn from or reutilise spaces from earlier Paleochristian catacombs in present day Rabat, to which they have a close relationship. On the other hand, those which are rural are scattered in the countryside, mostly in the hilly Northern part of the island. A distinction is also made between those spaces which are purposely hewn out of the rock face of a valley for a cave church or settlement and those spaces which utilise a naturally-formed cave.

The iconography of the surviving fresco cycles found in these cave churches stems from the Siculo-Byzantinesque tradition, being stylistically closest to murals found in the cave churches in Sicily and the South of Italy. Dating of these churches or murals can be difficult, in that in the former case numerous elements may have

²⁰ M. Buhagiar, 'The Re-Christianisation of Malta', 257.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 271.

²³ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 38.

²⁴ These will be discussed in the following chapters.

altered the natural state of the space, namely geophysical. In the case of murals one can only presume the latest possible date, as these may have been painted much later than the founding of the church itself.

Taking in consideration that only scant documentation and evidence has been found for cave churches in Gozo, this study will concentrate on the ones found in Malta.²⁵

²⁵ Documentation has been found attesting to a cave church in Gozo in the limits of Xlendi Bay, whose location is unknown.

Chapter 1:

Urban Cave Churches

Despite the geophysical difference, it must be remembered that the urban and rural cave churches are a result of the same pressures and realities, be they religious and/or social. The Siculo-Byzantine tradition is at the root of the surviving murals of either type of cave church and this common iconographical language ties them together more closely.²⁶ However, a quality that distinguishes the urban churches is their proximity or connection to the Early Christian hypogea, from which they are often re-cut, as with the cases of the cave church of St. Agatha, that of St. Paul's Grotto and Abbatija tad-Dejr. In these churches there also seems to be an increased tendency for architectural elaboration and decoration.²⁷

The Civitas

The urban centre of Medieval Malta was the Mdina and Rabat surrounding it. In Roman times the city of Melite encompassed the whole of Mdina and Rabat. It is traditionally held that Mdina was reduced to its present size by the Muslims some time after 870, while the rest became Rabat.²⁸ However, this idea of the urban transformation and reduction of Mdina and Rabat during the Muslim period has been challenged.²⁹

It is assumed that during the long periods of Byzantine and Muslim dominion, the Maltese countryside remained unchanged from Roman times.³⁰ The Norman reconquest of 1127 presumably brought with it a degree of religious intolerance, along with the establishment of a Latin garrison. It is at this stage that the first instances of Muslim persecution seem to have occurred.³¹ Between the years 1221 and 1225, Maltese Muslims who refused baptism were exiled to Lucera in Apulia.³² This, and other threats, probably triggered the move of the native Muslim population out of the Medina and into the surrounding areas of Rabat and the

²⁶ M. Buhagiar, 'The Re-Christianisation of Malta: Siculo-Greek Monasticism, Dejr Toponyms and Rock-Cut Churches', *Melita Historica* Vol. XIII, no. 3 (Malta, 2002), 272.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ C. Dalli, *Malta: The Medieval Millennium*, (Midsea Books, Malta, 2006), 262.

²⁹ For more information, see C. Dalli, *Malta: The Medieval Millennium*, (Midsea Books, Malta, 2006), 262-266.

³⁰ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 2005), 40.

³¹ G. Wettinger, 'The Gold Hoard of 1525', *Melita Historica* Vol. VII, no.1 (Malta, 1976), 25.

³² A.T. Luttrell, 'Giliberto Abbate's Report on Malta ca. 1241', in K. Sciberras (ed.) *Proceedings of History Week 1993* (Malta, 1997), 12.

countryside, where their Islamic identity could be safeguarded from the process of Christianisation.³³ A similar move from the city to the countryside also occurred in Pantelleria and in Sicily, where in the latter the mountainous terrain provided better protection, compared to the relative flatness of the Maltese countryside.³⁴ The spread of the troglodytic phenomenon during the Middle Ages, which would become an essential feature of the Maltese countryside, is believed to coincide with this move away from the city.³⁵

With the process of latinization in motion, the Medina became known as the Civitas.³⁶ It is from here and now that Malta came closer to the European sphere of influence, rather than the North African one. Christian colonizers from Sicily and the heel of Italy probably helped in making the Civitas more Latinate, as well as filling the void left by the expulsion of the Muslims.³⁷ In one such instance, the population of Celano was banished to Malta, following the town's destruction at the hand of Frederick II.³⁸

The Greek element

An important presence in the Civitas is that of the Greek Church, and perhaps even more so, outside the walls of the Civitas. Norman Sicily had a strong Greek past, and it is through this channel that the Siculo-Greek monastic presence in Malta is presumably forged.³⁹ This presence seems to have been an instrumental influence in the formation of coenobitic establishments on the island, all of which date to the post-Muslim period.⁴⁰ Greek-rite monasticism in Sicily survived the protracted Muslim rule, particularly in the Eastern regions, despite instances of persecution. Following the Norman conquest, it provided the Muslim community with a more

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 40.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ C. Vella, *The Mediterranean artistic context of the art and architecture of Late Medieval Malta, 1091-1530*, (Italy, 2013), 28.

³⁷ Ibid., 29.

³⁸ A. T. Luttrell, 'Approaches to Medieval Malta', in Id. (ed.), *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights* (London, 1975), 37.

³⁹ Siculo-Greek monasticism is discussed in the Introduction.

⁴⁰ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 58.

attractive alternative to Latin-rite proselytization.⁴¹ This was also the case in Pantelleria and probably Malta.⁴²

Malta differs from the Sicilian case in that it is probable that Christianity was decimated through the Muslim conquest of 870, and was only revived after the Norman reconquest of 1127.⁴³ Aside from Latin Christianity, the Normans also brought with them to the island the Greek-rite, both of which aided the process of re-Christianisation.⁴⁴ However, a class distinction seems to have been in place, in that the diocesan establishment was made up of Latin-rite priests, while the religious edification of the Muslim lower class was undertaken by the Greek-rite clergy.⁴⁵ Evidence of their presence and work is found in the art and architecture of the cave churches.⁴⁶

It is highly probable that in the Civitas, the Castrum Maris and the Gozo Castello, Latin Christianity was prevalent, while Greek Christianity was practiced mostly in the countryside.⁴⁷ The existence of a number of *Dejr* (derived from the Arabic *dejr*) toponyms seems to hint to valuable information regarding Greek presence on the island and the possibility of ‘a convent or a monastery’, as this is one of the meanings of the word, along with ‘the cell of a monk’.⁴⁸ However, none of the cave churches or troglodytic settlements that are known in Malta can be firmly identified as one of these supposed monastic establishments.⁴⁹ One such examples of the *Dejr* toponym is in Abbatija tad-Dejr, a paleochristian hypogeum that was reutilised in the early post-Muslim period as a cult centre. The art historical evidence supporting the claim that this might have been a *dejr* is found in the images with which they chose to decorate the walls of this hypogeum.

⁴¹ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 37.

⁴² Ibid.; M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 59.

⁴³ M. Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta: Catacombs, Cult-Centres and Churches to 1530* (Oxford, 2007), 82.

⁴⁴ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 37.

⁴⁵ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 91.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ G. A. Loud, *The Latin Church in Norman Italy* (Cambridge, 2007), 4-5.

⁴⁸ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 91.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 92.

The urban cave churches

1.1. Abbatija tad-Dejr

Situated outside the walled city of Melite, the Abbatija tad-Dejr complex is described by Buhagiar as ‘Malta’s most important example of Siculo-Greek coenobitic community squatting among the tombs of a rock-cut Early Christian burial complex.’⁵⁰ The site is first referred to by G.F. Abela in 1647 as a ‘cimiterio nominato l’Abbatia’.⁵¹ It was also mentioned in a deed of 1549, when it formed part of the landed property of the Benedictine nuns of St. Peter, Mdina.⁵² In fact, the name ‘Abbatija’ is derived from the site’s association with said nunnery, or *abbazia*.⁵³ The site (Fig. 1) is made up of three small hypogea and a main cemetery⁵⁴ dug into the side of a low hill, which used to be a quarry. A tentative date for the start of the gradual development of the site, as hinted by the artistic and architectural considerations, would be some time following the beginning of the Byzantine period, around 535.⁵⁵ At the entrance to the complex was a monumental building, possibly a church, with an *opus sectile* mosaic floor.⁵⁶

At some point after the Christian reconquest, probably during the twelfth century,⁵⁷ an ascetic religious community revived the site of the early Christian necropolis as a cult centre for ascetic Christian activity, after having possibly been abandoned and vandalised during the Muslim period.⁵⁸ Aside from being a cultic centre, the cemetery was probably used also for habitation by the monks who preached there. This custom of dwelling among the dead is rooted and has special importance in the Near-Eastern, especially Nile-Delta, monastic tradition, whence it was exported to Sicily and South Italy⁵⁹. The Sicilian-Greek roots of said community are evident in the architectural interventions as well as their painted wall icons,

⁵⁰ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 59.

⁵¹ G. F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta*, (Malta, 1647), 48 – 52.

⁵² G. Wettinger, ‘Maltese Medieval Place-Names of Archaeological Interest’, in *Atti del Colloquio Internazionale di Archeologia Medievale* (Palermo, 1976), 1, 107.

⁵³ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 99.

⁵⁴ For a detailed study of the Early Christian cemetery, see M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs and related burial places in the Maltese Islands*, (Oxford, 1986); M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*.

⁵⁵ T. S. Brown, ‘Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources’, in A. T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta*, 73

⁵⁶ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 58.

⁵⁷ Dated according to art historical considerations; M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 59.

⁵⁸ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 64.

⁵⁹ Discussed further in the Introduction.

which hint towards Basilian troglodytic communities between the late eleventh and late thirteenth centuries in Sicily,⁶⁰ as well as the Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria regions during the Norman and Swabian periods. A Paleochristian hypogeum was similarly inhabited and adapted to the needs of a monastic community at the Grotta dei Santi at Monterosso Almo, in the Ragusa province.⁶¹

Of the oratories abutting the cemetery, Oratory I and II are the ones of utmost art historical importance. Oratory I is made up of long rectangular chamber (9.14 x 3.96 x 2.25m) on an East-West axis and makes part of the vestibule of the main cemetery. Separating it from the burial ground is a rock-cut screen wall with arched openings (Fig. 2), and a rock-cut elevation creates two floor levels and divides the space horizontally. An L-shaped bench (0.40m high x 0.37m wide) is hewn out of the rock at northeast corner below the apsed niche (2.10 x 0.64 x 1.66m) (Fig. 3). G.F. Abela points out rock-cut supports for a portable altar,⁶² of which one is visible now.

Interventions from the Late Medieval period were seemingly limited to the engraving of crosses with forked finials, painted in with red ochre paint (Fig. 4), a common typology in both Sicilian and Maltese rock-cut churches.⁶³ Probably also of the same period are the painted cult images that were found in the oratories. In an apsed recess was a presumed painted representation of a Deësis group, of which the sinopia of a blessing Christ and another haloed figure, possibly the Virgin,⁶⁴ used to be visible. The presence of a St. John the Baptist in said group is suggested by a late nineteenth-century record indicating a banner,⁶⁵ which refers to the saint's symbol in art, the pennant. From the same account, the letters S C R were deciphered as part of a fragmentary Latin inscription written in vermilion.⁶⁶ The subject of the Deësis (from the Greek 'humble petition') is commonplace in the Greek-rite church, and represented the Virgin and John pleading with Christ for the human race. The scene is originally Latin, however very common in Byzantine art. The Abbatija tad-Dejr

⁶⁰ For more about the Sicilian cave churches see the publications of Aldo Messina - *Le Chiese Rupestre del Siracusano*, (Palermo, 1979); *Le Chiese Rupestre del Val di Noto*, (Palermo 1994); *Le Chiese Rupestri del Val Demone e Del Val di Mazara*, (Palermo, 2001).

⁶¹ A. Messina, 'Trogloditismo Medievale a Malta', *Melita Historica*, Vol. X, no. 2 (Malta, 1990), 117.

⁶² G. F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 49.

⁶³ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ A. A. Caruana, *Ancient pagan tombs and Christian cemeteries in the Islands of Malta explored and surveyed from the years 1881 to the years 1897*, (Malta, 1898), 123.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

sinopia showed a bearded Christ wearing a halo enclosing a Greek cross, with features that align with the Byzantine tradition – an oval face, almond shaped eyes, heavy eyebrows and a prominent nose. To emphasize His divine majesty, the figure of Christ in Byzantine art was customarily enclosed within a mandorla, of which no traces are here evident.⁶⁷ The iconography of the Christ Pantocrator speaks most closely the language of Siculo-Byzantinesque art of Norman Sicily, of which Aldo Messina gives several examples from both rock-cut and built churches in Sicily.⁶⁸ A particularly similar, and approximately coeval, frescoed Deësis is that found in the Grotte della Solitudine rock-cut complex at Lentini.⁶⁹

Other murals found in the Oratory include two icons on the arcaded screen wall that survived until the turn of the twentieth century, and through accounts of the site.⁷⁰ The painter Lazzaro Pisani was commissioned by Dr. A.A. Caruana to copy these murals in watercolour for the Library,⁷¹ that are now lost. Photographs of the icons, presumably taken by Sir Themistocles Zammit, one of which was traced, revealed the presumed subject of the icons, namely a *St. Michael the Archangel*⁷² and a *St. John the Evangelist*. The latter, whose presumed identity was identified by Gian Francesco Abela in the seventeenth century,⁷³ seems to have donned Greek pontifical robes decorated with Greek crosses. The two icons were contained within a frame of red pigment, as well as possibly carrying legends in Latin script with the saints' names,⁷⁴ which make up two of the defining characteristics of the Siculo-Byzantinesque artistic idiom.

Another oratory (Oratory II) seems to have been recut from an Early Christian or Byzantine burial-chamber. Aldo Messina suggests that in the development of Late Medieval churches in Sicily of Siculo-Byzantinesque origin, the presence of a rectangular shaped apse and stone benches (dukkien) suggests a later date.⁷⁵ Still in use until at least 1575,⁷⁶ the oratory originally had an entrance

⁶⁷ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 61.

