

Comino: Historical and Archaeological Observations

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Abstract

Archaeological finds from Comino may not be as numerous and extensive as other discoveries made in other parts of the Maltese islands, but are still of valid importance in the reconstruction of past land use and settlement patterns. The aim of this paper is to furnish the reader with a comprehensive account of documented archaeological findings. It also attempts to investigate the land use and hydrological potential of the island in the medieval and early modern periods.

Comino is a low, relatively flat island that is strategically located between the south-eastern tip of Gozo and the northern coast of Malta. It is the third largest island in the Maltese archipelago and has a land surface area of *ca.* 2.5 square kilometres. The highest point is a mere 68.6 metres above sea level and it is separated from Malta and Gozo by narrow channels of water known as 'il-Fliegu ta' Malta' and 'il-Fliegu ta' Għawdex'. Its coast is rugged and with the exception of the inlets of San Niklaw¹ and Santa Maria to the north and the Blue Lagoon channel to the west, it lacks the shelter necessary for maritime activity (Fig. 1).

The island was formed as a result of rift faulting,² and three exposed strata of Upper Coralline Limestone constitute its geological stratigraphy.³ Comino contains soil deposits of the *Terra Rossa* type and in areas not reclaimed by agriculture, garigue and steppe type habitats prevail. In the absence of Blue Clay deposits, the only natural water source available is derived from the mean sea level

water table. This water source has been tapped locally since the latter half of the nineteenth century through the drilling of bore holes and underground galleries.⁴

With the exception of the church dedicated to the Holy Family on the Flight to Egypt, Wignacourt's Tower built in 1618 dedicated to St. Mary,⁵ the coastal Battery on the south-east coast⁶ and the former isolation hospital,⁷ to the untrained eye, Comino appears devoid of past human occupation and activity. Historic sources and a systematic survey may however prove otherwise.

In his 1647 description of the island, G. F. Abela mentions the discovery of a sarcophagus, found in a small unnamed valley, which was apparently exposed by runoff surface water.⁸ Other finds of probable archaeological value were the remains of ancient buildings and lead pipes and terracotta canals, which Abela associates with the passage of water in antiquity.⁹ One of the major archaeological finds was accidentally made in 1912 at the east end of Santa Maria Bay and consisted of a human interment, located *ca.* 100 metres from the shore. The skeleton was covered by two portions of an amphora split vertically.¹⁰ A photograph of the burial during excavation and a brief description of it were included in a 1915 publication by Thomas Ashby.¹¹ The burial was originally dated to the third century BC,¹² but its typology conforms to that of Late Roman amphorae.¹³

Sir Temi Zammit noted surface pottery scatters which he identified as late Punic and also reported, without giving any specific loca-

