

# The Christianisation of Malta: A Discussion Based on the Available Evidence

## Introduction

Like many other Mediterranean communities, the Maltese had long been familiar with a varied pantheon of deities pertaining to pagan – largely Punic and Roman – religions during Classical antiquity. Then, during the late Roman occupation (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) of Malta (fig. 1), one comes across the earliest known material or archaeological evidence of Christian presence in Malta.<sup>1</sup> This evidence comprises a basilica church and a baptismal font at Tas-Silġ near Marsaxlokk,<sup>2</sup> a shrine / chapel and the attached catacomb complex at L-Abbatija tad-Dejr in Rabat (Malta) and a number of other catacombs and hypogea in several places around Malta, most notably in the Rabat area.<sup>3</sup> But

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Bonanno (with Daniel Cilia), *Malta. Phoenician, Punic, and Roman* (Malta: Midsea Books Ltd, 2005), 201.

<sup>2</sup> [Missione] *Archeologica Italiana a Malta. Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1963*, (Roma: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, Università degli Studi di Roma, 1964), 55; *1964* (1965), 44-48, 53-54; *1965* (1966), 160-161, 172; *1966* (1967), 25-27, 33-35, 118-120, 128-130; *1967* (1968), 44-46, 110-111, fig. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Bonanno (with Cilia), *Malta. Phoenician, Punic, and Roman*, 259, 262-271, 324-337. As they have already been described and discussed in detail in several other publications, no detailed descriptions or discussions of the Maltese catacombs / hypogea and of the Tas-Silġ basilica (including the baptismal font) are being repeated in this paper. Only certain references which are sufficient enough for the purposes of this paper are being given. The catacombs / hypogea

a careful reading of this evidence would seem to lead us to an earlier Christian presence than a superficial reading might lead us to.



Fig. 1. Map of the Maltese islands and (inset) with their location in the center of the Mediterranean. The map shows the main places mentioned in the text (Adapted from [www.geocities.ws/maltashells/NatHist.html](http://www.geocities.ws/maltashells/NatHist.html)).

## The Material Evidence

Consisting of a basilica church (including a baptismal font) and a number of catacomb burials the distinctive Christian character of which does not go back earlier than the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, this kind of evidence is not suggestive of a simple Christian nucleus or of a Christian community in its infancy or in its early stages of existence. Rather, this evidence seems to indicate a fully-fledged, established, and well-developed community. In the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, this community was making use of burial places employing distinctly Christian symbols, iconography, and epigraphy (see further below) evidently reflecting established beliefs. It also had a basilica and a baptismal font implying an organised liturgy. This 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD evidence, therefore, indirectly points to an earlier origin of

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and the said basilica (including the baptismal font) are, strictly speaking, included as part of the evidence and are, therefore, not so much within the main scope of this paper.

this community. For a community to have its own distinct burial spaces and worshipping places would mean that, by then (in our case, by the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), this community must have consolidated and established itself (and its identity) well enough and was also sufficiently organised to have its own distinct burials and worshipping places. Moreover, the Christian presence / community must have also, by then, grown or developed to such an extent that it also needed burial places of its own; perhaps also in view of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD prohibition of Christian burials amongst pagan ones by the Council of Laodicea (c. AD 360) and St Hilary of Poitiers (Church Father and bishop, c. AD 315 – c. 367).<sup>4</sup>

As the organisation and consolidation of a community (even of its identity) and also its growth or development constitute a process which takes a considerable length of time (perhaps even centuries), then, our material evidence made up of the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD catacombs / hypogea and basilica might be taken to represent the culmination (or a stage near the culmination) of this process: a process which, therefore, is expected to have seen its initiation earlier than the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.<sup>5</sup> This might point to an earlier date like the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD when, according to the biblical *Acts of the Apostles*,<sup>6</sup> Christianity was introduced to the island by the apostle Paul while the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD evidence itself would seem to provide us with a *terminus ante quem* in respect of Christian beginnings in Malta.

The absence of (recognisable) material evidence of a Christian presence during this process' presumed earlier initiation period may be explained by the possibility that the Christian community was, back then, not yet sufficiently organised and consolidated (and its identity was not yet established) and was not large or developed enough to leave distinctive marks of its presence in the archaeological record. This may, therefore, also lead us to suspect that throughout this process – and, especially, during the early stages – of its consolidation, organisation, and growth or development, Christianity in Malta might have been somehow overshadowed by other pagan cults with which it may have co-existed. These pagan cults will be outlined below.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs. Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 10.

<sup>5</sup> In view of the lengthy process required for the consolidation, organisation, and growth or development of a community to take place, had this Christian community seen its beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, one would expect to have the hallmarks (like catacombs and a basilica) of a well-established, consolidated, organised, and developed Christian community perhaps some two or three centuries later.

<sup>6</sup> [*Acts*] of the *Apostles* 27:39-44; 28:1-11.

A somewhat distinctive picture might be provided by the catacomb complex at Ta' Bistra in the limits of Mosta. What appears to have been a rock-cut *agape* table inside a *triclinium* towards the complex's eastern end seems to have been later hollowed and turned into a circular basin. This basin could have been used as a baptismal font as two similarly rock-cut, laterally facing steps on the front elevation possibly meant to facilitate access to the basin may seem to suggest.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this presumed font has long been mutilated but a photographic record prior to its destruction had been secured (fig. 2). Another baptismal font or baptistry in a funerary context is known, for example, from the Catacomb of Pontian on the *Via Portuensis* in Rome while an example closely analogous to ours at Ta' Bistra in its circular shape and general characteristics is the baptismal font discovered in June 2000 beneath the floor of the sacristy of the *Chiesa del Santo Sepolcro* in Cagliari, Sardinia.