⁶⁸ A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestri del Val di Noto*, 26, 45, 121; Id., *Le Chiese Rupestri del Siracusano*, 31, 49.

⁶⁹ Id., *Le Chiese Rupestri del Siracusano*, 48-49.

⁷⁰ G.F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 48-52.

⁷¹ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 61.

⁷² Reproduced in Ibid, 64, pl. 4.6.

⁷³ G.F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 49.

⁷⁴ Ibid; C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 65-66.

⁷⁵ A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Val di Noto*, 160.

independent of the cemetery, walled up at an unknown date.⁷⁷ The small rectangular room (3.20 x 1.21 m) is orientated on an east-west axis and has a flat roof supported by a rock pilaster (0.76 x 0.91 m) possibly recut from a *baldacchino*-tomb.⁷⁸ The square apse (1.82 x 1.21 m) contained a stone altar, recorded in 1647, along with the remains of a stone basin.⁷⁹ On the north wall a large Greek cross with forked finials is engraved and highlighted with red paint, one of the many found in the oratories of Abbatija tad-Dejr. Traces of painting were found in 1898, possibly belonging to icons used for personal veneration.⁸⁰

The apse in this second oratory housed Malta's most important Siculo-Byzantinesque painting, depicting a Golgotha and an Annunciation scene. (Fig. 5) The natural rock was levelled through a method of painting partly onto plaster applied in patches and partly on the rock.⁸¹ Now preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, the painting has survived, albeit having suffered through natural elements as well as conservation and relocation in the 1980s.⁸² A tentative date for the fresco would be around the early fourteenth century; however an earlier date seems more likely, due to Malta having become essentially Latinized.⁸³ Among the elements which point to the fourteenth century is the unmistakable S-curve of the Crucified Christ, which points to the development of a Gothic sensibility, as well as the merging of two devotional themes, namely the Crucifixion and the Annunciation.⁸⁴ The Latin legends on the mural, indicating the different character, are another indication to a late date. Although very little survives, the legends are recorded in the account of G.F. Abela.⁸⁵ On one of the arms of the cross was *VIKTOR MORTIS*, by the heads of the Annunciating Angel and the Virgin respectively were *ANGELVS GABRIEL* and *M. DOMINI*, while in the Golgotha scene, *MAT* was inscribed by the Sorrowing Virgin and *IOH* next to St. John the

⁷⁶ G. Aquilina; S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part IV – Documents at the Vatican No. I – Archivio Secreto Vaticano Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari. Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51 Mgr Petrus Dusina, 1575*, (Malta, 2001), f.164v.

⁷⁷ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 61.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ G.F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 49.

⁸⁰ A.A. Caruana, *Ancient pagan tombs*, 124.

⁸¹ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 63.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 66.

⁸⁴ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 63.

⁸⁵ G. F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 51.

Evangelist.⁸⁶ This merging of Latin script and Greek iconography was frequent in Byzantine paintings of post-Muslim Sicily. Aldo Messina notes the parallelism between this mural and a very similar mural in the previously mentioned Grotta dei Santi at Monterosso Almo (Fig. 6), where an arcosolium was reused as apse. The way in which the Crucifixion is associated with the Annunciation, similarly to the mural in Abbatija tad-Dejr, is a sign of similar devotional taste.⁸⁷

In addition to the two main oratories, one of the smaller hypogea (Fig. 7) was made into a monk's cell, where a sinopia of two haloed heads was found, having survived until the 1980s.⁸⁸ The sinopia probably belonged to an icon of two standing saints, painted for the private contemplation of the monk. In the late nineteenth century, a third haloed head as well as an inscription were still partly visible.⁸⁹ Seemingly contemporaneous to the images are two engraved Greek crosses, of which one has end bars. This typology has been noted in the Sicilian cave churches, namely in the Grotta dello Spirito Santo in Militello.⁹⁰

1.2. Church of St. Agatha

Just outside the walls of the Civitas, in an area of modern Rabat known as Hal Bajjada, one finds the St. Agatha Complex, a network of Early Christian and Jewish catacombs, one of the two principal Maltese catacombs, together with St. Paul's Catacombs.⁹¹ The presumed holiness of the site is linked to a legend in the life of St. Agatha. It is believed that the Sicilian saint fled from her home in A.D. 250 and sought refuge from persecution in a cave or crypt adjoining the catacombs. Referring to this legend are inscriptions in the crypt.⁹²

Similarly to the hypogea of Abbatija tad-Dejr, albeit a larger space, in the St. Agatha catacomb complex, a church (Fig. 8) was cut from an originally independent

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ A. Messina, 'Trogloditismo Medievale', 117; Id., *Le Chiese Rupestre del Val di Noto*, 104 – 107.

⁸⁸ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 67.

⁸⁹ NMAV, Field book of Filippo Vassallo (ca.1890 – 6) with measured drawings of archaeological monuments and sites; M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs*, 211 – 2.

⁹⁰ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 67; A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Val di Noto*, 113 – 5, fig. 35.

⁹¹ J. F. Pace, 'St. Agatha Sacred Complex', in *Heritage Vol. 2*, Midsea Books (Malta, 1979), 428 – 435; M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs*, 69 – 93.

⁹² J. F. Pace, 'St. Agatha', 428.

hypogeum which had its own entrance.⁹³ In fact, evidence of funerary architecture can still be observed, namely in the possible remains of a canopied *baldacchino*-tomb and of an arcosolium.⁹⁴ Modern accretions have deformed the original ground plan; however it is likely that the church was rectangular with a deep apsed chancel.⁹⁵ There also seems to have been an added interest in using side wall recesses as altar spaces, more so than in the oratory in Abbatija tad-Dejr, but this may be a later accretion, as the cultic significance of the church was retained after the Greek-rite monks departed the site.⁹⁶ Similarly to other cave churches, low wall benches served the purpose of seating accommodation, typical of the later phase of Sicilian rock-cut churches.⁹⁷

Most of the frescoes which now cover the walls of the church were painted over the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.⁹⁸ They seem to have been painted over an earlier cycle of Siculo-Byzantinesque murals, only two of which survive (Fig. 9), on the west wall by the entrance. According to stylistic considerations, these can be dated to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries.⁹⁹ The saints' identities, a male and a female, seem to have been originally inscribed in Latin script, of which a few letters survive, namely the *th* next to the head of the female saint, suggesting the name *AGATHA*.¹⁰⁰ However, there are no symbols which distinguish her as such, aside from a gemmed cross carried in her right hand. She is frontally posed to invoke the spectator's prayers, wearing a pearled halo around her head, and clad in rich attire. According to the iconography, the male saint is probably Anthony the Abbot; St. Paul being another possibility.¹⁰¹

The technique used follows the conventions of the known Siculo-Byzantinesque murals of the Late Medieval. The customary red ochre, yellow ochre, verdigris are used, along with a mixture of charcoal and lime to produce a dark-blue

⁹³ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 98.

⁹⁴ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 66.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 69.

⁹⁷ A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Val di Noto*, 160.

⁹⁸ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 98; For a detailed discussion of these later frescoes see *Id.*, *The Late Medieval*, 184 – 190; C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 187 – 189.

⁹⁹ *Id.*, *Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs*, 73.

¹⁰⁰ Up to at least 1899 the letter *SA(ncta)* were extant, appearing on a watercolour drawing by Lazzaro Pisani, A. A. Caruana, *The Crypt of St. Agatha in Hal Bajtjada District, Malta*, Government Printing Office (Malta, 1899).

¹⁰¹ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 66

grey pigment. The *a secco* technique seems to have been used here, rather than *a fresco*. However, dampness induced a virtual frescoping of the pigment and caused the calcification of the first layer of lime.¹⁰² Their survival is fortunate, and might have occurred due to their cultic interest, attested by the diminutive figure of a kneeling supplicant at the feet of the female saint (Fig. 10), possibly added at a later date.¹⁰³ Differences in style between the two figures may prove as evidence for the presence of more than one artist at work. The male saint seems to be the work of the more skilled artist, evidenced by a greater sensibility for drapery folds and execution of the saint's head.¹⁰⁴

Despite the rustic quality of these murals, with figures that are heavily outlined and stiffly posed, the art historical interest they provide in the context of Late Medieval Malta is noteworthy. The red and yellow frames in which each figure is contained, as well as the blue background, is very much alike Sicilian examples, such as those in the Grotta di San Nicola in Modica.¹⁰⁵ This type of framing was in fact widely used in both built and rock-cut churches for juxtaposed wall images. Therefore, the St. Agatha murals need to be considered within the context of the Siculo-Byzantinesque vernacular. The San Vito panel in the Grotta di San Nicola, particularly as regards facial features, is very close to the female saint in St. Agatha, whose hand can also be compared to the St Peter in the same Modica cave church.¹⁰⁶ Another mural in the cave church that might be Siculo-Byzantine in origin is the mutilated image of the Virgin suckling the Child (Fig. 11), but this cannot be ascribed with surety, as scientific tests carried out on the mural proved inconclusive.¹⁰⁷ However, this painting displays highly vernacular characteristics, and no examples of Sicilian murals have been found that show any resemblance to it.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 65 – 66.

¹⁰⁴ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 70.

¹⁰⁵ For more about this particular site, see A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Val di Noto*, 40 – 46; G. Di Stefano, *La Chiesetta Rupestre Di San Nicolo' Inferiore a Modica* (Ragusa, 2005).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 69 – 70.

¹⁰⁷ F. Muscat, 'The wall paintings at St. Agatha's Crypt: a study of the manufacturing techniques and the past interventions', Unpublished Undergraduate Dissertation, University of Malta (2005).

¹⁰⁸ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 70.

It seems that after Abela's visit, the hypogea were blocked, only to be rediscovered during the late nineteenth century by a farmer.¹⁰⁹ Due to its richness in lime, the rock was quarried, until the church authorities intervened and opened parts of the site to the public. The cave church had also been abandoned, however in 1870, in part due to a renewed interest in pre-Baroque art, church authorities set in motion its rehabilitation.¹¹⁰ In 1921 the complex was passed to the Missionary Society of St. Paul, who removed the rubble that filled the catacombs and still tend to the site nowadays.¹¹¹

A cave church whose location has been lost, but was also adapted from a hypogeum in the St. Agatha cemeterial complex was a church of St. Venera. Abela describes the church as having a stone altar as well as a mural of a standing St. Venera holding a vase filled with flames.¹¹² The flaming bowl is the iconographical symbol associated with St. Parasceva, better known as St. Venera, an Early-Christian martyr particularly venerated by the Siculo-Greek community of Southern Italy and Sicily.¹¹³ In Sicily, a painting of St. Venera is found in Santa Maria della Grotta in Marsala.¹¹⁴ The cave church was deconsecrated at some point between 1574 and 1614, and in 1693 the entrance was blocked to protect the church from misuse.¹¹⁵ Reference was made to the church by Caruana, who might not have known the location himself.¹¹⁶

Another lost cave church that seems to have contained cult images is the one allegedly found in the Għajn Qajjed district in 1829. The landowner did not welcome interest and visitors to the site, so it was soon reburied.¹¹⁷ Devotional murals were also accounted for by Abela¹¹⁸ in the Dominican church of the Madonna tal-Għar ('Virgin of the Grotto'), which was hewn out of a burial chamber leading at the

¹⁰⁹ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 70.

¹¹⁰ V. Camilleri, *Sant' Agata : Knisja, Kripta u Katakombi*, Klabb Kotba Maltin (Malta, 1978), 55.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹² G. F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 46 – 47.

¹¹³ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 70.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestri del Val Demone*, figs. 2, 15.

¹¹⁵ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 70; 'Medieval Malta: Its Hypogea, Cave-Churches and Ecclesiastical Buildings', *Architecture in Malta 1: Historical Aspects* (Malta, 1986), 147 – 148.

¹¹⁶ *Id.*, A. A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of the Islands of Malta*, Government Printing Office (Malta, 1882), 107; *Id.*, *The Crypt of St. Agatha*.

¹¹⁷ S. Zerafa, 'History of Art in Malta', in G. Calleja, *The works of art in the churches of Malta and the Governor's Palace, Valletta*, L'Immacolata Press (Malta, 1881), 165.

¹¹⁸ G. F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 48.

mouth of a catacomb, now inaccessible, known as l-Għar il-Kbir ('the Big Cave').¹¹⁹ Handed to the Dominican friars in the fifteenth century, its cultic significance was retained, and a convent and church were built.¹²⁰ The original having been deformed, the plan of the cave church seems to have been similar to the oratory of S. Maria della Virtu', which retained its original plan.¹²¹ This church seems to have been recut from a paleochristian hypogeum¹²² into a lobed plan resembling a latin cross. It is reached down a number of steps and through an ornate Gothic hood mould dated, on a stylistic basis, to the fifteenth century.¹²³ In 1575, Dusina observed a number of altars,¹²⁴ of which Abela, in 1647, noted only one. He also points out that the walls were treated with stucco, a possible sign of preparation for murals.¹²⁵

1.3. St. Paul's Grotto

The cult of St. Paul is central to the Maltese religious, even national, identity. At the heart of this cult is the site of St. Paul's Grotto (Fig. 12) and the story of the apostle's shipwreck on the island in A.D. 60, be it fabrication or fact.¹²⁶ At an unknown date, the church was marked as the cave used by St. Paul, St. Luke and St. Trophimus as dwelling. The first reference is made to it in 1388, when it was reached down a steep flight of steps.¹²⁷ The original plan was destroyed by recutting that occurred around 1617, and two years previously it had at least four side altars and a main one behind a wooden screen.¹²⁸

The importance of this site and its cultic significance is evidenced in the fact that, in 1575, aside from being visited daily by pilgrims, fragments of rock from the

¹¹⁹ M. Fsadni, *Il-Miġja u l-Hidma ta' l-ewwel Dumnikani f'Malta, 1450-1512*, Lux Press, (Malta, 1965), 34.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26 – 32.