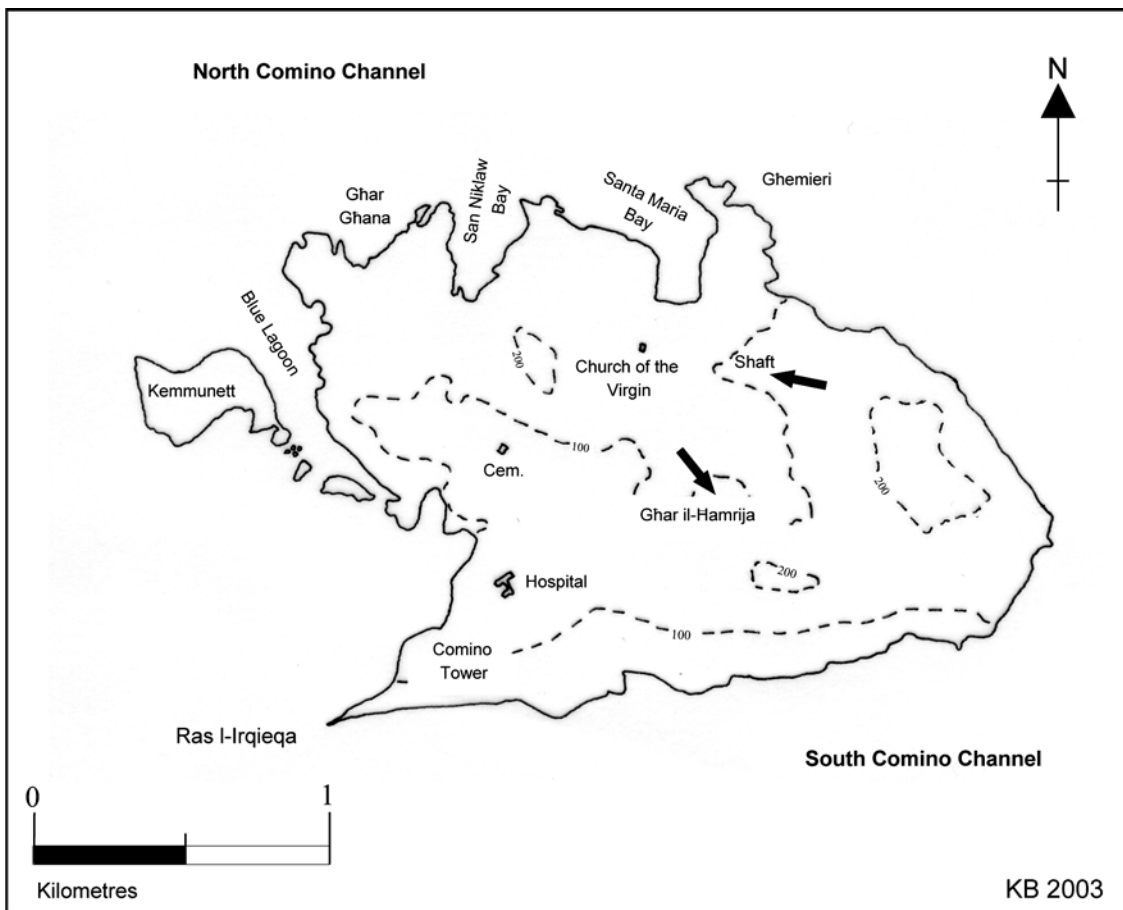


Fig. 1. General plan of Comino

tion or grid reference, that several Punic tombs could be seen at various points of the island.¹⁴ Temi Zammit was here possibly referring to two window-like openings (GR 3967 8543), hewn into the rock-face in the south-west face of a small valley, *ca.* 180 metres to the north-north-west of the former hospital building. Each opening gives access to a small, roughly rectangular rock-cut chamber, but no features that can be associated with a funerary practice or help to establish their date, survive. George Said-Zammit mentions the possible presence of a Late Roman or early Christian tomb in close proximity to Santa Maria Bay, but gives no grid location.¹⁵

Another rectangular rock-cut opening in the rock-face was noted in the Ta' l-Ifrat area close to Wied l-Ahmar (GR 4035 8567). This gives access to a small chamber, which is very similar on the interior to a Punico - Roman mortuary chamber. A wide trench fronts the entrance on the inside, and is flanked by two rock-hewn couches. Distinct sets of tool marks suggest two separate occupational phases. The earlier chamber was severely mutilated at an unknown date, but its original outline plan is

still preserved in the roof. In its final stage of development, it is unlikely that this chamber had any funerary connection and function, and its resemblance to a mortuary chamber is probably a mere coincidence. Considering its close proximity to a major agricultural site, it is more likely that it was used as a recess for the storage of agricultural produce.

The Museum Annual Report for 1929 – 1930 lists the donation of a Roman oil lamp by Capt. A. Zammit Cutajar,¹⁶ who leased the island from the Government and started an agricultural project which involved about 65 people.¹⁷ In November of 1931, Zammit Cutajar reported that large quantities of potsherds were being dug out of the soil in a field close to Santa Maria Chapel. The finds mainly consisted of amphorae and dishes and were dated to the Roman occupation of the island. The sherds were being collected by the local inhabitants to pound into a dust known as 'deffun'.¹⁸ Two unguentaria, three coins, one small broken jar, one early Roman lamp, three bronze coins, one stone hammer and fragments of clay amphorae, all recovered from Comino, were presented to the Museums Department.¹⁹