The presence of the presumed baptismal font at Ta' Bistra would seem to confirm the Christian character of the Ta' Bistra catacomb complex. However, the inconspicuous location (in a catacomb complex) of the presumed baptismal font away from the urban center of Melite might assign this presumed baptismal

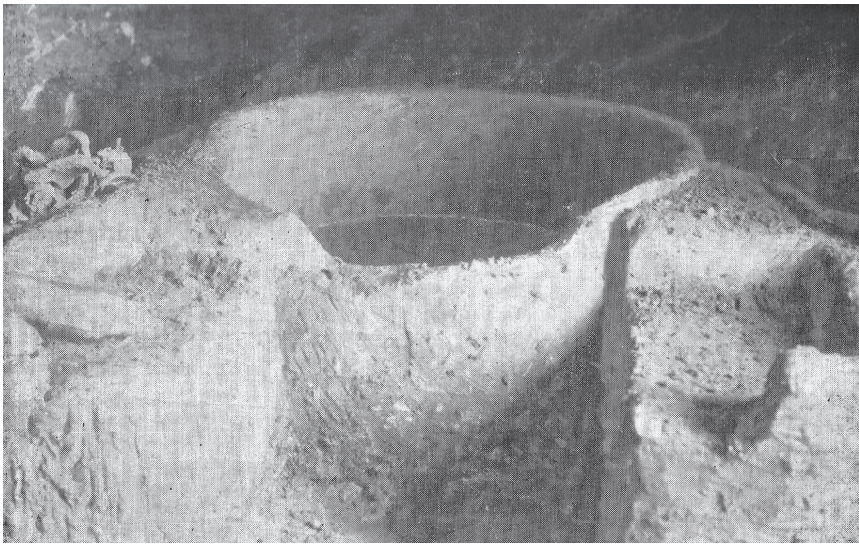


Fig. 2. The presumed baptismal font inside a *triclinium* at Ta' Bistra Catacomb complex in the limits of Mosta. It appears to have been cut out from an earlier *agape* table. The two laterally facing steps in the foreground were possibly cut to facilitate access to the presumed font (Source: Zammit (1935), 175(fig.4)).

<sup>7</sup> Charles G. Zammit, "The 'Tal-Bistra' Catacombs," *Bulletin of the Museum* 1, no.5 (February 1935): 169-170, 175(fig. 4), 177.

font and, by extension, the catacomb complex inside which it was located to a period when Christianity in Malta was not yet fully established. This might further lead us to surmise that the presumed baptismal font at Ta' Bistra belongs to an earlier phase of Malta's Christianisation process than the one at Tas-Silġ (near Marsaxlokk) which, by contrast, is more conspicuous and is linked to a monumental basilica, evidently representative of a later phase of the Christianisation process in Malta. The baptismal font at Tas-Silġ was dated by its excavators specifically to the period between the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD<sup>8</sup> and may, therefore, provide a *terminus ante quem* in respect of the presumed baptismal font at Ta' Bistra.

### The Literary Evidence

As discussed above, the introduction of Christianity in Malta may have taken place well before the appearance of the earliest known material evidence. Apart from the commentary on Paul's sojourn in Malta in one of the homilies of the 4<sup>th</sup>-early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD Church Father St John Chrysostom<sup>9</sup> and a very brief reference in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD apocryphal *Acts of Peter and Paul*,<sup>10</sup> the biblical *Acts'* narrative is the sole literary evidence we have associated with the beginnings of Christianity in Malta.

The biblical *Acts'* narrative gives us the impression that the apostle and the new religious ideology he brought along with him were first embraced by the local '*barbaroi*' (people extraneous to Greek and Roman culture) while the local elite are likely to have remained attached for a long while to their own pagan religious traditions (see further below).<sup>11</sup> It was not unusual for the newly spreading religious ideology (i.e. Christianity) to be first embraced by people of low social standing (in both rural and urban contexts) amongst whom it seems to have enjoyed popularity due to the favourable treatment it accorded to them.<sup>12</sup>

However, one is not to imagine a quick and massive-scale shift. Apart from the fact that Paul's arrival in Malta was not a planned missionary journey, his being a prisoner implies that his movement – and, by implication, his activity – is likely to have been somewhat restricted. In addition, his three-month

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<sup>8</sup> *Missione 1966* (1967), 33-35, 119-120, 129-130.

<sup>9</sup> 'Homily LIV on Acts XXVIII.1', in John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*.

<sup>10</sup> *Acts of Peter and Paul*, 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> (unnumbered) paragraphs.

<sup>11</sup> See George Azzopardi, *The Extramural Necropolis of Għozo* (Gozo: The Author, 2007), 24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

sojourn in Malta may have been too short to leave a long-lasting impact on the local population; unless he delegated someone to follow up and complete the task / mission he initiated.<sup>13</sup> Whether he did or not, we do not know but evidently pagan cults continued to be practised for a long while as will be shown further below.