¹²¹ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 68.

¹²² *Id.*, Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs, 193 – 194.

¹²³ *Id.*, *Christianisation*, 99.

¹²⁴ G. Aquilina; S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History*, f.161.

¹²⁵ G. F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 47.

¹²⁶ For more about St. Paul's shipwreck, see M. Buhagiar, 'The St. Paul Shipwreck Controversy – An assessment of the Source Material', in K. Sciberras (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week 1993* (Malta, 1997); *Id.*, *Christianisation*, 1 – 10.

¹²⁷ G. Wettinger, 'A Land Grant by Bishop Ylario to Bochius de Bochio at St. Paul's Grotto, 1366', in J. Azzopardi (ed.), *St. Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*, Progress Press (Malta, 1990), 65 – 67.

¹²⁸ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 64.

cave were considered as having therapeutic properties against disease.¹²⁹ The substance had different names, such as *terra melitensis* and *terra sigillita melitensis*.¹³⁰ Since at least the fifteenth century, the rock was shipped outside the island, having been widely popularised as an antidote against snake bites.¹³¹ Despite the large amounts of rock allegedly hewn out of the cave, the size of it remained miraculously unchanged.¹³² It has been suggested that the Basilian monks had a central role in the propagation of the Pauline mythology and tradition on the island, considering how they are known to have used places with a rich Christian past, such as the Abbatija tad-Dejr catacombs, for cult centres.¹³³

As for decoration, the grotto seems to have originally had a medieval mural that depicted a preaching St. Paul with an upraised hand and a burning taper at his feet.¹³⁴ The fame of the Grotto occasionally wavered, and it seems that in 1549 it had been subject to century-old neglect.¹³⁵ The site regained its cultic vigour in the early seventeenth century, and in 1617, having been handed to the Knights of St. John, the site's transformation was set in motion. The cave was given a grand approach and an oratory of St. Publius was built above the entrance steps, as well as an underground chapel with three altars next to the grotto.¹³⁶

1.4. Other possible cave churches in Rabat

St. Paul's Grotto, along with the churches of Santa Maria della Speranza and St. Mary Magdalene were situated within the precincts of the Late Medieval aboveground cemetery of St. Paul. There does not seem to be any evidence to support Greek-rite presence in this major cemetery, possibly due to the cemetery's inaccessibility at the time.¹³⁷ Santa Maria della Speranza is first mentioned in 1575, when it was called a '*caverna*', and seems to have been in a state of neglect at the

¹²⁹ G. Aquilina; S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History*, ff. 36 – 37.

¹³⁰ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 8.

¹³¹ Zammit Maempel, George, 'Fossil Shark's Teeth – A Medieval Safeguard against Poisoning', *Melita Historica*, Vol. VI, no. 4 (1974), 391 – 410.

¹³² M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 9.

¹³³ Id., *The Late Medieval*, 63 – 64.

¹³⁴ Id., 'Medieval Churches in Malta', in A.T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta*, 166.

¹³⁵ Id., *Christianisation*, 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 67.

time, albeit mass was still celebrated there.¹³⁸ The site of the church is now lost, however, it was in 1714 marked by a columnar cross,¹³⁹ having been deconsecrated in 1656.¹⁴⁰

Noted first by Abela, the church of St. Mary Magdalene (Fig. 13) carries a dedication to the titular saint.¹⁴¹ The church is reached down a flight of steps and its plan is roughly circular, with walls that are stuccoed with a cement mixture of ground pottery and lime, perhaps intended for paintings, of which no evidence survives.¹⁴² A low rock-cut bench (0.45m x 0.92), similar to the one in the cave church of St. Leonard in the Lunzjata Valley outside Rabat, runs around the church, and the altar, a nineteenth-century addition,¹⁴³ is found within a shallow apsed niche. As with the previously discussed cave churches, St. Mary Magdalene seems to adjoin, even occupy the site of an early Christian catacomb.¹⁴⁴ Dusina's report of 1575 records that it was for a time used as ossuary for the cemetery above it, as well as having a mural that was meant to instil a fear of death¹⁴⁵. In 1647 an '*innumerabile quantità di ossa*' as well as rubble were noted in the church by Abela.¹⁴⁶

A short distance away from St. Paul's Grotto is the church of St. Catald, which preserves the presumed remains of a church hewn from the shaft of an Early Christian hypogeum of the same name as the later church.¹⁴⁷ Due to the stone-slab roof carried on built arches (Fig. 14), added when the church was built in the late eighteenth century, the church can only be called partially rock-cut.¹⁴⁸ During the course of the construction of the Baroque church (1739 – 1745), wall images were discovered, which disappeared soon after, the subject of which were sainted bishops, painted in 'the Greek style'.¹⁴⁹ However, this stylistic claim must be questioned, as during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the 'Greek style' denoted any style

¹³⁸ G. Aquilina; S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources*, f. 28.

¹³⁹ AAF, VP 1758 – 1760, I, f. 431, 467v.

¹⁴⁰ AAF, VP 1656 – 1659, f. 30.

¹⁴¹ G.F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 346.

¹⁴² M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 64.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Id.*, 'Medieval Churches in Malta', 167.

¹⁴⁵ G. Aquilina; S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources*, f. 26v.

¹⁴⁶ G.F. Abela, *Descrittione*, 346.

¹⁴⁷ M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs*, 160 – 164.

¹⁴⁸ *Id.*, *The Late Medieval*, 64 – 66.

¹⁴⁹ G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata ovvero Descrittione di Malta*, vol. 1 (Malta, 1772), 184 – 185.

that was pre-Renaissance.¹⁵⁰ The church was deconsecrated in 1575, when it was described as ‘half ruined’.¹⁵¹ The cult of St. Catald, an obscure Irish saint, was spread most diligently by the Normans. Catald’s cult is also present in the Calabria, particularly in the port city of Taranto, and in Sicily, and was probably a result of new ideas being grafted onto and merging with the Siculo-Greek tradition by travelling Calabrian monks. It is likely that the saint’s cult in Malta was introduced through the Sicilian channel by the Normans.¹⁵²

One of Malta’s most important and largest paleochristian cemeteries is that of St. Paul, and albeit no documentary evidence is extant regarding cultic activities therein during the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries,¹⁵³ it holds considerable interest. A rectangular space at the entrance of the complex seems to be recut from a number of burial chambers, and is decorated with pairs of fluted columns (Fig. 15). Sometimes referred to as a funerary chapel,¹⁵⁴ this space is unlike other Maltese cave churches, in that there seems to be no evidence of it being used as a church during the late Middle Ages, despite alterations.¹⁵⁵ By 1575, the church seems to have been abandoned, even forgotten.¹⁵⁶ Caruana noted in 1898 that some traces of paint were visible on the wall behind the altar.¹⁵⁷ Evidence seems to exist attesting to an altar and a ciborium held by four slender columns.¹⁵⁸

Suggestive of a link to a possible neighbouring monastic community of Basilian monks is the toponym Djar Hanzira, which might be evidence of its reutilisation during the pre-Muslim period.¹⁵⁹ Messina argues for a connection between the introduction of monastic orders in Malta during the late fourteenth century and this particular site.¹⁶⁰ A document of 1372 mentions a church of St. Francis as ‘*prope cimierium Sancti Pauli*’, possibly relating to St. Paul’s catacombs.¹⁶¹ Messina further conjectures that it could have been in fact the

¹⁵⁰ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 70.

¹⁵¹ G. Aquilina; S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources*, 28v.

¹⁵² M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 65.

¹⁵³ Id., *Christianisation*, 98.

¹⁵⁴ Id., ‘The Rock-Cut Churches of Malta’, in *Heritage* Vol. 2, Midsea Books, (Malta, 1979), 580

¹⁵⁵ Id., ‘The Re-Christianisation of Malta’, 273.

¹⁵⁶ Id., *Christianisation*, 98.

¹⁵⁷ A.A. Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs*, 111 – 112.

¹⁵⁸ M. Buhagiar, , ‘The Re-Christianisation of Malta’, 273.

¹⁵⁹ Id., *Christianisation*, 98.

¹⁶⁰ A. Messina, ‘Trogloditismo Medievale’, 117.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Franciscan order, residing close to said catacombs that gave the complex its Pauline name.¹⁶² Similar sites in Sicily are the two Byzantine oratories in the Catacombs of Santa Lucia in Syracuse,¹⁶³ which also seem to belong to a later phase in the history of the site.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ G. Agnello, *Le Arti Figurative nella Sicilia Bizantina*, Istituto Siciliano di Studi Bizantini (Palermo, 1962) 162 – 180.

Chapter 2:

Rural Cave Churches

As has been discussed, the cave churches in the neighbourhood of the Civitas, namely in the Rabat area, are tied together by the fact that they are hewn from or adjoin earlier catacombs. In the case of the rural cave churches, a stronger link is made with the ascetic lifestyle, as the countryside offered seclusion and a better setting for the contemplative life. An important aspect that existed side-by-side with the rural cave churches is the troglodytic phenomenon, a crucial element of the late medieval Maltese landscape. Indeed, even that of the Mediterranean, as cave-dwelling has been a custom of Mediterranean people since ancient times, and in Malta even lasted well into the modern period.¹⁶⁴ The rural cave churches are mostly found in the hilly Northern region of the island. They are further divided into those which are purposely hewn from the rock face of a valley or ridge and those which utilise a naturally-formed cave. One of the more important troglodytic settlements in Malta is that of Għar il-Kbir, in the Buskett area in the limits of Rabat.¹⁶⁵

The move into the countryside and the troglodytic phenomenon

Before the Norman reconquest of 1127 there does not seem to have been any major settlements outside the civitas. Countryside dwellings in Malta seem to have started flourishing only after the second half of the twelfth-century.¹⁶⁶ Presumably driven away by a religiously intolerant Latin garrison, pockets of Muslims communities set up in the countryside, where their beliefs and traditions could be protected and practiced with a degree of freedom. Physical elements that encouraged this type of habitation, not only in the Middle Ages, but throughout history, and at multiple points in the Mediterranean basin, were the softness of the stone, as well as the scarcity of timber.¹⁶⁷ In such places as Cyrenaica and Bulla Regis, we find examples of wholly or partially rock-cut villas, which Roman colonists devised of after noting

¹⁶⁴ A. Messina, 'Trogloditismo Medievale a Malta', *Melita Historica*, Vol. X, no. 2 (Malta, 1990), 111.

¹⁶⁵ For more about troglodytism and the settlements, see K. Buhagiar, *The Għar il-Kbir settlement and the cave dwelling phenomenon in Malta*, Unpublished Undergraduate Dissertation, University of Malta (1997); A.T. Luttrell, 'Malta Troglodytica: Għar il-Kbir', *Heritage* Vol. 2, Midsea Books (Malta, 1979), 461 – 464.

¹⁶⁶ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 2005), 40.

¹⁶⁷ A.T. Luttrell, 'Malta Troglodytica', 461.

the advantages of rock-cut constructions in the fringes of the African desert and elsewhere.¹⁶⁸

In an island very much open to attacks from pirates, caves proved as rather inconspicuous to raiders, more so than built houses, however this probably was not the main reason the move occurred, and a predilection for caves occurred.¹⁶⁹ Prior to 1545, there is little evidence of properly constructed country houses. This indicates that most peasants, or as they were called, *beduini*, lived in rubble huts or in caves. Between the fifth and sixth centuries, an economic recession hit Sicily, which Messina relates to the troglodytic phenomenon, as well as the decline of the insecure coastal cities of Sicily.¹⁷⁰ The same might have been the case in Malta.¹⁷¹

A result of common circumstances, a move from city to countryside was made in Pantelleria and Sicily, where the mountainous terrain provided better protection, compared to the relative flatness of the Maltese countryside.¹⁷² Habitation in caves was thus spread across the island, albeit having historical precedences, and became one of the foremost types of habitats outside the *civitas*. Although this custom was common throughout the Mediterranean, the Maltese variant is most similar to the cave settlements found in the heel of Italy, namely those of Matera.¹⁷³ A result of a similar geophysical setting, however different in character, is the complex of settlements in Matmata, where a sunken cortile leads to a number of hewn dwellings. As noted by Luttrell, the dwellings in Matmata most resembles those of Għar il-Kbir.¹⁷⁴

In Asia Minor and the Nile Valley, early Christian hermits and ascetics moved away from civilisation into the 'huge silence', where they set up monastic communities and dug out churches such as those at Cappadocia and Latmos, some of which contain exceptional wall paintings. In Sicily and southern Italy, this practice was also widespread, possibly introduced by the Eastern presence. From Sicily it

¹⁶⁸ M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings and Rock-Cut Churches in Malta', in D. De Lucca (ed.), *Atrium: Mediterranean and Middle East Architectural and Construction Review* (Malta, 1984), 17.

¹⁶⁹ A.T. Luttrell, 'Malta Troglodytica', 464.

¹⁷⁰ A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Siracusano* (Palermo, 1979), 7.

¹⁷¹ M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 17.

¹⁷² Id., *The Late Medieval Art*, 40.

¹⁷³ Circolo culturale La Scaletta, *Le Chiese rupestri di Matera* (Rome, 1966).

¹⁷⁴ A.T. Luttrell, 'Malta Troglodytica', 464.

may have reached Malta, where none of the rock-cut churches can be dated before the thirteenth-century.¹⁷⁵

An important account of Maltese troglodytic living is that by the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher, whose published account of the Għar il-Kbir settlement in 1637 possibly influenced an idealized engraving of a scene in a Maltese cave by Pieter van de Aa (Fig. 16). Kirchner describes the communal life and habitat of these troglodytes as having separate partitions for each family, some natural and others built. The people are described as vegetarian, selling their livestock to buy other needs. More importantly, they spoke a language that was purely Maltese, and their caves were decorated with crosses and Madonnas, clearly a devout people, praying daily and attending mass in a nearby village.¹⁷⁶ Despite the fact that Għar il-Kbir seems to have been an extraordinary example, this description gives us an idea of life within these troglodytic communities, and perhaps disproves any perception that these were a base and uneducated people.