A field survey of Comino headed by Emmanuel Anati, revealed the presence of pottery scatters in the vicinity of San Niklaw Bay. These were dated to the Borġ in-Nadur phase of the Bronze Age and the Roman – Byzantine period.²⁰

Previously unrecorded finds consist of two rectangular shafts with steps cut into their narrow sides. The first shaft was discovered by the author in September 2002 and is located on high ground on the east side of Santa Maria Bay.²¹ It preserves traces of plastering and paint and was hewn into the floor of an old surface quarry (Plate 1). The existence of a second shaft, typologically identical to the former, was recently detected in the vicinity of the Comino Helipad (GR 4123 8535) at an altitude of *ca.* 180 ft above sea level.²² The shaft measures 1.95 m by *ca.* 0.5 m and preserves traces of a mortar rendering (Plate 2). Dug into its north-eastern side is a niche-like depression. The find still needs to be adequately surveyed and investigated, but preliminary observations show that it is of cruder workmanship and finish than the former. The shafts have been tentatively dated to the Punic period and were possibly used as places of burial.²³

Maritime activity was made possible through the shelter provided by the bays of San Niklaw and Santa Maria, where the presence of ancient wrecks has been recorded.²⁴ An iron anchor was discovered in 60 feet of water, off the coast of Santa Maria Bay in 1965. It had a U-shaped ring fitted onto a bolt-hinge and had a maximum length of 1.45 metres.²⁵ Being the mouths of valleys, both inlets of Santa Maria and San Niklaw were subjected to a gradual siltation process that has probably changed the topography of the area significantly since Punic and Roman times. The remains of Punic amphorae dating to *ca.* 350 – 200 B.C. were identified close to the south coast of the island, east of Ras l-Irġieqa at a depth of 37 metres.²⁶

Comino has been home to enigmatic historical figures. In the latter half of the thirteenth century, the Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia of Saragoza was exiled to the island. Being a kabbalist,²⁷ his teachings worried both the Jewish rabbis and the Roman pontiffs of the time.²⁸ Abulafia called himself a Messiah and Son of God and preached Ascetism.²⁹ In the fifteenth century, a hermit living on Comino

was frequently visited by Corrado (Kerrew), himself a hermit who resided in the vicinity of Hondoq ir-Rummien in Qala, Gozo.³⁰

The complete absence of the perched aquifer and water springs limited past agricultural activity. This study will not attempt to discuss agricultural and irrigation methods employed on Comino during the Roman and pre-Roman era. It appears that the practice of terracing the land flanking the sides of valleys is a relatively recent phenomenon and probably does not predate the middle ages.³¹ Early modern agricultural activity seems to have been concentrated in the area surrounding Santa Maria Bay, and was probably very similar in design to the agricultural and irrigation strategies adopted by the medieval farmer.³² The fertile valley of 'Wied l-Ahmar', south of Santa Maria Bay contains plentiful Terra Rossa soil deposits. A well developed terraced field system covers most of the valley sides, whilst the nearby natural inlet of Santa Maria allowed good communication to and from the island.

In the absence of the perched aquifer, agricultural activity on Comino was mainly dependant on rainfall and the effective collection and storage of surface runoff rainwater. This farming strategy was possibly introduced some time during the medieval period, and is similar in technique to flood irrigation systems practised in other semi-arid and arid Mediterranean regions. A series of walls in 'Wadi Mansur', Libya, dating to the first few centuries AD appear to have acted as conduits, channelling runoff water from the wadi sides downstream.³³ A similar system of floodwater irrigation in the Negev desert in Israel was discovered to allow the successful cultivation of a desert region during the rainy season.³⁴

Canals on the east side of Santa Maria Bay cut parallel to the natural gradient of the land, channelled runoff surface water to a nearby underground cistern. The most fertile part of the valley was the valley bed, which was transformed and developed into a number of interconnecting fields. The selection and exploitation of this section of the island for agricultural purposes was a natural choice. An adequate water supply during the rainy season was ensured because of the natural gradient of the surrounding land, which slopes gently in the direction of Santa Maria Bay. In the ab-

sence of rainfall, water availability was ensured through the construction of a number of cisterns located in different sections of Wied l-Aħmar, close to the valley bed.