### Paul the Healer

An interesting detail given by the *Acts*' author is the instance when, seeing no harm done to the apostle by the viper, the local '*barbaroi*' (presumably, countrymen hailing from the coastal surroundings of the beach where the apostle's vessel was wrecked) perceived him as a god.<sup>14</sup> They are expected to have done so even more when Paul healed the father of Publius, the *Protos* / Chief man of the island and, then, saw him healing their own sick as well.<sup>15</sup> One is tempted to guess that they might have identified him with the Punic healing god Eshmun or his Roman counterpart Aesculapius with whom they are expected to have been familiar (fig. 3). The apostle Paul had, in fact, undergone a similar experience when, along with Barnabas, he was at Lystra, in Lycaonia. There, upon seeing him preaching and curing a crippled man, the gathered crowds identified

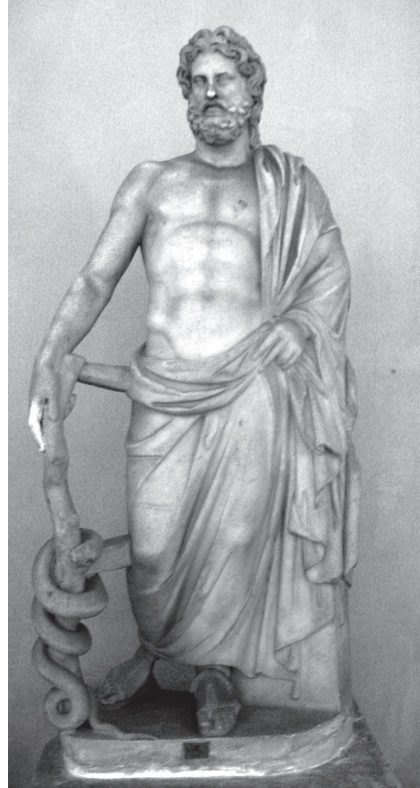


Fig. 3. A marble statue of the Roman healing god Aesculapius found at Ostia, near Rome, and now in the Vatican Museum. This statue is an early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD Roman copy reproducing an iconographic scheme developed in late Hellenistic times (Photo: the author).

<sup>13</sup> The origins of the tradition relating to the appointment of Publius (the *Protos* of Malta) as the first bishop of the island by the apostle Paul himself may, perhaps, be attributed to the Martyrology (*Martyrologium ad diem 21 Januarii*) of St Bede quoted in Seraphim M. Zarb, "Publius the Protos of Malta", *Scientia* 37, no.4 (1974): 163-164 (including footnote 15). But as this martyrology is rather a condensation of earlier ecclesiastical popular traditions, I refrain from resorting to it or to the other traditions to further elaborate this argument.

<sup>14</sup> *Acts* 28:6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 28:8-9.

Paul with the messenger-god Hermes, eloquence being an attribute of this god. Scarcely were the crowds persuaded that he was not Hermes.<sup>16</sup>

Perceptions surrounding the healing qualities of the apostle or of places closely associated with him seem to have survived for many centuries to follow. Until relatively recent times, dust or stone to which healing properties would seem to have been attributed used to be extracted from St Paul's Grotto in Rabat, Malta (see fig. 4).<sup>17</sup> The dust was also used to produce *terra sigillata* medals<sup>18</sup> one of which, depicted on a contemporary engraving showing the shipwreck of St Paul,

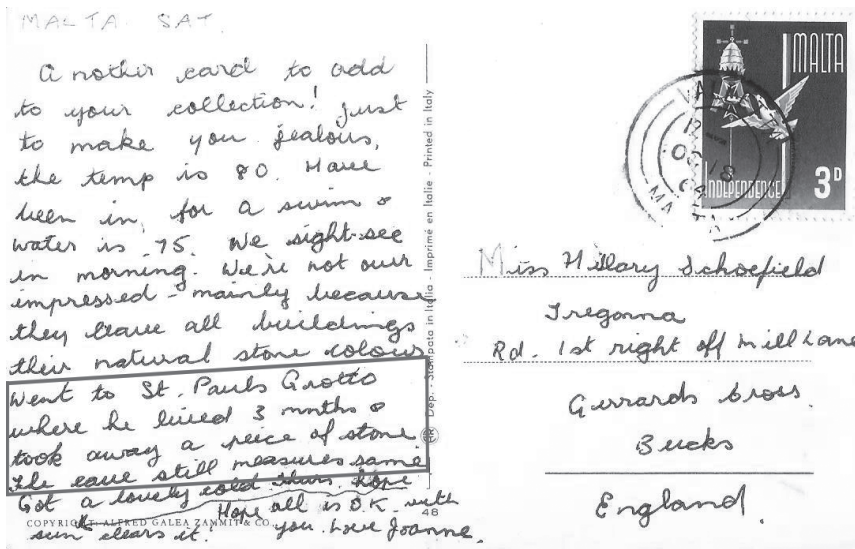


Fig. 4. The rear side of a Malta souvenir card (showing Gozo's Ta' Pinu shrine which is not visible here) sent by a British tourist visiting Malta in 1964. In her message, she tells her relative in Britain that she visited St Paul's Grotto in Rabat (Malta) from where she extracted a piece of stone (see framed sentences in her message) whilst recalling the locals' belief that the cave's dimensions remain unaltered (Author's collection).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14:6-18.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Freller, "The Image of the 'Island of St Paul'. A Story of Success of Baroque Historiography, Iconography, and Poetry," in *St Paul in Malta and the Shaping of a Nation's Identity*, eds John Azzopardi & Anthony Pace (Malta: Office of the Prime Minister, 2010), 103, quoting the 17<sup>th</sup> century French chronicler Francois Deseigne; Jean Quintin d'Autun, *The Earliest Description of Malta* (Lyons, 1536), trans. Horatio Caesar Roger Vella (Malta: DeBono Enterprises, 1980), 46-47. A commemorative marble inscription set up next to the entrance of the cave known as 'St Paul's grotto' in Rabat (Malta) to mark the embellishment of the grotto's immediate environs by Grandmaster Emmanuel Pinto in 1743, makes reference to the belief regarding the unchanging shape and dimensions of the grotto upon extraction of stone or dust from its walls.