The rural cave churches

2.1. St. Leonard, Lunzjata

The cave church of St. Leonard in Wied Liemu, or Wied il-Lunzjata, found within the limits of Rabat and Dingli, is one of the best preserved rural cave churches in Malta. The land surrounding the cave church is scenic and rich in fresh water springs – an ideal landscape for a troglodytic monastic community to set up home. In the early fifteenth-century, the land belonged to Donna Margarita de Aragona, and it is through her will that the Carmelite Order, under a Frater Guillelmus Cassar, acquired the land where they founded their first house in Malta. The source of the toponym Wied Liemu may have been Father Guillelmus.¹⁷⁷ On the land provided by Donna Margarita was also found the aboveground church of the Annunciation, which is of unknown antiquity, and was rebuilt during the late seventeenth-century.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 17.

¹⁷⁶ A.T. Luttrell, 'Malta Troglodytica', 462.

¹⁷⁷ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 170, 179; K. Buhagiar, 'St. Leonard Cave Church, Lunzjata l/o Rabat', in A. Bonanno (ed.), *Malta and Sicily: Miscellaneous research projects* (Palermo, 2008).

¹⁷⁸ For more information about the Carmelite Church of the Annunciation of the Virgin at San Leonardo, see M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 170 – 172.

Suggestive of an enduring dedication to St. Leonard is an early fifteenth-century document that calls the area around the cave church *Santu Leonardu*.¹⁷⁹

The Carmelites, whose house was founded in the area sometime after 1418,¹⁸⁰ drastically altered the cave church. The church seems to have originally been bigger and may have had a built facade, with the interior walls stuccoed and painted, evidenced in the remains of painted areas, namely in the apse, and a lime based mortar.¹⁸¹ Alterations include a built cylindrical apse made of ashlar and wet rubble containing a stone altar (Fig. 17), and a flagstone pavement, in evident emulation of the architecture of aboveground late medieval churches. The rock cut wall benches, or *dukkien* (Fig. 18) seem to belong to the original church.¹⁸² Similar examples of wall benches are seen in cave churches in the vicinity, namely in the Abbatija tad-Dejr and the church of St. Mary Magdalene.

The cave contains the mutilated remains of a painted image of St. Leonard (Fig. 19). Poor preservation and vandalism has led to a considerable loss of pigment and the disappearance of the saint's head. This makes it difficult to critically appreciate the work; however one can still note that it is of mediocre quality. A fresco technique with some *a secco* additions seems to have been used. The saint is depicted in full-length three-quarter profile, and in the background can be seen a low stone wall, behind which are some tall trees. There is no question as to the saint's identity, which is clearly stated through the lions, the saint's iconographical symbol. Stylistically datable to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries, the image has elements of the Sicilian Renaissance style, and it shows stylistic links to the late medieval frescoes at Hal Millieri, similarly dated to the mid-fifteenth-century.¹⁸³ The artist is unknown; however Buhagiar takes in consideration Giovanni Antonio Pulcella, a Carmelite friar and an itinerant painter who seems to have worked in a number of villages during this period.¹⁸⁴ This attribution cannot be made certain, as knowledge on Pulcella's manner and technique is largely absent, due to the lack of

¹⁷⁹ S. Abela, *L-Ewwel Karmelitani u l-Ewwel Knisja u Kunvent Tagħhom: Il-Lunzjata il-Qadima, 1418 – 1469* (Malta, 1976), 6 – 7.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 20.

¹⁸² Id., *The Late Medieval*, 77.

¹⁸³ Id., 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 20.

¹⁸⁴ Id., *The Late Medieval*, 184.

secure attributions to his hand.¹⁸⁵ The image could have possibly replaced an earlier Siculo-Byzantinesque image, as is the case with some of the images in the cave church of St. Agatha, which preserves an almost complete cycle of early sixteenth-century frescoes.

Sicilian historian Rocco Pirri recorded an oral tradition in 1638 linking the cave church to a community of hermits residing in nearby caves and using the cave church as a space for prayer in the early thirteenth -century.¹⁸⁶ The veracity of this legend is questionable. It most probably was a fabrication of the Carmelite friars, who desired to establish a historical connection with the cave church, even claiming that the hermits were of the Carmelite order.¹⁸⁷ However it is likely that the area was inhabited by troglodytes.

St. Leonard the Hermit was a Latin saint whose cult was highly notable in Norman Sicily, and was quickly adopted by the Greek-rite element. A miracle which elevated his popularity was the release of the son of Robert Guiscard from a Muslim prison, which made him patron saint of slaves and captives, often depicted holding a pair of chains. The saint's cult was introduced to Malta by the Normans, with at least two cave churches dedicated to him,¹⁸⁸ the one in the limits of Rabat, previously discussed, and the other in San Gwann, discussed below.

2.2. San Leonardo tal- Ġebel

The other cave church dedicated to St. Leonard is presently found in the limits of San Ġwann and St Julian's, in an area known as Tal-Minsija. It was first recorded as *San Leonardo tal-Ġebel* ('St. Leonard of the Boulders') in 1588, at a place dubbed *Il-Hofra ta' Għar* ('The Sunken Cave'). It has since been possibly identified with the church in Tal-Minsija.¹⁸⁹ The church was deconsecrated in 1618; however the discovery of its altar-painting renewed its interest and appeal.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ R. Pirri, *Notitae Siciliensium Ecclesiarum* (Palermo, 1639), 84.

¹⁸⁷ M. Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta: Catacombs, Cult-Centres and Churches to 1530* (Oxford, 2007), 100.

¹⁸⁸ Id., *The Late Medieval*, 76.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

The original configuration of the church, particularly the entrance, was drastically altered in the late nineteenth-century, making it impossible to reconstruct the original entrance, albeit possibly also having been down a number of steps.¹⁹⁰ Resulting from the church's early modern history, it was dubbed *Il-Minsija* ('The Forgotten One'), which eventually became associated with the surrounding area.¹⁹¹ Sometime in the fifteenth century, a legend emerged regarding this area and the foundation of the Minsija church. The legend tells of a previous church dedicated to the Annunciation in the site of the current church. During the Muslim period the locals hid church, in fear of the Muslim rulers. This church was forgotten in time, and as the legend states it was only to be found again by a local farmer, who discovers a cave within which was a niche of Our Lady, which is thence taken to several places, however the niche kept reappearing in the cave, and as a result of this strange occurrence, the Bishop ordered the cave cleaned up, and a stone altar and iron railings were erected.¹⁹²

The exterior of the present church dates to the nineteenth-century and is highly ornate, and the interior is reached down a flight of steps (Fig. 20), seeing as the cave is situated a few metres beneath ground level. A parallel can be perhaps here drawn to the eschatological element of cave churches, were the cave seems to be symbolic of the tomb, and indeed a number of cave churches are found below ground level, some slightly and others more so. The cave has a roughly oval plan and is partially left in its natural rough state, most notable in the rock above the altar (Fig. 21). Painted on the rock at the back of the altar, the cave church contained icons of Saint John the Baptist, Athanasius and Basil, of which the latter were Greek-rite in origin. These images survived until the early eighteenth century.¹⁹³

In 1691, under a new dedication of the Annunciation and St. Leonard, the church reopened for worship, having been deconsecrated in 1618. The reopening and rededication was in large part due to a renewed interest in the church brought about by the chance discovery of its altar-painting, a triptych of the *Annunciation of the Virgin with St. Leonard* (Fig. 22). This work can be dated to the mid-to-late fifteenth-

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 102.

¹⁹² T.C. Cutajar, 'Towns and Villages: San Ġwann', *Heritage* Vol. 5, Midsea Books (Malta), 1621 – 1622.

¹⁹³ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 76.

century, and is painted in an evidently tempera technique on red deal wood panels, a non-costly material.¹⁹⁴ The hieratical St. Leonard once again recalls the saints at Hal Millieri saints, as with the St. Leonard in the previously discussed cave church of St. Leonard in Lunzjata. In both images of St. Lawrence, anecdotic elements are eliminated, in a rather Siculo-Byzantinesque manner, and the saint's identity is revealed only through the shackles. It seems as though the artist was here trying his best to emulate a prototype of the saint, evident in the saint's rather grave countenance.¹⁹⁵

2.3. Sanctuary of the Virgin, Mellieħa

In the late Middle Ages, Mellieħa was a secluded town a considerable distance away from the hub of central Malta, concentrated mainly in and around the civitas. The Sanctuary of the Virgin was most probably born out of the need of countryside inhabitants, most of whom were probably cave-dwellers, for a religious centre independent from the ones within Mdina and Rabat. A point of particular interest is that of all the parishes mentioned as *cappelle* in the 1436 apostolic visitation report by Mgr Pietro Dusina, including Siggiewi, Naxxar and Birkirkara, the parish of Mellieħa was the only one housed in a cave-church, while the others had built churches.¹⁹⁶ This shows that the cultic significance of the cave-church was truly strong, so much so as to make it the seat of a parish.¹⁹⁷ The presence of a cult image as well as the strong devotional significance of the cave church makes it the most important cave church in the Maltese countryside.

Despite its initial remoteness, the sanctuary has become one of Malta's most prominent Marian shrines. Its early history seems to have been similar to that of Għar San Niklaw, but it later gained greater affluence, having been named a *cappella*.¹⁹⁸ A major contributing factor to its fame is the icon of the *Madonna and Child* (Fig. 23) in the sanctuary, for a time believed to be painted by St. Luke, after being

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 205.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Churches in Malta' in A.T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta – Studies on Malta before the Knights* (London, 1975), 172.

¹⁹⁷ C. Vella, *The Mediterranean artistic context of the art and architecture of Late Medieval Malta, 1091-1530* (Malta, 2013), 80.

¹⁹⁸ Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 102.

shipwrecked on the island.¹⁹⁹ The *St. Luke Madonna* at Mdina, as suggested by its given name, has also been attributed to St. Luke, however both attributions are unfounded. This legend even acquired approval from the church in 1747 with Bishop Alpheran de Bussan.²⁰⁰

Stylistically, the Mellieħa *Madonna and Child* is Byzantinesque in inspiration and Sicilian in style, and is datable to the late twelfth or early thirteenth-century, or later, on basis of style. This makes it one of the earliest surviving works of the late Middle Ages in Malta.²⁰¹ A further tool enabling the dating of the icon is the accompanying Latin inscription MAT(ER) D(OMINI) (Fig. 24), seen on either side of the Madonna's head. The Latin script places the icon in the last phase of Siculo-Byzantine culture, when Greek Christianity was being transformed by the westernizing element of the Norman Kingdom.²⁰² This legend is also found in the Sassi di Matera in Apulia as a reference to the *Theotokos* (the Virgin as the Mother of God).²⁰³ The artist is unknown; however it is presumed that he may have been one of the Basilian monks who was on the island to convert the Muslims living in the countryside.²⁰⁴

As noted by Buhagiar, the Mellieħa icon is most closely comparable to a *Virgin and Child* found in the Grotta di Sta. Lucia sul Tirone at Lentini (Fig. 25), which belongs to the Norman period.²⁰⁵ They share a number of characteristics, including the frontal, hieratic pose, the maphorion, the pearled nimbus, the almond eyes outlined by a single black line and, perhaps most importantly the Latin script of MAT(ER) D(OMINI) in identical letters. They come from a similar historical context; however the Mellieħa icon has a stronger vernacular quality and is of lesser quality than that of Lentini. Differently from any of the other Siculo-Byzantinesque wall icons in Malta, the Mellieħa icon is contained within an oval border made up of three colours – an outer layer of red, and yellow and white inner bands, while other Maltese images are framed by a rectangular border. The reason for this difference may have been due to the niche within which the icon is painted, albeit the Abbatija

¹⁹⁹ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 73.

²⁰⁰ M. Buhagiar, *Christianisation*, 102.

²⁰¹ Id., *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands, 1400 – 1900: Painting*, (Progress Press, 1987), 10.

²⁰² Id. *The Late Medieval*, 72.

²⁰³ C. Vella, *The Sanctuary of the Virgin of Mellieħa: The Art Historical Context to a Marian Shrine*, Unpublished Undergraduate Dissertation (University of Malta, 2006), 63.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 71; A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Siracusano*, 33.

tad-Dejr *Crucifixion and Annunciation* (Fig. 5) may also have been painted within an arched border.²⁰⁶

The type of Madonna the Mellieħa *Virgin and Child* might have represented is either the *Eleousa* ('the Compassionate One') or the *Hodegetria*, with the Virgin pointing at the Child, being held to her left, showing that He is 'the Way'. Both types of Madonna were popular in post-Muslim Sicily. In the Val di Noto region one of several examples of the *Hodegetria* type Madonna is the *Virgin and Child* in the Grotta di S. Nicola in Modica (Fig. 26).²⁰⁷ Since the Virgin's hands have not survived in the Mellieħa icon, we cannot be sure that the Mellieħa icon is of this typology, we are however certain that it is of the *Dexiotrophousa* type, with the Virgin holding the Child on her right arm.

Bishop Tommaso Gargallo, in his Pastoral Visitation Report of 1587, deemed the icon as being in a poor state of preservation, so an over-painting was commissioned of the same theme.²⁰⁸ As can be seen in Giuseppe Cali's copy of the over-painting, which it probably reproduces, on glass, now in the church's sacristy, a more tender approach was adopted. The sixteenth-century over-painting was successfully removed in the early 1970s,²⁰⁹ apart from the lower half, which did not survive. The restoration enabled a more accurate stylistic dating of the icon to the Late Medieval period. A similar case of a possibly Siculo-Byzantinesque icon being hidden beneath a later over-painting may be the case in the Church of S. Maria della Speranza in Mosta. The church is built on the site of a natural cave, which may have been used as a cave-church. Embedded in the thickness of a wall by the doorway is an eighteenth-century mural of the *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 27) that might conceal a Siculo-Byzantinesque icon, as suggested by mention of an icon of the Virgin painted on the rock in Pastoral Visitation Reports.²¹⁰

Despite having gained ecclesiastical pre-eminence by the fifteenth-century, as the seat of a parish that covered most of the land north of the Great Fault, the site of the cave church was still one of considerable danger. The cave's exposed position left it open to attacks from North African raiders, and by 1575 the district seems to

²⁰⁶ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 71, 82.