The above mentioned water harvesting strategies are difficult to date with any accuracy, but probably predate the agricultural impetus several areas of the island experienced in the 1930s. The success of this project appears to have relied heavily on water retrieved from the mean sea level aquifer from various bore holes dug along the side of Wied l-Aħmar. There was no knowledge of the existence of the mean sea level aquifer before the 1860s.³⁵

That the area round Santa Maria Bay was the main centre of activity in the Middle Ages is also confirmed by the presence of the church dedicated to the Holy Family on the Flight to Egypt, located on the west side of the bay. It is one of the earliest surviving rural churches in the Maltese islands and is first mentioned in a 1296 text.³⁶ The church of Santa Maria was subject to a number of subsequent alterations, but like other medieval masonry built churches in the Maltese countryside, it appears to have consisted of a one cell building, constructed entirely out of stone with a cylindrical apse at its east end. Excluding the slight pitch of the roof, the original structure probably had severe box-like proportions.³⁷ The chancel and the apse were cut off from

the rest of the church by a wooden screen, a feature that was present in other late medieval churches of Malta.³⁸

Located on high ground behind the church of the Holy Family, commanding a good view of the underlying fields and Santa Maria Bay (Plate 3), a series of three dry-stone wall rectangular-shaped enclosures front the entrance to two man-made caves³⁹ dug into a Tal-Pitkal member deposit (Fig. 2). Both chambers are cut into the face of a disused surface quarry of unknown antiquity, and their archaeological potential and value has previously never been considered. Only the scale drawing of the larger cave could be produced (Fig. 3). To the south-east of its entrance is a smaller rock-cut chamber fronted by a dry-stone wall enclosure. Dense fig tree growth makes this area inaccessible, and prohibits the survey of this small chamber (Plate 4). Its interior contains two distinct sets of tool marks, which show that it was enlarged at an unknown date, but its original purpose and function are difficult to determine.

The larger cave (Fig. 3 a) is accessed through a low square-headed doorway, the west end of which is flanked by a dry-stone wall (Plate 5). The cave is known as Għar il-Hamrija⁴⁰ and has an interior floor level that is *ca.* 1 metre lower than the exterior. In its last phase of occupation the cave was internally