<sup>18</sup> See examples in *St Paul in Malta and the Shaping of a Nation's Identity*, 195-203.



Fig. 5. St Paul's shipwreck on the island of Malta. Engraving by Jacob Andreas Friedrich Snr (1684-1751). The medal (probably one of those made of *terra sigillata* from St Paul's Grotto in Rabat, Malta) represented below on the left shows the apostle with the viper twisted round his raised sword (evidently a *Zweihänder* or double-handed longsword that used to be carried across the shoulder as seen here) and the legend "TERRA:D.GROTTA·D·S·PAVL" / "Dust from the Grotto of St Paul" (Author's collection).

showed the apostle with the viper twisted round his raised sword and the legend "TERRA:D.GROTTA·D·S·PAVL" / "Dust from the Grotto of St Paul" (fig. 5). Incidentally, as a matter of observation, while local popular tradition would seem to have attributed healing properties to dust extracted from St Paul's Grotto in Rabat (Malta), the viper twisted round his raised sword would seem to recall the snake-entwined staff of the healing god Eshmun / Aesculapius (see fig. 3). It would seem that, in Maltese popular culture, not only certain places linked



to him but even the apostle himself may have remained associated with healing.

Besides St Paul's Grotto in Rabat, another place possibly associated with the healing qualities of the apostle is a water spring known as 'Għajn Rasul' / 'Rasul's Spring' in St Paul's Bay (see fig. 6)<sup>19</sup> and, thus, not far from the traditionally held site of the shipwreck. Meaning 'a prophet'<sup>20</sup> or 'a messenger', the Arabic word 'Rasul' might be a reference to Paul as a prophet or a messenger of God (or of God's word / gospel) amongst the Maltese. We have also already seen the experience Paul underwent at Lystra (in Lycaonia) where, upon seeing him preaching (and curing a crippled man), the gathered crowds identified him with Hermes, the eloquent messenger-god (see above). The said spring in St Paul's Bay also features a statue of the apostle Paul. As healing properties were often attributed to water or to water sources (like springs)<sup>21</sup> and as the apostle Paul might have been himself also associated with healing, this particular spring might have also enjoyed an association with healing: a possibility which may further explain the connection between St Paul and this particular spring.

Also in St Paul's Bay, the old chapel dedicated to the Shipwreck of St Paul always enjoyed great devotion from the inhabitants of Malta, and especially

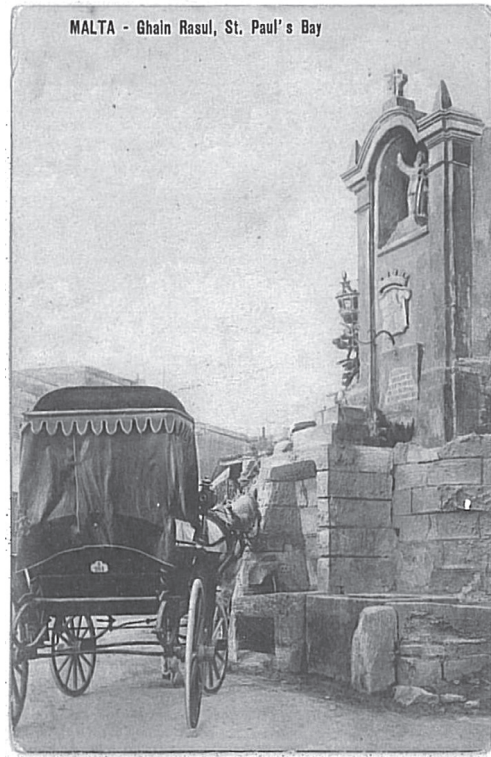


Fig. 6. Ghajn Rasul in St Paul's Bay as seen around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This water spring might have had healing properties much like the apostle Paul with whom it is associated (Photo: Author's collection).

<sup>19</sup> Godfrey Wettinger, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands. ca. 1300-1800* (Malta: Publishers Enterprises Group, 2000), 189 (sub Ghajn Razun).

<sup>20</sup> Prophets in Islam include messengers.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Michele dall'Aglio, *I Culti delle Acque nell'Italia Antica* (Imola (Bologna): Angelini Editore, 2009), 14-16.

those who suffered illnesses of all sorts who, with the intercession of the Apostle, found here consolation.<sup>22</sup>

### A Pauline Cult?

At such an early stage as that which saw the arrival of Paul in Malta, one can perhaps imagine a hybridised cult centred on the figure of the apostle presumably identified with one of the gods whom, for a while, the Maltese continued to worship (see below). Having been familiar with polytheistic religious traditions, it might have not been difficult for them to include the apostle Paul in their pantheon of gods. Certain syncretised Christian elements, however, might have not been altogether excluded from this new hybridised cult.