²⁰⁷ A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestre del Val di Noto*, (Palermo, 1994), 41 – 46.

²⁰⁸ C. Vella, *The Sanctuary of the Virgin*, 62.

²⁰⁹ The restoration was conducted by Samuel Bugeja. *Ibid.*, 65

²¹⁰ M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 74.

have been abandoned. Interest in the church was only revived in the seventeenth-century.²¹¹ The icon of the Virgin seems to be the most significant feature of the cave church to have survived. The reason for its survival is in large part due to the highly notable cult which it attracted. In the sixteenth century, when the cave church was a site of pilgrimage, it was taken care of by a community of Augustinian friars.²¹² The cave church may have contained other painted cult images, but due to alterations including the marble cladding of its walls, any painted remains have disappeared.²¹³ Seven engraved Greek crosses filled with red paint were visible until at least 1866,²¹⁴ and could indicate, as with the cases of St. Agatha and Abbatja tad-Dejr, a Siculo-Byzantine origin. Recutting over time and various built additions to the sanctuary have also hindered the reconstruction of the cave's original plan.²¹⁵

2.4. Ghar San Niklaw

Mentioned immediately after the Sanctuary of the Virgin in the 1575 Apostolic Visitation Report of Mgr Pietro Dusina is a cave church of St. Nicholas that can be identified with Ghar San Niklaw. Dusina lists it as one of fourteen rural churches of the Mellieħa area, however he does not provide a description of the remains.²¹⁶ Also possibly relating to Ghar San Niklaw is an earlier document of 1436 that refers to a '*Beneficio di S. Nicolao della Mellecha*'.²¹⁷ At c.180 meters above sea level, in the San Niklaw Valley, and about 3 km away from the Mellieħa church, the San Niklaw troglodytic settlement has mostly been left in its natural state. This is in large part due to its remote location, which preserves the cave's original context rather successfully. Set in the lush agricultural area of Ġnien Ingraw (Fig. 28), it overlooks Ġhadira Valley and Marfa Ridge, embedded in the sides of Mellieħa Ridge.²¹⁸

²¹¹ Ibid., 72.

²¹² V. Borg, *Marian Devotions in the Islands of St. Paul* (Malta, 1983), 41 – 2.

²¹³ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 73.

²¹⁴ A. Ferris, *Descrizione storica delle chiese di Malta e Gozo* (Malta, 1866, reprinted 1985), 520.

²¹⁵ For a study of the sanctuary over time, see C. Vella, *The Sanctuary of the Virgin*.

²¹⁶ G. Aquilina; S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part IV – Documents at the Vatican No. 1 – Archivio Segreto Vaticano Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari. Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51 Mgr Petrus Dusina, 1575*, (Malta, 2001), f.181.

²¹⁷ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 73.

²¹⁸ K. Buhagiar, *The Ghar il-Kbir settlement*, 78; C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 73; M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 74.

This troglodytic settlement makes up part of the rich cave-dwelling community found in the Medieval Maltese landscape, one which even persisted well into the twentieth century. The site of a post-Muslim settlement north of the Great Fault, there might be in Mellieħa evidence of coenobitic Greek-rite presence, especially considering the various caves which honeycomb the district.²¹⁹ The name Ingraw, as well as the dedication to St. Nicholas, points towards an early post-Muslim *viridarium* type of settlement,²²⁰ with the troglodytes that originally inhabited the area being Muslim *beduini* who worked the land for the clerical establishment.²²¹ The cult of St. Nicholas of Bari reached Malta through the Normans, for whom the saint held great significance.

The site is sheltered by its relative inaccessibility, aiding its preservation, particularly that of the rubble walling. At an unknown period, the entrance to the cave was accessed by a cobbled path, and marked by stone pilasters.²²² A section to the left of the settlement partitioned by dry waling seems to have been used as a church (Fig. 29). This can be identified with the cave-church mentioned by Dusina. The rock wall of the cave church was plastered with pinkish stucco and decorated with painted murals, of which only small traces survived, due to the natural flaking of the rock. Traces of paint can be noted in several areas of the cave church, most significantly opposite the entrance to the church (Fig. 30), from which one can safely assume that the decorative scheme of the cave church included individual icons of varied sizes, with frontally-posed saints, painted side by side and framed in the characteristic dark red frames.²²³ Not enough of the image remains intact for a stylistic analysis; therefore a possible Siculo-Byzantinesque origin cannot be proven.

Dry walling suggests that the cave had a number of sections, namely for human and animal habitation. The larger walled area, which has an almost rectangular plan, seems to have been used for habitation (Fig. 31), and is situated towards the middle of the terrace. In its original state, the dry wall probably reached up to the roof of the cave, as can be seen in the inner section of the cave church.²²⁴ As regards a parallel to other modes of cave dwelling and rock cut architecture in the

²¹⁹ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 73.

²²⁰ For more about the *Viridarium*, see M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 51 – 54.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ K. Buhagiar, *The Ghar il-Kbir settlement*, 79 – 80.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

Mediterranean, Messina argues that because Sicily is not familiar with settlements under rock shelters, and prefers the artificial excavation, a more legitimate parallel would be that to Byzantine settlements in the south East of Sicily, namely those of Modica, Scicli and Militello.²²⁵ The idea of a domestic area linked to a sacred space is a common feature of cave churches, and is also seen in the San Pietru settlement, with which San Niklaw also shares the view of the Ghadira Valley from its terrace (Fig. 32). This is very much in tune with the coenobitic and monastic way of life, which emphasis a communal and religious lifestyle, one which is in very close quarters with nature.

2.5. Ghar San Pietru

A region of the Maltese countryside that was especially suited for cave-dwellings was the Great Fault cliff, separating the hilly Northern part of the island from the populated South. Among the many caves in this area, four show definite signs of habitation. The settlement of Ġebel Pietru, at the limits of Naxxar and Ġharghur, beneath the Victoria Lines, is made up of two caves. The smaller one may be identified as the rock-cut church of St. Peter. This cave church was probably used by the troglodytic inhabitants of the desolate countryside of the Great Fault. This cave church is mentioned in 1575, when bread and food was given to the poor who congregated for mass.²²⁶

The probable cave church of St. Peter has a roughly oval plan, measuring about 7.65m wide x 5.18m deep, with a shallow altar recess and probable remains of a rock cut bench (Fig. 33). Murals may have decorated the cave wall, as evidenced in the smoothed walls, suggesting that they may have been stuccoed, albeit no traces of plaster have been found.²²⁷ In its original state, the entirety of the cave's entrance seems to have been walled up using dry walling, similar to what has partially survived at San Niklaw.²²⁸

²²⁵ A. Messina, 'Trogloditismo Medievale a Malta', 116.

²²⁶ M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 18.

²²⁷ K. Buhagiar, *The Ghar il-Kbir settlement*, 76.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

Adjoining is a larger cave which had been most possibly used for habitation, and contains two shaft tombs of unknown antiquity with doubtful relation to the caves.²²⁹ Unlike the nearby cave church, which shows evidence of rock hewing, the larger cave seems to have been left in its natural state. Keith Buhagiar argues that this might be due to the type of rock present in the area – the Lower Coralline Limestone, out of which the cave dwellers hew the cave church presumably with great difficulty, but were not prepared to go through such effort for a cave meant for habitation.²³⁰ The cave at Ġebel Pietru shares a number of characteristics with that of Ghar San Niklaw, namely in the fact that it served as both dwelling and cave church. These two defined areas are, in both cases, connected by a terrace, which faces the fertile land below known by the toponym *Ir-Raba' ta' San Pietru*. This land must have played a central role in the life of the cave-dwellers, especially during the months of summer.²³¹ In the larger cave there is evidence of the use of dry walling as partitions for different families and their livestock.²³²

2.6. Ghar San Brinkat

A considerably short distance away from Ghar San Pietru, in the Ghargħur area, is the Ghar San Brinkat (Fig. 34), or San Brancat. The two caves share a common environment, and they both may have been centres of Siculo-Greek monasticism.²³³ Brancato can be identified with Pancratius of Taormina, whose myth made him a disciple of St. Peter's. He is said to have suffered martyrdom in Sicily, where his cult was revived during the Norman period,²³⁴ and is virtually nonexistent elsewhere. This dedication helps place the cave within the Norman timeframe, and perhaps by connection, even the Ghar San Pietru.

There seem to be no records of the cave being used as a church, however; it has been mutilated and altered extensively, which suggests human inference and habitation, possibly for coenobitic use. Surviving until the 1970s was a cobbled path leading to the cave, which has since been replaced with the asphalt road present

²²⁹ M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 18.

²³⁰ K. Buhagiar, *The Ghar il-Kbir settlement*, 76.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

²³² *Id.*, *Christianisation*, 101.

²³³ *Id.*, *The Late Medieval*, 75.

²³⁴ C. Vella, *Late Medieval Malta*, 74; M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 18.

today, one which disrupts the original context of the site.²³⁵ The cave, measuring about 7.31 x 3.96 m, has been left in its natural state, with walls that have seemingly not been smoothed. There is however a height difference in the ground, which drops from over 0.85m to about 5m. This can be in possible emulation of the grave. On the left of the entrance is an oval basin, into which natural spring water is collected during winter. It was believed that this water contained miraculous properties.²³⁶

A nearby, considerably larger cave, seems to have been used as dwelling for man and animal.²³⁷ The San Brinkat cave has enjoyed veneration until recent times, particularly for the farming community. Evident of its cult is a nineteenth century addition above the cave's entrance of an aedicule with a Crucifix between St. Peter and St. Brancato.²³⁸

2.7. St. Paul the Hermit and the Virgin of Hope

Two churches in Mosta that have a connection with a cave and are of unknown antiquity include that of St. Paul the Hermit and the Virgin of Hope. Both of these churches are found at different spots in Wied il-Ghasel, a valley passing through Mosta.

The church of St. Paul the Hermit (Fig. 35) is perhaps the most picturesque of Malta's wayside chapel. The present church was built the seventeenth century, on the site of an older church of unknown date.²³⁹ Almost entirely rock cut is a chapel of the Virgin (Fig. 36) reached from the inside of the church, dated to 1656. First reference to this church is made by Dusina, who mentions it in a list of churches in the northern part of the island, none of which were described individually.²⁴⁰ Some might have been cave churches, as with the case of Ghar San Niklaw. A description of the site is however provided by G.F. Abela, who describes a church built beneath overhanging rocks, which contains murals of St. Paul the Hermit, the Virgin and

²³⁵ Photograph of said cobbled road published in M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval*, 45, Fig. 3.9.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

²³⁷ *Id.*, 'Medieval Cave-Dwellings', 18.

²³⁸ *Id.*, *The Late Medieval*, 76.

²³⁹ *Id.*, 'The Church of St. Paul the Hermit', *Heritage* Vol. 1, Midsea Books (Malta, 1979), 141.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 144.

Child and St. Anthony the Abbot in the chancel behind the altar. Still visible in the cave wall behind the church are remains of a rock cut structure, which Abela presumes to be the cell of a hermit, but might be the church listed by Dusina.²⁴¹

A tradition linked with the church, reproduced by Abela, tells of a pious man who lived in the neighbourhood of the church, who was tricked by a group of shepherd to help a girl with her washing, which lead to his assault. Followed by the shepherds, the hermit fled to the seashore, where he spread his mantle on the water, stepped on it and disappeared, leaving his walking stick behind. In repentance, the men built a church in the hermit's cave dedicated to Paul the Hermit, where the walking stick was venerated as a holy relic. The hermit is sometimes identified with the Blessed Corrado of Noto, and in Noto, the pious believe he crossed from Malta to Sicily on his mantle.²⁴²

The other church, that of the Virgin of Hope, or Madonna tal-Isperanza, is built above a cave (Fig. 37) in the south flank of the Mosta valley. The cave has been drastically altered over time by built addition and mutilations. It seems that the innermost section of the cave only has retained its originality, which has a rock pilaster supporting the ceiling and a well-head.²⁴³ A roughly-cut niche may have housed a cult image, as with the Sanctuary of the Virgin in Mellieħa. This could be identified with the icon of the Virgin painted on rock referred to in the pastoral visitation reports, which was moved to the aboveground church in 1771.²⁴⁴ Buhagiar suggests that this image can perhaps be hidden underneath a Baroque repainting of the *Virgin and Child* (26 x 29cm) (Fig. 27), which is embedded in the thickness of the window flanking the west doorway, making it possible for the pious to view and pray to.²⁴⁵ A similar case of an older icon being hidden underneath a later repainting is that of the icon of the *Madonna and Child* in the Sanctuary of the Virgin at Mellieħa.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid, 144 – 145.

²⁴³ Id., *Christianisation*, 101.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

This dissertation provides an ideological and historical map for the various cave churches in Malta. Through research and psychical experience of the sites surveyed, the numerous influences that shape the art and architecture are synthesized and presented in an organic manner. Most importantly, better understanding and appreciation of the art in question is sought.

Caves have always been an important element of Mediterranean history and lifestyle, from the Prehistoric caves to the caves reused as war shelters. The study of caves, the people who prayed and lived within them and the art they produced, is a study of the lay people, rather than that of the nobility or ruling classes, making it a unique art to study. The first troglodytes of the Maltese Middle Ages are presumed to be Muslims who move away from the civitas, which had become the home of a religiously intolerant Latin garrison, as a result of the second Norman conquest of 1127. These runaway Muslims found shelter in earlier catacombs and natural caves, providing them with considerable religious freedom and seclusion from the civitas, something which they presumably sought actively.