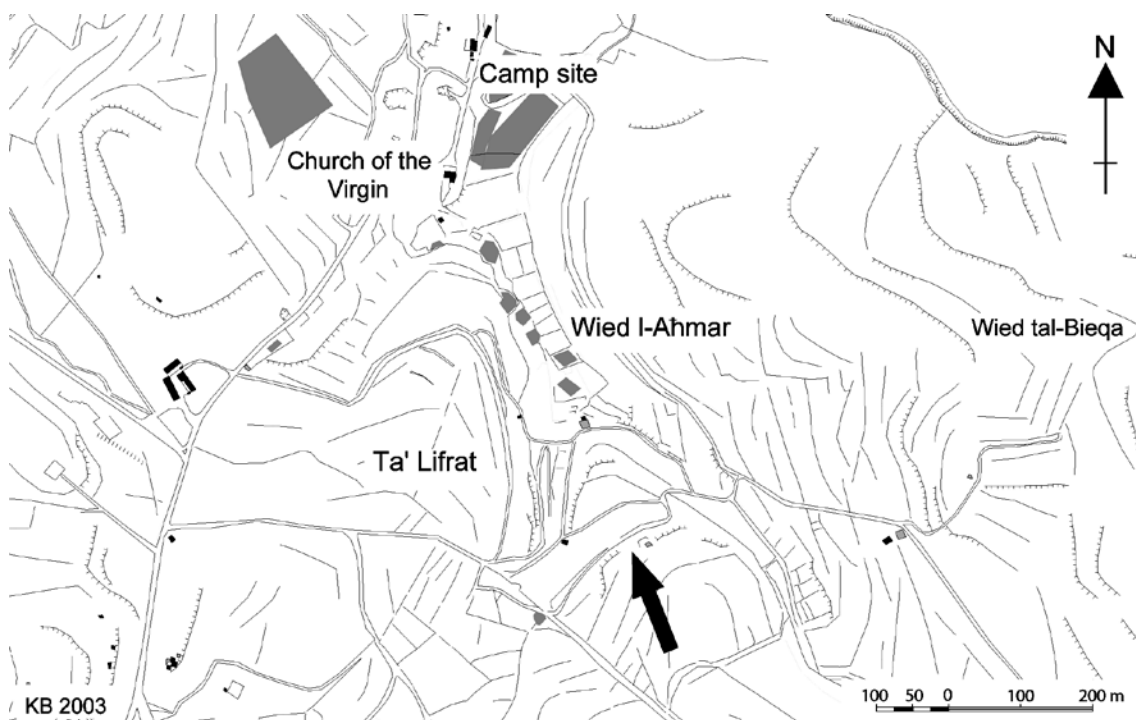


Fig. 2. Map detail showing location of Ghar il-Hamrija, Comino

partitioned into three separate chambers by means of dry-stone walls. A series of troughs hewn into the south wall are indicative of the cave's use as an animal pen (Fig. 3 d). The use of an almost circular shaft in the roof of the cave, which flanks the east jamb of the doorway is unknown (Fig. 3 c), but could have possibly functioned as (a) a ventilation hole aimed at allowing the dispersal of smoke generated by an underlying hearth or (b) a shaft through which manure could be lifted and dispersed in the overlying fields.

Three different sets of well defined tool marks are preserved on the rock walls and roof, and indicate that the cave experienced an organic type of development. The plan of the original chamber survives in the cave roof. It had smaller proportions, was roughly oval shape and its roof recalls a barrel-shaped ceiling (Fig. 3 f). It was finished to such a high degree of refinement that tool marks are barely visible (Plate 6).

Three Latin-type crosses (Plate 7) are carved into the south, west and east sides of the roof (Fig. 3 e). A linear decorative band, located below the Latin-type crosses appears to have encompassed the whole vertical wall-section of the cave. This effect was achieved by receding the rock-wall by a few centimetres inwards from the overlying barrel vaulted ceiling.

A corridor (Fig. 3 g), cut into the west wall, appears to be a later addition. In its final phases of occupation the west and east rock-walls were re-shaped into apse-like chambers, the access to which was partly screened by dry-stone walls. The south wall was receded inwards by a few metres. The tool marks representing this final occupational phase are coarser and deeper and are easily distinguishable from the finer tool marks that characterise the extent of the original cave.

The cave appears to have a long history. Its location, interior plan and refinement strong-