Nonetheless, the filtering process through which the balance may have eventually tipped more in favour of Christianity is very likely to have been slow and gradual as evidenced by the presence of imperial and pagan cults until late imperial times. Such evidence is best provided by surviving or documented inscriptions, like *CIL* 7494 for the continuation of the cult of Proserpina after c. AD 69<sup>23</sup> and *CIL* 7495 (and, possibly, 8318) for the cult of Apollo in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>24</sup> There is also epigraphic evidence for surviving imperial and pagan cults on the neighbouring island of Gozo (fig. 1) like inscription *CIL* 7507 for the cult of the deified emperor Hadrian during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD<sup>25</sup> while the *cognomen* ‘Gallus’ in *CIL* 7506 (of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD like the previous inscription) may possibly indicate the presence, in Gozo, of a cult of Magna Mater whose priests were known as ‘galli’.<sup>26</sup> Ritual activity connected with pagan cults also survived longer as witnessed at Tas-Silġ sanctuary evidently as late as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and, to a much lesser extent, till the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>27</sup> and at what appears to have been a headland sanctuary

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<sup>22</sup> Archivum Cathedrale Melitense / Malta Cathedral Archive, Mdina, Malta, Misc. 57 [*Leggendario Maltese Raccolto e formato dal Pre Pelagio dal Zebug Capuccino, dato a conservare nella Libreria della S. Madre Chiesa Cattedrale nel 1775*], f.48r.

<sup>23</sup> See George Azzopardi, *Elements of Continuity. Stone Cult in the Maltese Islands* (Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2017), 63-68.

<sup>24</sup> See Joseph Busuttill, “The Cult of Apollo,” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts (The Royal University of Malta)* 5, no. 3 (1973): 261-268.

<sup>25</sup> See George Azzopardi, *The Roman Municipia of Malta and Gozo. The Epigraphic Evidence* (Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2023), 15, 17, 22-25.

<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>27</sup> *Missione* 1966 (1967), 118, 128; 1967 (1968), 44; 1970 (1973), 100, 104.

at Ras ir-Raġeb as late as around the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>28</sup> The same phenomenon occurred also on nearby Gozo where pagan rituals were practised at another headland sanctuary at Ras il-Wardija till the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and, possibly, down to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>29</sup> and at a coastal shrine at Għar ix-Xiġ, overlooking Mgarr ix-Xini, till the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.<sup>30</sup>

But external elements (perhaps in the form of missionary activity or Christian immigrants) could have, at some (evidently, later) stage, contributed towards a simultaneously continuing Christianisation process or flourishing in Malta, already initiated earlier. Such elements might have been of North-African origin or inspiration as suggested by the baptismal font at Tas-Silġ<sup>31</sup> and by the significant number of 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD North-African red-ware lamps both from the area of the basilica church at Tas-Silġ and from certain catacombs / hypogea (see below).

### Elements Suggestive of a Christian Inspiration

As said above, the Tas-Silġ basilica church and baptismal font are datable to the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. To the same period are, likewise, datable the distinctly Christian symbols, iconography, and epigraphy found in a number of catacombs / hypogea. The largest concentration of such catacombs / hypogea is to be found in the Rabat area (near Mdina) but other smaller groups or isolated ones were to be found in the then extra-urban areas like Salina Bay and Marsascala, near St Thomas' tower, amongst other places. One might possibly include even architectural elements found in these catacombs, like *agape* tables.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly,

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<sup>28</sup> Mario Buhagiar, *Essays on the Archaeology and Ancient History of the Maltese Islands: Bronze Age to Byzantine* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2014), 11-15.

<sup>29</sup> George Azzopardi, *Ras il-Wardija Sanctuary Revisited. A Re-Assessment of the Evidence and Newly-Informed Interpretations of a Punic-Roman Sanctuary in Gozo (Malta)* (Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing, 2017), 1-2, 16-62.

<sup>30</sup> George Azzopardi, "Religious Landscapes and Identities of the Maltese Islands in a Mediterranean Context: 700 BC – AD 500", Ph.D. e-thesis, Department of Archaeology, University of Durham (UK), 2014, 223-226, 230.

<sup>31</sup> *Missione 1966* (1967), 33-35, 119-120, 129-130; *1967* (1968), 44-46, 110-111. See also, Claudia Perassi, "Rinvenimenti monetali da Tas-Silġ", in *Scienze dell'Antichità. Storia, Archeologia, Antropologia*, ed. C. Panella 12(2004-2005) (Rome: Università degli studi di Roma «La Sapienza», 2007), 376-381. For the suggested North-African inspiration of the baptismal font at Tas-Silġ, see Azzopardi, "Religious Landscapes and Identities of the Maltese Islands in a Mediterranean Context," 137.

<sup>32</sup> Bonanno (with Cilia), *Malta. Phoenician, Punic, and Roman*, 262, 266-267, 269-272, 286, 324-337.