The Maltese countryside seems to have remained unchanged since Roman times, even during the lengthy Byzantine and Muslim periods. This would slowly start to change with the spill of some of the civitas' population into the countryside. This suggests that we are to some degree indebted to these first inhabitants of the Maltese countryside, as they may have triggered the development of the Maltese village. Troglodytism seems to have been a presiding aspect of the late medieval Maltese landscape, being the most popular form of habitat at the time. This form of dwelling even lasted well into the modern period. Cave dwelling was customary throughout the Mediterranean, but the Maltese variant finds its closest parallel in the troglodytic communities and habitats of Sicily and the heel of Italy. Geophysical realities that enabled the spread of troglodytism include the temperate weather, a rock that is often easily hewn and the scarcity of timber. Caves were also good for protection from raiders and pirates, often being more inconspicuous than built houses.

An external influence that sought in its ideals, above all else, seclusion, was the Greek monastic element, which reached Malta through the Sicilian channel. Malta was for most of its history a satellite state to Sicily, therefore the Sicilian

context must always be taken in consideration. Siculo-Greek monasticism would come to shape the religion of the cave dwellers, and as a result influence their artistic taste, seen in the decoration of the Maltese cave churches. Perhaps unconsciously following what happened in Sicily, Maltese Muslims who fled from Norman persecution seem to have preferred conversion to Greek-rite Christianity, rather than Latin, which they possibly associated with their rulers and persecutors.

The travelling monks, most of whom probably hailed from Sicily, who preached to these Muslims, possibly saw in these communities a very likely group of converts. The secluded places in which they dwelt may have also struck an attractive chord in these monks, whose asceticism called for seclusion from society. The ascetic and eremitic traditions are far-reaching, in that they stem from the Orient, particularly Syria and the Nile Delta. In Sicily, Greek-monasticism has several sources, which include the early Christian ascetic coenobitic tradition as well as the presence of Middle Eastern monks on the run from the Iconoclastic persecution of the Byzantine Empire.

Most of the art produced in the Maltese cave churches has elements which can be regarded as Greek, most notably of these are the hieratic, frontal poses of saints, the typology of faces, with the characteristic almond shaped eyes and arched eyebrows. However, few images can be termed as purely Greek in inspiration, as the Latin cultural context was highly influential. Therefore, one sees such Latin elements as Latin script with the saint's name. The merging of elements from the Greek and Latin spheres of influence makes up the defining characteristic of the Siculo-Byzantine idiom.

The spread of Siculo-Greek monasticism shaped not only the art, but also the cult of saints on the island. Saints who were rather obscure and worshipped mostly in Sicily were introduced to the island, namely in the shape of St. Cataldus and St. Brancato, both of whom have presumed cave churches which hold their dedication. In Sicily, which had become the core of Greek monasticism, particularly the Eastern regions, a creative and intellectual reawakening took place at the turn of the twelfth century, following the Norman conquest, due to travelling Calabrian monks who injected the Siculo-Greek community with new beliefs and traits, such as new saints. This is felt in Malta on a considerably smaller scale.

An obvious issue that one encounters in the study of cave churches is dating. In the case of the architecture, numerous elements may have altered the natural state of the space, namely geophysical and human. When it comes to murals, one can only presume the latest possible date, as these may have been painted much later than the founding of the church itself. However, alterations and accretions over time sometimes provide an interesting and unique synthesis of artistic currents and styles. This is seen in the St. Agatha cave church, where the origin of the site is paleochristian, however it preserves murals that are late medieval and others that betray early Renaissance sensibilities, providing a sort of visual timeline of the different changes in the Maltese, even European, cultural history.

Although one can learn a great deal through academic research, nothing truly equals having experienced a space yourself. This is particularly true with the case of cave churches, where of great importance is the idea of space, one which for a time was used for living as well as prayer, and in the case of catacombs, a space populated mostly by the dead. These elements reflect the original climate which pulled the people into the site in the first place, and only by experiencing the site at first hand can one truly come to terms with these ideas, which still linger in the space itself.

Figures



Fig. 1. Exterior of Abbatija tad-Dejr complex.



Fig. 2. The rock-cut screen wall with arched openings, Oratory I, Abbatija tad-Dejr.



Fig. 3. Apsed niche and L-shaped bench on the lower left, Oratory I, Abbatija tad-Dejr.



Fig. 4. Engraved cross with forked finials painted in with red ochre, Oratory I, Abbatija tad-Dejr.



Fig. 5. Siculo-Byzantine school, *The Crucifixion and the Annunciation*, Apse painting, Oratory II, Abbatija tad-Dejr, now in the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.



Fig. 6. *Crucifixion*, arcosolium reused as apse, Grotta dei Santi, Monterosso Alma, Sicily.



Fig. 7. One of the smaller hypogea of Abbatija tad- Dejr, presumably recut for use as a monk's cell.



Fig. 8. Church of St. Agatha, Rabat.



Fig. 9. Wall icons of two Siculo-Byzantine Saints, Church of St. Agatha.



Fig. 10. Detail of diminutive kneeling figure at the feet of the female saint.



Fig. 11. Mutilated fresco of *Virgin suckling the Child*.



Fig. 12. St. Paul's Grotto, Rabat.



Fig. 13. Church of St. Mary Magdalene, Rabat, with low-rock cut bench and nineteenth century altar within apsed niche.



Fig. 14. Remains of a partially rock-cut church of St. Catald in Rabat, with built arches and ceiling dating to the late eighteenth century .



Fig. 15. Oratory at the entrance to St. Paul's Catacombs possibly utilised as a church, with fluted columns on the right.



Fig. 16. Pieter van de Aa. *The Għar il-Kbir troglodytic community.* Copper engraving. Published at Lieden at the turn of the 18th century.



Fig. 17. Cylindrical apse made of ashlars and wet rubble containing a stone altar, Cave church of St. Leonard.



Fig. 18. Rock cut bench, or *dukkiën*, Cave church of St. Leonard.



Fig. 19. *St. Leonard*, Cave church of St. Leonard.



Fig. 20. Entrance with steps. Church of Annunciation and St. Leonard, Tal-Minsija.



Fig. 21. Altar and natural rock ceiling. Church of Annunciation and St. Leonard, Tal-Minsija.



Fig. 22. Master of Mensija Triptych, *Annunciation of the Virgin with St. Leonard*, Church of Annunciation and St. Leonard, Tal-Minsija.



Fig. 23. Siculo-Byzantine wall icon of the *Madonna and Child*, Sanctuary of the Virgin, Mellieha.



Fig. 24. Detail of Latin legend on the icon of the *Madonna and Child*, from the right side, showing the 'MAT' of 'MAT(ER) DOMINI'.



Fig. 25. *Virgin and Child*, Grotta di Sta. Lucia sul Tirone, Lentini.



Fig. 26. *Virgin and Child*, Grotta di S. Nicola, Modica.



Fig. 27. *Virgin and Child*, S. Maria della Speranza, Mosta.



Fig. 28. Ġnien Ingraw area, near Mellieħa, Ghar San Niklaw.



Fig. 29. Ghar San Niklaw, near Mellieħa. Partly walled section of the cave used as a church.



Fig. 30. Remains of painted wall image, Ghar San Niklaw.



Fig. 31. Section of the Ghar San Niklaw used as a cave dwelling.



Fig. 32. View from the interior of Ghar San Niklaw.



Fig. 33. Ghar San Pietru, possible remains of a cave church of St. Peter.



Fig. 34. Ghar San Brinkat, Gharghur.



Fig. 35. Church of St. Paul the Hermit in Wied il-Ghasel, Mosta.

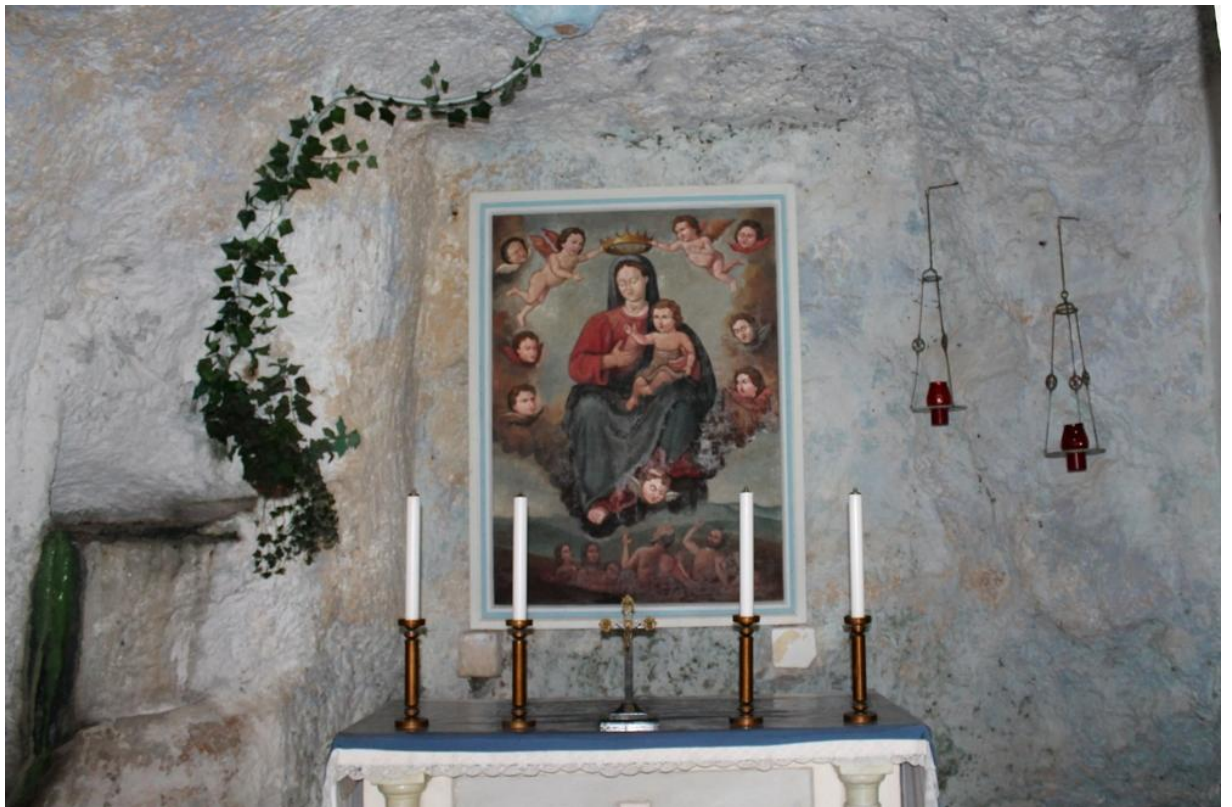


Fig. 36. Rock cut chapel of the Virgin in the Church of St. Paul the Hermit.



Fig. 37. Cave underneath the Church of the Virgin of Hope, Mosta.

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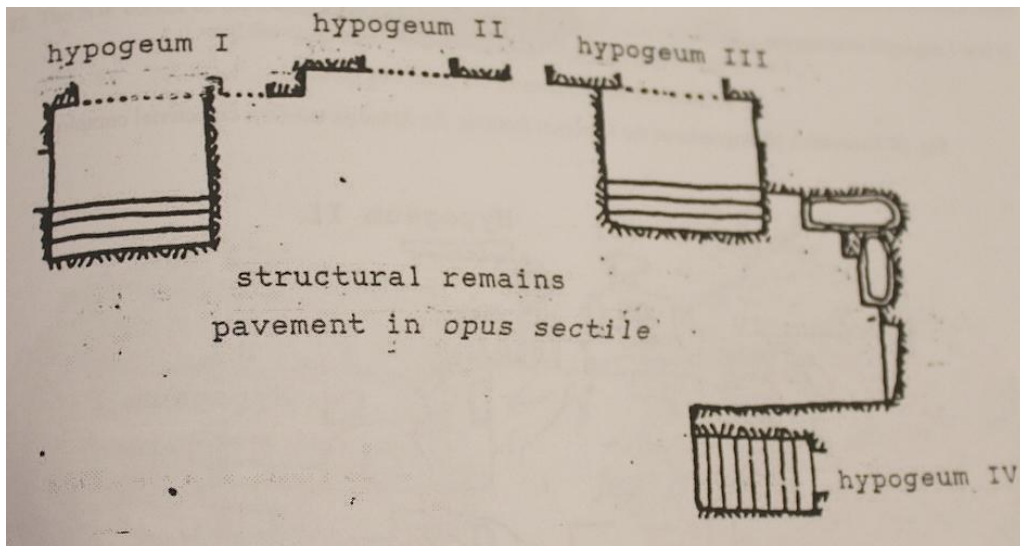
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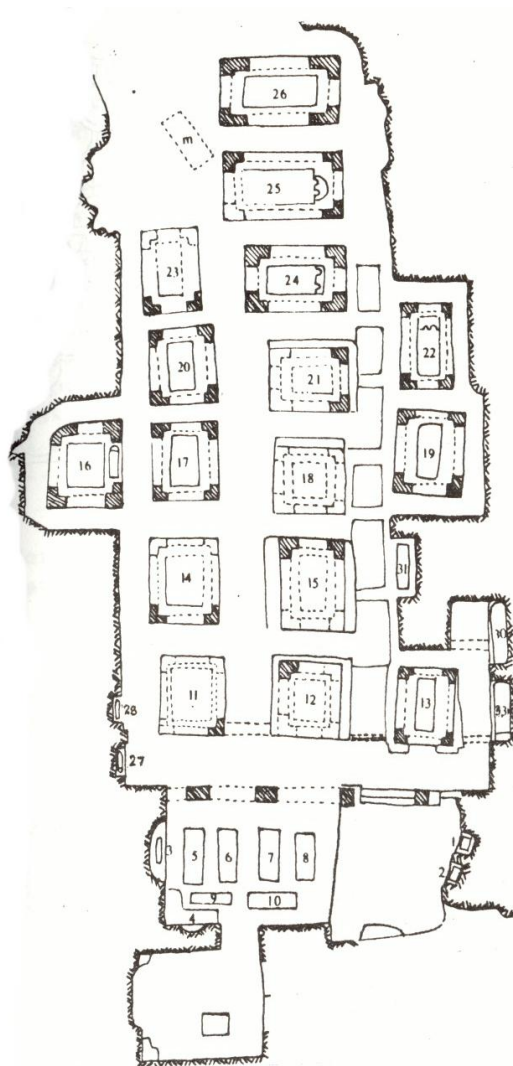
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Appendix:

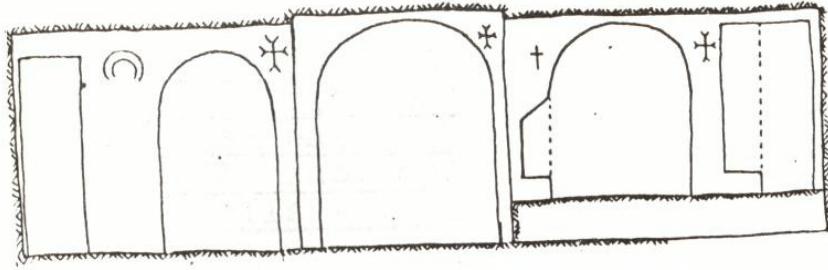
Gazetteer of cave church plans



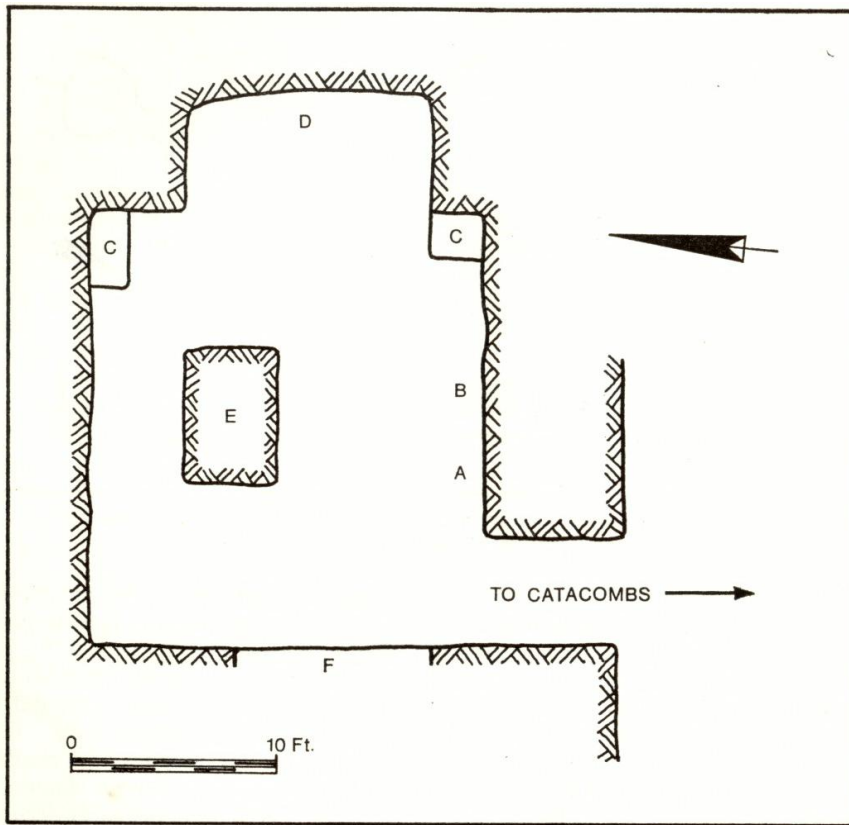
Pl.1.
Abbatija tad-Dejr, Rabat
Courtyard fronting the catacombs



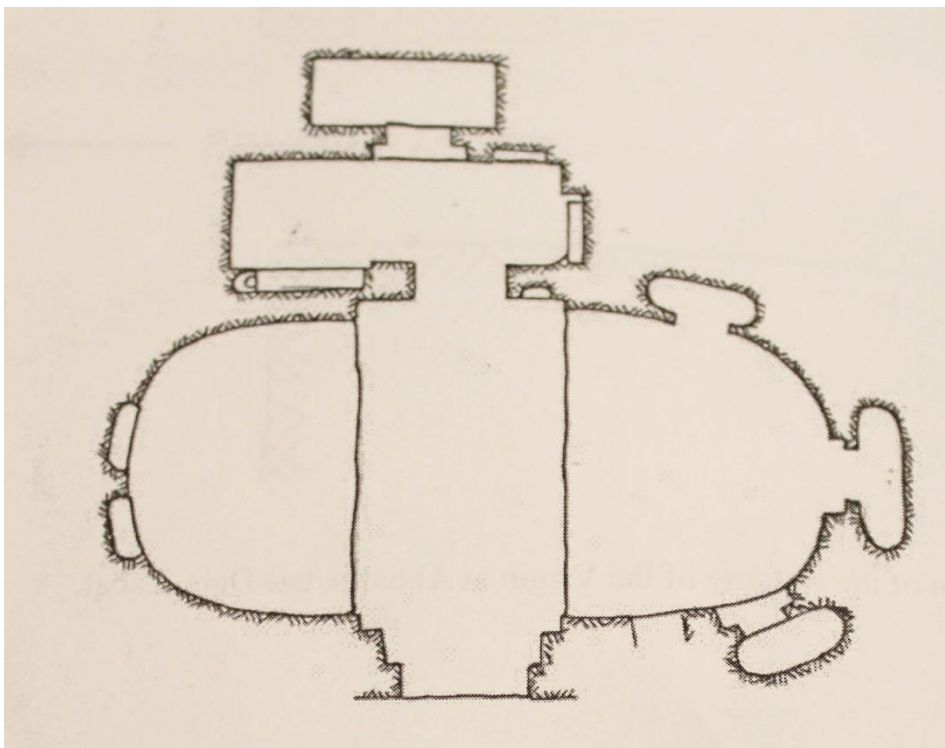
Pl.2.
Abbatija tad-Dejr, Rabat
Hypogeum I



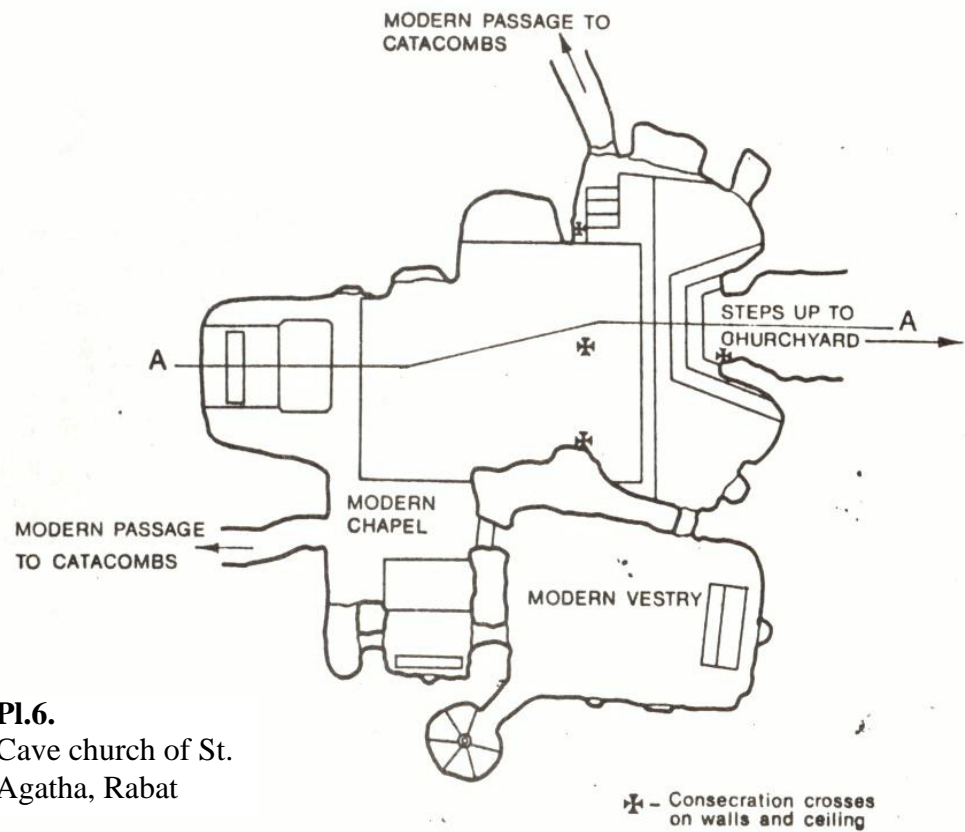
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 Abbatija tad-Dejr, Rabat
 Hypogeum I
 Arcaded screen



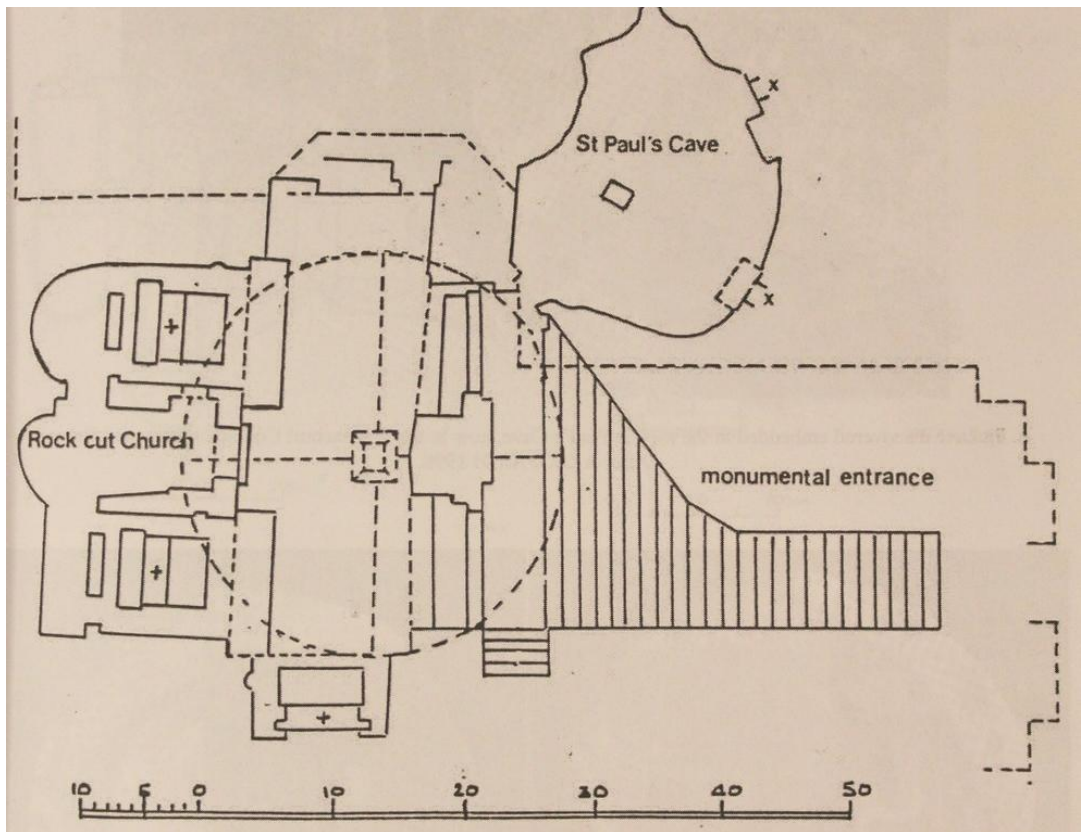
Pl.4.
 Abbatija tad-Dejr, Rabat
 Church of the Nativity of
 the Virgin



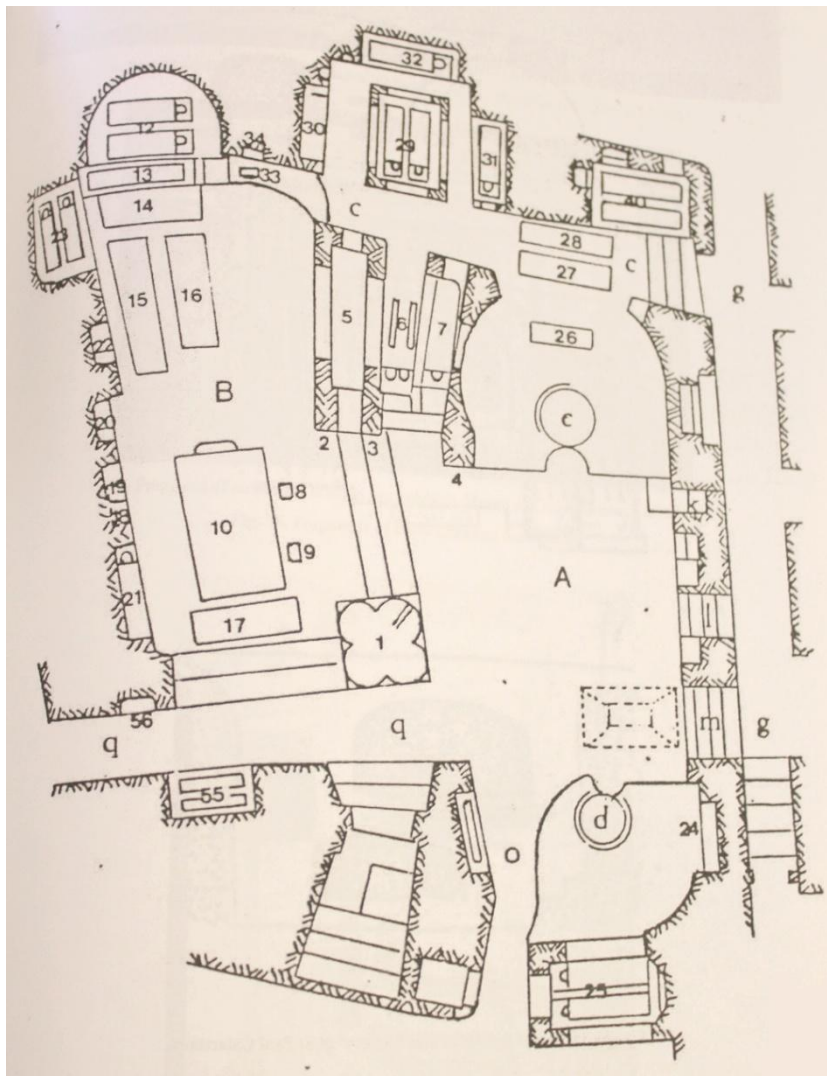
Pl.5.
 Abbatija tad-Dejr,
 Rabat
 Hypogeum III