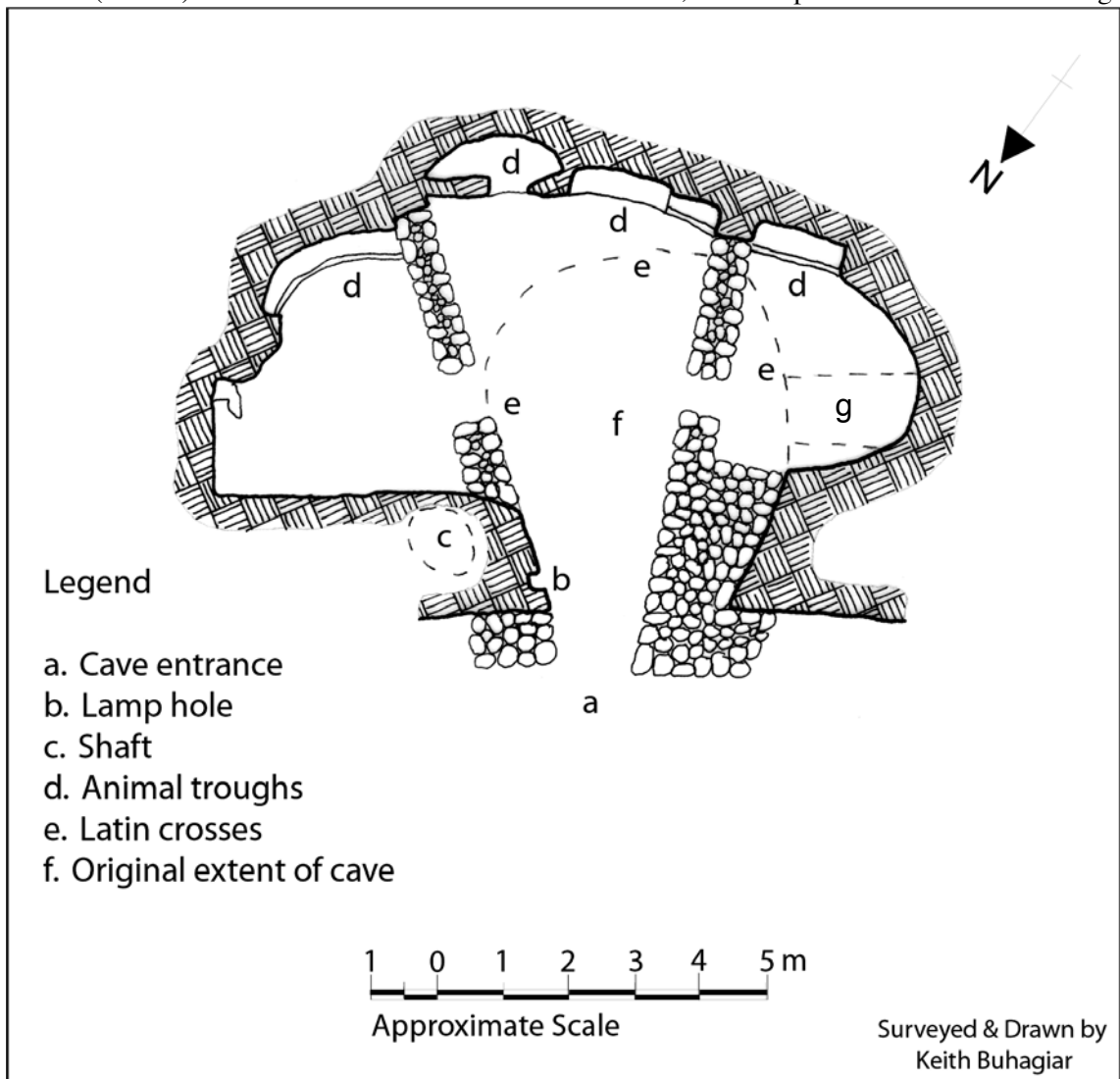


Fig. 3. Plan of Ghar il-Hamrija which overlooks Wied l-Aħmar and Santa Marija Bay

ly suggest the possibility that the cave originally served as a cave-church. Maltese cave-churches can be divided into two categories: the urban and the rural.⁴¹ Cave-churches still in use in 1575 were recorded and described by the Apostolic delegate, Mgr. Pietro Dusina.⁴² Urban churches were often located within the precincts of palaeochristian hypogea and generally show a greater preoccupation with architectural elaboration and enhancement than their rural counterparts.⁴³ The rural churches are generally smaller in size and display a lesser degree of architectural sophistication. Various cave-churches of this type survive in Malta, the most important being the cave-church dedicated to St. Nicholas in Mellieha,⁴⁴ a reference to which is included in the 1575 Dusina report.⁴⁵ The rock-walls of several cave-churches were plastered and covered with wall-paintings. Rock-cut churches were common in the Byzantine world and it is probable that this tradition reached Malta from Southern Italy and neighbouring Sicily.⁴⁶

The cave's architecture and setting share close ties with other rural cave-churches in Malta, the majority of which are located on high ground and command unobstructed views of the underlying fertile land. They are small in nature and were located in areas where the spiritual needs of the isolated rural communities would be otherwise difficult to administer. Even though not comparable in architectural refinement to the urban cave-churches, their interior is still more refined and elaborately finished than any adjoining troglodytic dwellings and animal pens, even when hewn into a hard Upper Coralline deposit. The majority of the identified rural cave-churches in Malta are of the cliff-face type,⁴⁷ but the lack of such an accessible landscape on Comino was probably an important factor in determining the cave's location.