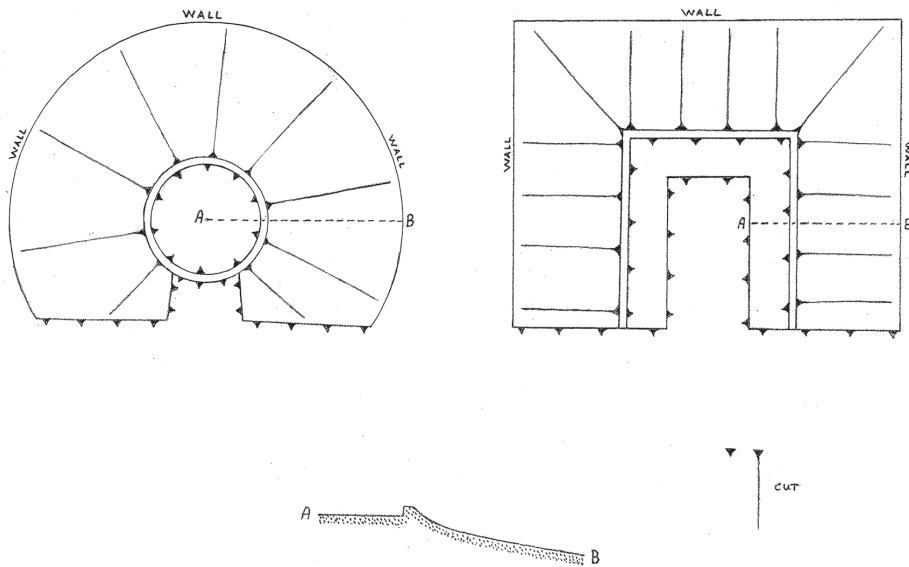


Fig. 7. Similar rock-cut dining features in the form of a reclining couch preceded by a shelf or ledge for food and drink (see profile in center, below) are noted to be shared by *agape* tables inside the catacombs' *triclinia* (see plan on the left, above) and the proposed banqueting arrangements in the *triclinia* at Ras il-Wardija Punic-Roman sanctuary (see plan on the right, above), albeit in circular and linear orientations respectively. Drawings are for illustrative purposes only. Not to scale.

the *agape* tables inside the catacombs' *triclinia* and the proposed banqueting arrangements in the *triclinia* (the one inside the cave and the two facing ones beyond the cave) at Ras il-Wardija Punic-Roman sanctuary<sup>33</sup> do share similar rock-cut dining features in spite of their respective circular and linear orientations (see figs 7 and 8), possibly suggesting assimilations between Christian and non-Christian banqueting customs during a transitional stage towards Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

Other significant architectural elements inside the catacombs might include the rock-cut gabled tops, antefixes, and 'doorways' seen on certain tombs in some of the catacombs like those of St Paul's in Rabat or those at Salina Bay, evidently in imitation of contemporary above-ground domestic architecture (see fig. 9). Similarly imitated architectural elements in the form of tiled gabled roofs, antefixes, columns and 'doorways' are also often met with on both pagan and Christian sarcophagi, tomb stelae, and even cinerary urns beyond Maltese shores (see, for example, figs 10, 11, 12 and 13). While perpetuating (at least, in the case of the Maltese islands) a phenomenon that could be detected already in prehistoric

<sup>33</sup> Azzopardi, *Ras il-Wardija Sanctuary Revisited*, 32-35, 39, 53-54, 57-58, 60-61.

<sup>34</sup> For a further discussion, see *ibid.*, 57-58.



Fig. 8. Views of the rock-cut dining features in the form of a circular reclining couch preceded by a similarly circular shelf or ledge for food and drink characterising the *agape* table inside the *triclinium* at St Cataldus' catacomb in Rabat, Malta (left) and of similar features, albeit in linear orientation, marking the proposed banqueting arrangements in one of the two facing *triclinia* (interfered by an offering table at the far end) beyond the cave *triclinium* at Ras il-Wardija Punic-Roman sanctuary (right). Left photo: the author; Right photo: *Missione 1965* (1966), pl. 90(2).

times (i.e. the replication of contemporary above-ground architecture in an underground funerary context as at the Hal Saflieni prehistoric hypogeum), these elements would give the tomb (or sarcophagus or urn) an overall appearance of an abode where the deceased would 'dwell' while awaiting resurrection; a belief shared also by pagans. In fact, the tendency to view the tomb as a place where the deceased 'resided' can be also traced to the pagan Roman world not only through the shape and characteristics of sarcophagi and cinerary urns (see above) but even through the architecture of certain mausolea and sepulchral monuments recalling the houses of the living, sometimes even through the internal renderings in paint, marble, stone, or stucco of the useful and familiar objects like food and drinking vessels, furniture, etc., in the tomb interior to make the deceased feel at home inside the tomb.<sup>35</sup> This belief was maintained by Christians, echoing the

<sup>35</sup> J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 37-38, 132-143, 253. See also, Azzopardi, *The Extramural Necropolis of Gaulos*, 11-12.

Christian apologist Tertullian when, interpreting allegorically *Isaias* 26.20, he exhorts the deceased to “... enter into your chambers, shut your doors upon you, hide yourself a little for a moment, until the indignation pass away.” Tertullian likens the graves to chambers or store rooms where the bodies of the deceased are preserved with ointments and kept in the grave only to come out at the Lord’s bidding.<sup>36</sup>

Though now badly mutilated, the Ghar Gerduf catacomb is the only one known so far in Gozo. However, in the absence of any distinctly Christian characteristics, symbols, iconography, or epigraphy, it cannot be securely claimed to be Christian (at least, exclusively) in character.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, a rock-cut tomb of a clearly Christian character is reported to have been found beneath the soil of a field in St Mary’s Street at Marsalforn (Gozo) in 1893. Apart from some human bones (including a cranium), no architectural details or accompanying goods which could help us date the burial are mentioned. However, its covering slab (later moved to the public library while the tomb



Fig. 9. Gabled top of a tomb under a *baldacchino* in hypogeum 5 forming part of the Salina group of catacombs. Two of the four antefixes could be seen in the visible corners while the ‘spine’ running the whole length of the gabled top could be in imitation of *imbrices* that, in antiquity, used to be seen in the same location and position on top of tiled roofs. The same tomb also has a small ‘door’ opening (not shown in photo) at floor level. All of these details seem to suggest an imitation of contemporary above-ground domestic architecture (Photo: the author).