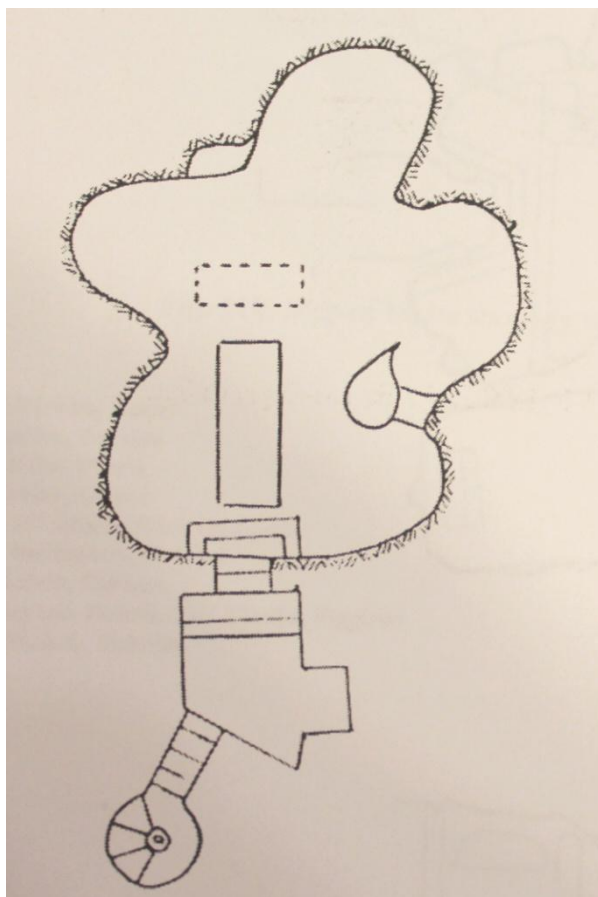
Pl.6.
Cave church of St.
Agatha, Rabat



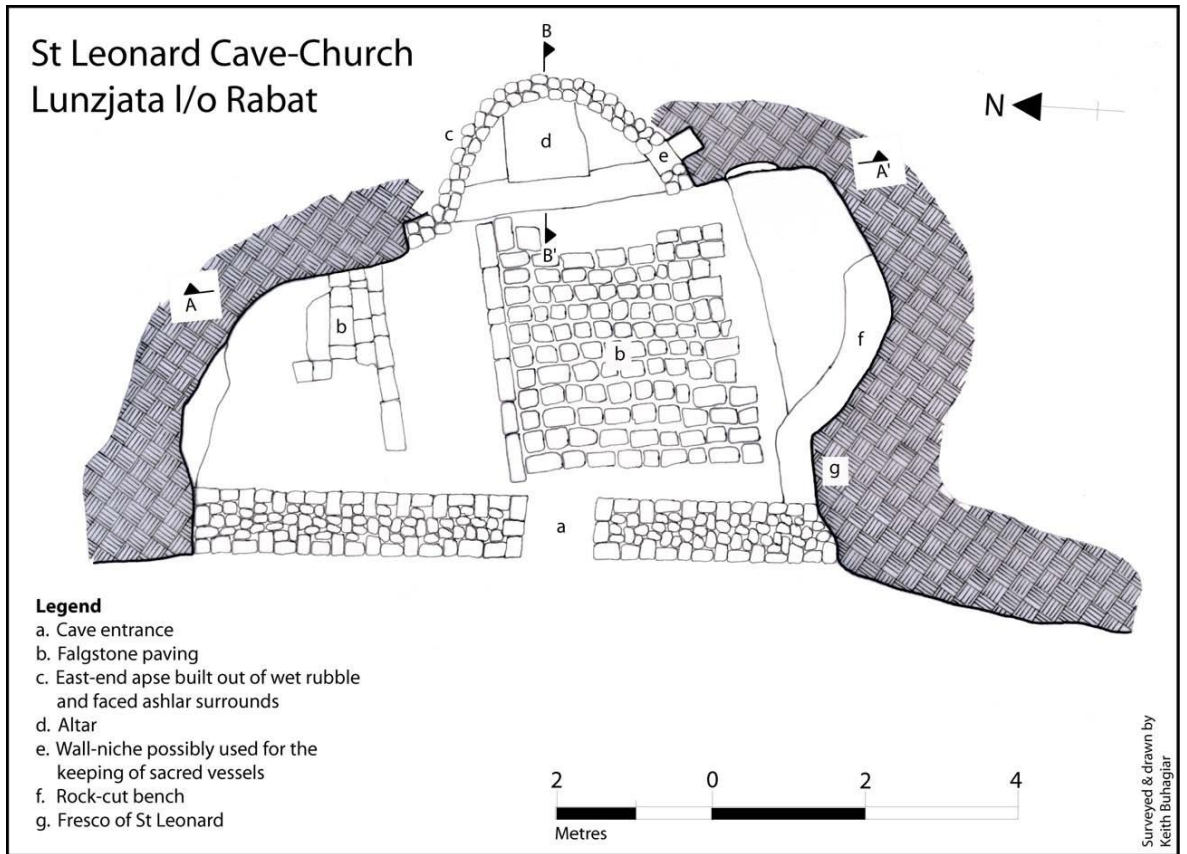
Pl.7.
St. Paul's Grotto
and Rock cut
church, Rabat



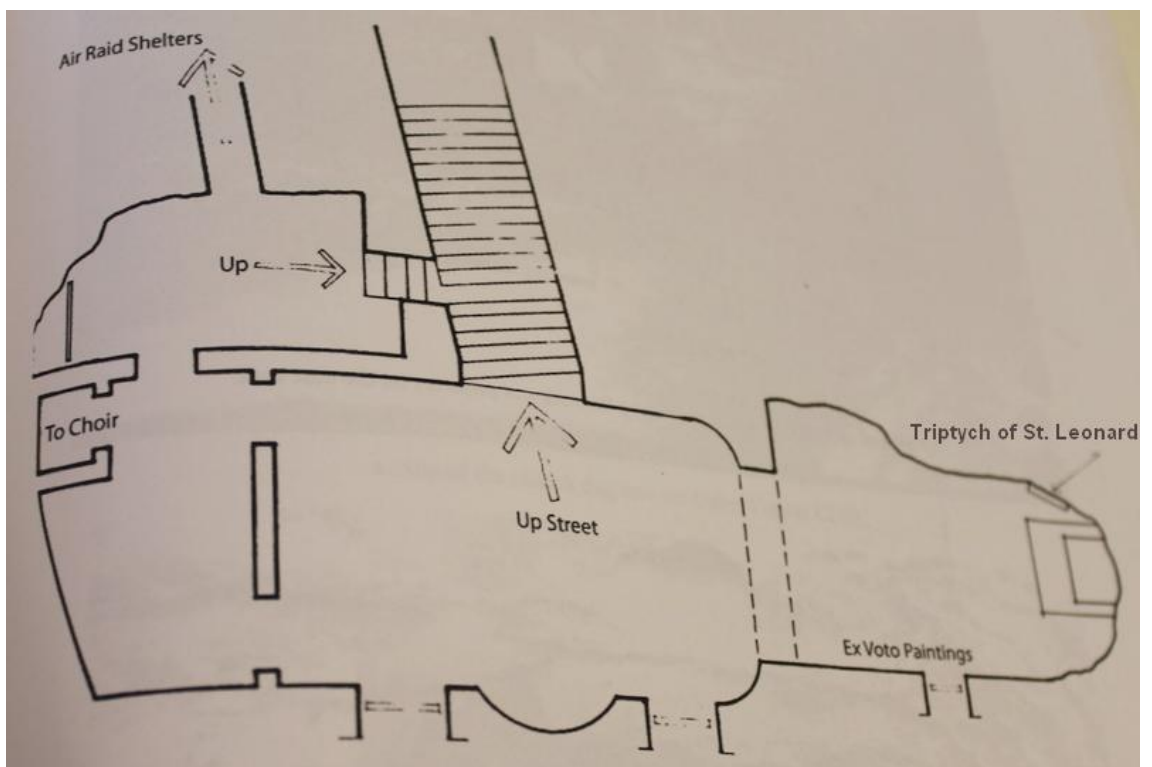
Pl.8.
St. Paul's Catacombs, Rabat
The two oratories



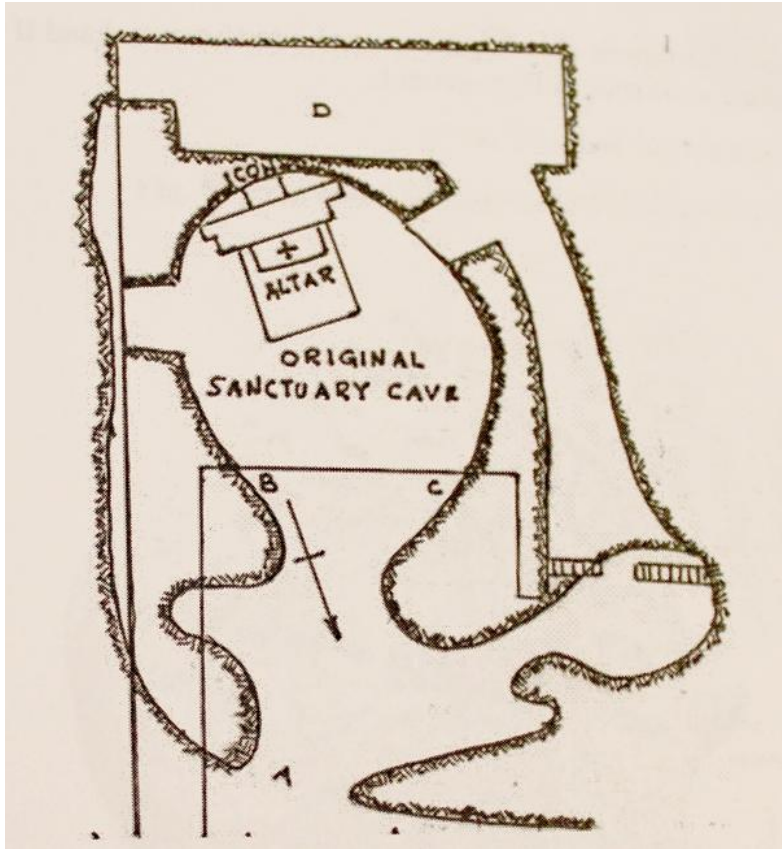
Pl.9.
S. Maria della Virtu', Rabat



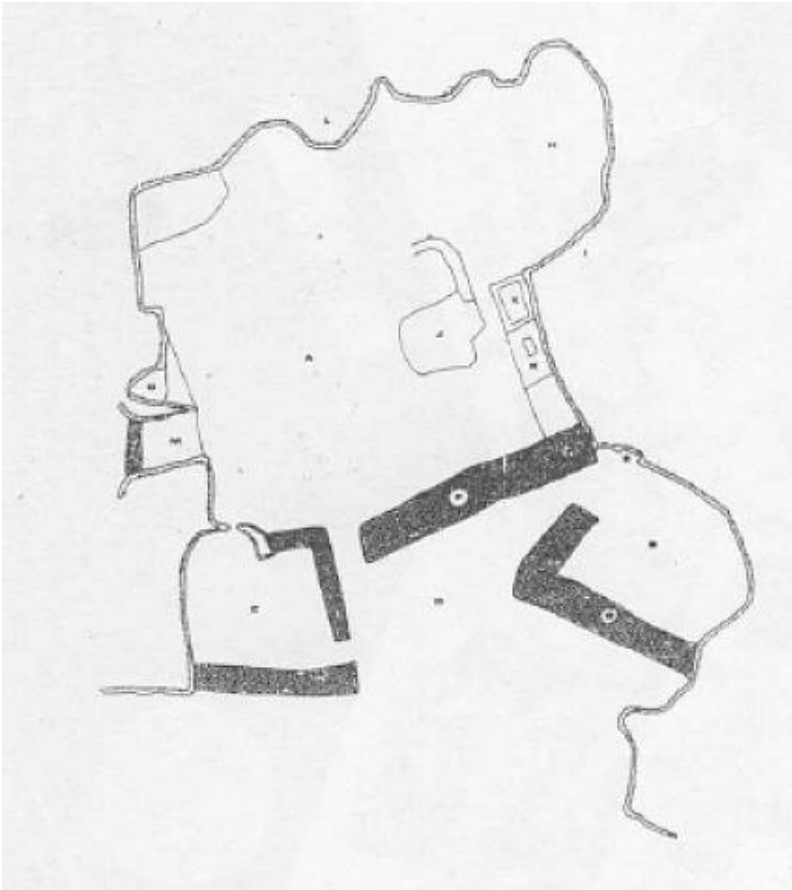
Pl.10.
Cave church of St. Leonard, Wied Liemu, Limits of Rabat and Dingli



Pl.11.
San Leonardo tal- Ġebel, Minsija, San Ġwann



Pl.12.
Sanctuary of the Virgin, Mellieha
(Hypothetical reconstruction of
original plan)



Pl.13.
Ghar San Niklaw, Mellieha
Cave church and dwelling