Conclusions

The dearth of physical evidence for the presence of ancient structures might be partly due to the limited availability of natural resources on the island. It would have been less costly and less labour intensive for occupants to reutilise already extant ashlar masonry, rather than quarry or import materials from the mainland. It is also likely that only a fraction of the finds

made on Comino were reported to the Museums Department and important archaeological evidence has been irreversibly lost. This study highlights the archaeological potential of the island, but needs to be followed by a systematic field survey which will perhaps lead to the identification of other archaeologically sensitive areas.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Popular belief states that San Niklaw bay got its name from a church dedicated to Saint Nicholas which was located close by. See G. F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta*, (Malta. 1647), 124.
- 2 H. Bowen-Jones, J. C. Dewdney & W. B. Fisher, *Malta – Background for Development*, (Durham, 1962), 34 – 42; M. Pedley, M. H. Clarke & P. Galea, *Limestone Isles in a Crystal Sea – The Geology of the Maltese Islands*, (Malta. 2002), 13 - 22.
- 3 The stratified rock sequence starting from top to bottom is (i) Tal-Pitkal Member, which is exposed throughout most of the island, the (ii) Gebel Imbark Member, exposed outcrops of which are present in the western, southern and eastern sections and the (iii) Mtarfa Member, which lies only exposed in a small area south of Santa Maria Bay. See G. Debono & S. Xerri, *Geological Map of the Maltese Islands, Gozo and Comino – Sheet 2*, Oil Exploration Directorate, (Malta. 1993).
- 4 Water Services Corporation – Institute of Water Technology. See also T. O. Morris, *The Water Supply Resources of Malta*, (Malta. 1952), 8 – 12.
- 5 Abela, 124. See also A. Gauci, *Gozo – A historical and tourist guide to the island*, (Malta. 1969), 114 – 115.
- 6 The building of St. Mary's Battery commenced in 1714, but in 1715 it was relocated to its present site. See S. C. Spiteri, *Fortresses of the Cross*, (Malta. 1994), 537. See also R. Farrugia Randon & S. Farrugia Randon, *Comino, Filfla and St. Paul's Island*, (Malta. 1993), 5.
- 7 The isolation hospital was an extension of a building called 'Il-Palazz' which was originally constructed by Grand Master Wignacourt. The Hospital was opened some time before 1912 for the treatment of patients suffering from the plague and cholera. See Farrugia Randon & Farrugia Randon, 6 – 7. See also C. J. Boffa, *The Islets of Comino and Filfla*, (Malta. 1966), 21 – 22.
- 8 Abela, 125. By 'sepolcro di creta cotta', Abela is probably referring to a clay sarcophagus. In an article