<sup>36</sup> Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 27. See also, Alfred C. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1941), 12, 121-122; Azzopardi, *The Extramural Necropolis of Gaulos*, 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> George Azzopardi, “Vestiges of Material Culture at Il-Lunzjata Valley and its Immediate Environs,” *The Gozo Observer* 41 (Winter 2020): 6-7. See also, Azzopardi, *The Extramural Necropolis of Gaulos*, 22-23.



Fig. 10. Sarcophagus at Split Archaeology Museum, Split, Croatia. Note the lid in imitation of a tiled gabled roof complete with antefixes at its corners (Photo: the author).

was destroyed) is reported to have carried two relief crosses.<sup>38</sup> Such a practice involving the display of two or more crosses on a tomb's cover is recorded, at least, from Mediaeval northern England. It appears that the number of crosses used to correspond to the number of persons buried in the tomb.<sup>39</sup> Could the presence of two crosses on our tomb likewise indicate two individuals (perhaps, a couple / husband and wife) that had been buried there? It is unclear if this practice has survived from an earlier Christian tradition or whether it was geographically unrestricted, although none can be excluded.

<sup>38</sup> G(iuseppe) Farrugia, *S. Paolo Apostolo e Padre dei Gozitani* (Malta: Tipografia G. Muscat, 1915), 182-183.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Charlton, "On the Sepulchral Slabs Existing in the Counties of Northumberland and Durham," *The Archaeological Journal* 5 (December 1848): 255-256.



Fig. 11. Sarcophagus with a high relief of the Good Shepherd in the middle of its longest side. From Salona (today, Solin), Croatia. Proconnesian marble, AD 310-330. Note the door imitation on the sarcophagus' shorter side, the columns at the corners, and the lid in imitation of a gabled roof with antefixes at its corners. Split Archaeology Museum, Split, Croatia (Photo: the author).



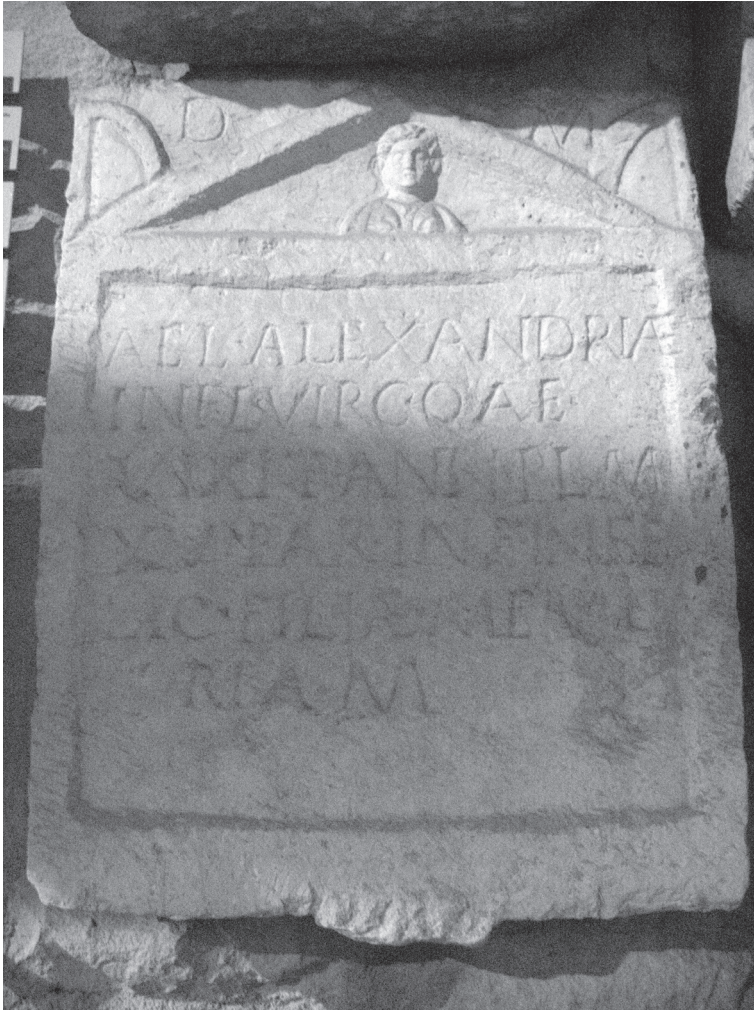


Fig. 12. Funerary stela erected in memory of Aelia Alexandria by her parents. From Salona (today, Solin), Croatia. End of the 2<sup>nd</sup> - beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Carved in limestone, it carries a tympanum flanked by two antefixes on top. Split Archaeology Museum, Split, Croatia (Photo: the author).



Fig. 13. Marble funerary urn at the Academic Art Museum, Bonn, Germany. Note the two columns on the front and the lid in the guise of a gabled roof complete with antefixes at its corners (Photo: the author).