- on *The Sunday Times* [Malta] of 31st August, 1958 entitled 'An Archaeological Glimpse of Comino', J. Bezzina stated that the sarcophagus was discovered in 1640 in Wied Ernu, but no reference to this source of information is given. See also Gauci, 115.
- 9 Abela, 125. See also O. Bres, *Malta Antica Illustrata co' Monumenti e coll'Istoria*, (Rome. 1816), 63.
 - 10 *Museum Annual Report* 1911–1912, section E, 4. The amphora burial is on display in the Gozo Archaeology Museum.
 - 11 T. Ashby, 'Roman Malta', in *Journal of Roman Studies*, (1915), 51 – 52.
 - 12 N. Tagliaferro, 'Archaeological Discoveries in Malta during the year 1911 – 12', in *Archivum Melitense*, vol. II, (1912 – 1913), 69 – 70.
 - 13 As generously pointed out by Prof. A. Bonanno.
 - 14 *Museum Annual Report* 1911–1912, 4, 13.
 - 15 G. Said Zammit, *Population, Land use and Settlement on Punic Malta – A Contextual Analysis of the Burial Evidence*, BAR International Series 682, (Oxford. 1997), 4.
 - 16 *Museum Annual Report* 1929 – 30, 1.
 - 17 Farrugia Randon & Farrugia Randon, 7.
 - 18 'Roman Potsherds at Comino Island', in *Museum Annual Report* 1931 – 1932, iv.
 - 19 *Museum Annual Report* 1931 – 1932, i.
 - 20 F. Fedele, 'Prospezioni orientative condotte nel Settembre 1987', in A. F. Anati & E. Anati (eds.), *Missione A Malta – Ricerche e Studi Sulla Preistoria Dell'Archipelago Maltese Nel Contesto Mediterraneo*, (Rome. 1988), 193.
 - 21 K. Buhagiar & C. Sagona, 'New archaeological find on the island of Comino in the Maltese Archipelago', in *Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, vol. XL, (2003), 160 – 172.
 - 22 The shaft was detected in November 2005 by Joseph Gilson and David Mizzi fsc who generously accompanied the author on a visit to the site.
 - 23 Buhagiar & Sagona, 160 – 172.
 - 24 Personal communication by Dr Timothy Gambin.
 - 25 *Museum Annual Report* 1965, 5.
 - 26 A. J. Parker, *Shipwrecks of the Mediterranean and the Roman Provinces*, BAR International Series, (Oxford. 1992), 153.
 - 27 Kabbala is in essence esoteric Jewish mysticism as it appeared from the twelfth centuries onwards. Observance of the Law of Moses remained the basic tenet of Judaism, but Kabbala provided a means of approaching God directly, thus providing a religious dimension to Judaism whose mystical approaches to God were viewed by some as being heretical and pantheistic.
 - 28 G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages*, (Malta. 1985), 6.
 - 29 Farrugia Randon & Farrugia Randon, 3.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, 3.
 - 31 A. Bonanno, 'L'Habitat Maltese in Età Romana', in *Kokalos*, xxii-xxiii (1976 – 77), 392 – 394.
 - 32 For information on agriculture in late medieval Malta see G. Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the Late Middle Ages', in *Proceedings of History Week 1981*, (Malta. 1982), 1 – 48.
 - 33 D. D. Gilbertson & C. O. Hunt, 'Romano-Libyan agriculture: walls and flood water farming', in Graeme Barker (ed.), *Farming the Desert – The UNESCO Libyan Valleys Archaeological Survey*, vol. I, (London 1996), 200.
 - 34 H. J. Bruins, *Desert Environment and Agriculture in the Central Negev and Kadesh-Barnea during Historical Times*, (Netherlands. 1986), 3.
 - 35 Morris, 5.
 - 36 B. Motzo, *Il Compasso da Navigare; opera italiana della metà del secolo XIII*, (Cagliari. 1947), 111. See also A. Ferris, *Descrizione delle chiese di Malta e Gozo*, (Malta. 1985), 608 – 609.
 - 37 M. Buhagiar, 'The First Christian Churches in Malta', in *Treasures of Malta*, vol. v, no. 2, (Malta. 1999), 50.
 - 38 M. Buhagiar, "Medieval Churches in Malta", in A. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta – Studies on Malta before the Knights*, (London. 1975), 169 – 170.
 - 39 The location of these caves was shown to the author by Dr Edgar Depasquale.
 - 40 Personal communication by Alex Camilleri.
 - 41 M. Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta: catacombs, cult centres and churches in Malta to 1530*, (Oxford. 2007), 96 – 103.
 - 42 For a reproduction of the Dusina visitation report see G. Aquilina & S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, Part IV – Documents at the Vatican, Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51, Mgr Petrus Dusina, 1575*, (Malta. 2001).
 - 43 Buhagiar (2007), 98 - 103
 - 44 K. Buhagiar, 'The San Niklaw Cave-Settlement', in *Melita Historica*, vol. xii, no. 2, (1997), 131 – 137.
 - 45 Aquilina & Fiorini, 187 - 188.
 - 46 Buhagiar (1975), 164. See also A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestri del Siracusano*, (Palermo. 1979); and id., 'Troglodismo Medievale a Malta', in *Melita Historica*, vol. x, no. 2, (1989), 109 – 120.
 - 47 The author has classified cave-settlements into two main typologies: (1) karst feature settlements, which consist of natural depressions in the ground, some of which were adopted for use as settlements and (2) cliff-face settlements. The latter consisted of a series of caves which were hewn into the cliff-face. See K. Buhagiar, *Medieval and Early Modern Cave-Settlements and Water Galleries in North-West Malta South of the Great Fault – A Field Survey and Gazetteer*, (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Malta, 2002), 48.