## The Christian Character of (Certain) Oil-Lamps

Some of the (Maltese) catacombs / hypogea also yielded North-African red-ware oil-lamps of the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, a number of which bore distinctly Biblical or Christian symbols.<sup>40</sup> One such North-African red-ware oil-lamp of a clearly Christian character was found with two others (one of which was incomplete) in December 1961 within an urban context at It-Tokk (today's Independence Square) in Victoria, Gozo. On its dished top, this lamp carried a relief image of the two Hebrews carrying a huge bunch of grapes from the Valley of Eshcol in Canaan as found in the Biblical Old Testament book of *Numbers* (13.23). On the same dished top, between the said two figures and the stub handle, the lamp carried the distinctively Christian Chi-Rho monogram.<sup>41</sup> The same biblical theme (but without the Chi-Rho monogram) is known from at least three other examples from Malta. Two examples are completely identical in both shoulder and dished top decoration where they exhibit this same biblical theme on their respective dished tops and a vine scroll on their respective shoulders. These two examples are, in fact, two incomplete lamps of the same type and period (i.e. North-African red-ware lamps of the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). One comes from Tas-Silġ<sup>42</sup> while the other (Inv. No.X55), found on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1959, is kept at St Agatha's Museum, Rabat (Malta). The latter's provenance is unknown, but it is very likely to be from Malta. A completely identical example of the same type and date and with the same shoulder and dished top decoration is to be found at the Archaeological Museum of Sousse, in Tunisia. Its provenance is unknown but is presumed to be from Sousse. This last example from Sousse Archaeological Museum and the Maltese ones from Tas-Silġ and from St Agatha's Museum are very likely to be from the same North-African workshop, unless the Maltese examples were local copies fashioned on imported ones (see below). The third example from Malta is also of the same type and date. It is a complete lamp, though unprovenanced. Forming part of the reserve collection of the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta, it shows the same above-mentioned biblical theme on its dished top but the decoration on its shoulders is different from that on the previous examples while it carries an undecipherable inscription within

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<sup>40</sup> George Azzopardi, "Catalogue of Roman Lamps in Malta," unpublished B.A. (Hons) dissertation, Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 1994, 16-19, 105, 107-108, 112-115, 118-122, 125-130, pls 65, 69-70, 74-75, 77-79, 81-84.

<sup>41</sup> *M(useums) A(nnual) R(eport) for the year 1961* (Malta: Museum Department, 1962), 5, pl.V(c).

<sup>42</sup> *Missione 1964* (1965), 57, 155, pl. 49(4).

its ring base. Similar oil-lamps (largely in fragments) were also found at Tas-Silġ, mostly in the upper levels in Area 2, location of the basilica church.<sup>43</sup>

These mould-made oil-lamps were usually mass-produced in North-African workshops from where they were exported to the entire Mediterranean world,<sup>44</sup> including the Maltese islands where imported examples may have also served as archetypes to create local copies as was done in Sicily.<sup>45</sup> Though not all of them bore Biblical or Christian symbols and iconography, these oil-lamps would, nonetheless, continue to highlight the distinctive North-African link in the presumed on-going Christianisation process of the Maltese islands during the late Roman period. Once again, North-Africa seems to have been a source of religious influence as it had already been earlier through its Punic cults.

## Conclusion

During the interval between the arrival of the apostle Paul in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and the earliest appearance, in late imperial times, of material evidence for Christianity in the Maltese islands, traditional cults were evidently not uprooted. But, at the same time, syncretised Christian elements perhaps under the guise of a new hybridised cult centred on the figure of the apostle Paul possibly identified with one of the traditional gods could have been absorbed (at least, initially) by certain (not necessarily all) rural communities (see above). In this case, they would have been mainly the political establishment and elite who constituted the conservative element that kept safeguarding the traditional and long-established cults.

In all likelihood, the 'new' cult was (initially, at least) subordinate and inferior to the long-established traditional ones to the extent that it left no material record of its initial stages. This might have been further aided by the unofficial nature of the cult itself and the small number of its initial adherents.<sup>46</sup>

Eventually, the traditional pagan cults would seem to have been slowly and gradually 'Christianised' in a process that may have also followed on from previous religious developments. Initially, this presumed syncretised religious phenomenon might have been not only unofficial but also selective whereby

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<sup>43</sup> *Missione* 1963 (1964), pl. 17(4); 1964 (1965), 47-48, pls 24(3-4), 49(1, 4); 1965 (1966), 35, pl. 15(2); 1966 (1967), 35, pl. 25(4-6).

<sup>44</sup> Donald M. Bailey, *Greek and Roman Pottery Lamps* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1963), 20-21, 32(pl. D).

<sup>45</sup> Azzopardi, "Catalogue of Roman Lamps in Malta," 17.

<sup>46</sup> Azzopardi, *The Extramural Necropolis of Gaulos*, 24.

the Maltese (particularly, the rural communities) might have retained previous elements and adopted others in a complex process motivated by what related to the Maltese communities, to their needs, or to their aspirations. It might have been, therefore, a continuous process marked by an ability to absorb new cults into existing structures. Thus, the initial 'Christianity' – or, rather, Pauline cult – of the Maltese could have been also of a hybrid character until it took on a more distinctively Christian look in a progressive manner.

The presumed syncretised adoption of Christianity at first by rural (and coastal) communities would seem to manifest the selective (and creative) approach of these communities in contrast to the conservative approach then apparently adopted by the Maltese urban elite who, despite their openness towards the mainstream religious trends, would seem to have shown reluctance in the face of the new religious phenomenon (i.e. Christianity) and rather favoured – perhaps, even conveniently – the long-established religious traditions which, for a long while, they continued to embrace and practise.

In summary, the tradition of early Christianity in Malta is quite possibly a later re-interpretation of its true origins. It might have originated as a hybrid cult (including pagan religious elements) perhaps rather centered on the figure of Paul (i.e. a Pauline cult) that was, then, integrated into Christianity through a long-term process of syncretism.

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