

A farewell to Neo-Punic: Taċ-Ċaġħqi revisited

Abigail Zammit and Robert M. Kerr

Dedicated to the memory of Mons. Benedetto Rocco (1926-2013)

The alleged inscriptions in the south-east hypogeum of Taċ-Ċaġħqi (within the premises of St Nicholas College in Rabat, Malta) were discussed in depth by Mons. Benedetto Rocco in 1972. Rocco interpreted the glyphs as Neo-Punic, with a long 'Inscription' supposedly consisting of a prayer to appease the deceased through the offering of a gift, and an alleged minor 'Inscription' addressing the dead to 'rise'. These readings were discussed against the notion of possible libation rites that may have been a custom within the hypogeum, as suggested by the tomb furniture in situ. Rocco based his readings of the script and types of letters on his previous study of further alleged Punic and Neo-Punic inscriptions within cave sites in Palermo and Favignana (Sicily), in combination with semantic analysis of Biblical Hebrew. Nevertheless, the supposed Taċ-Ċaġħqi inscriptions come across as ambiguous sets of glyphs that are illegible, and actually cannot be deemed Punic or Neo-Punic script.

Introduction

The Taċ-Ċaġħqi Secondary School complex, located within St Nicholas College in Rabat, Malta, comprises two independent *hypogea*, which were discovered during construction works in January 1952 and subsequently surveyed by Captain Charles Zammit, Curator of what was then the National Museum in Valletta. The two *hypogea* are situated south-east and north-west respectively on the same axis, with the former lying at a higher level than the latter. Today, both are reached by a common stepped entrance in the basement of the school. Their individual layouts and furnishings suggest a difference in the cultures responsible for their construction, with the south-east hypogeum displaying an apparent pagan nature, while the other is most likely Palaeochristian. The present paper, however, will only tackle the south-east hypogeum, which displays what might be writing in red ochre on its walls.¹

The south-east hypogeum has a relatively symmetrical T-shaped vestibule, with five burial-chambers (I–II–III–IV–V) dug into three of its walls (Fig. 1), and has large glyphs painted in red ochre on the surrounding walls of the main hall. A sixth tomb (VI), probably of a later date, was dug into the wall between chambers I and II. As Buhagiar (1986, 189)

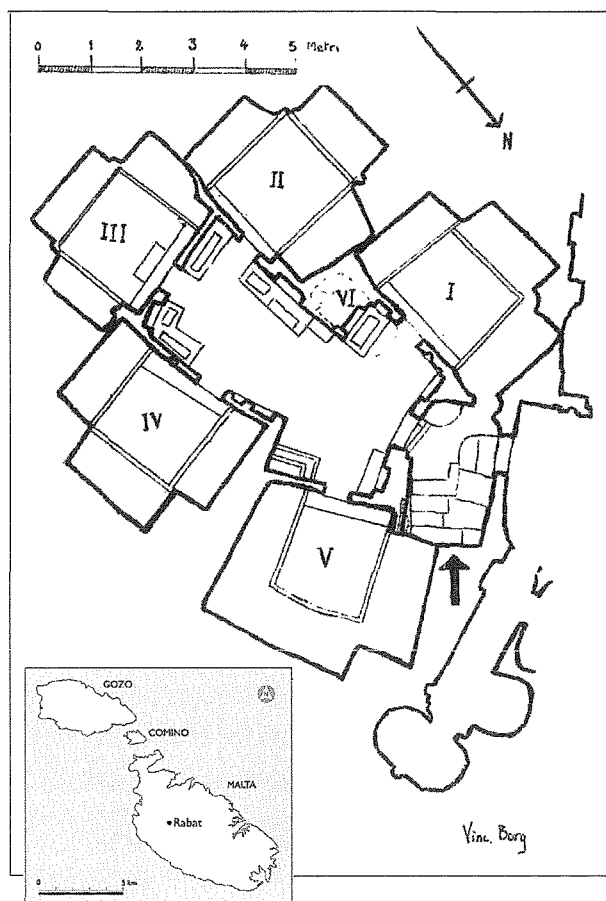


Figure 1. Location map and plan of the Taċ-Ċaġħqi South-East Hypogeum, St Nicholas College, Rabat (Malta) (after Borg 1972, 61).

remarks, it is likely that at least this part of the south-east hypogeum was reutilised. Dr J.G. Baldacchino, then Director of Museum Antiquities, reported that the hypogeum was rifled years before the 1952 discovery (Baldacchino 1954, I).

The signs observed in the south-east hypogeum were discussed at length by Mons. Benedetto Rocco (1972b). He observed two distinct texts: the so-called 'iscrizione maggiore', consisting of five separate lines of text individually painted above the entrances of five burial-chambers; and the 'iscrizione minore' painted in black pigment below two child *loculi* and accompanied by a line drawing. Below is a reanalysis of both of his readings, which, for the sake of continuity, will be referred to as 'Inscription' A, and the latter as 'Inscription' B (our quotation marks). For the actual dimensions of the glyphs, refer to Figs 3-8.

'Inscription' A

Above each of the five window-doors of the burial-chambers are the remains of various glyphs written in red ochre. As observed in the photographs and drawings presented in this paper, the paint seems at times to be sprinkled around the individual glyphs, suggesting that these signs were written with a thick brush on the undulating limestone surface.

Following the 1952 discovery of the south-east hypogeum, Baldacchino sent photographs and illustrations of three of the 'inscriptions' (on the walls of chambers I, II and III) to Fr Antonio Ferrua in Rome, requesting a transcription of the 'text'.² Ferrua was the first to posit that the find was in fact a Neo-Punic inscription, but the state of the glyphs even then inhibited any sound reading whatsoever.³ As a result, Ferrua suggested that the individual 'writings' stand for the names of the deceased interred within the tombs.⁴ Twenty years later, Rocco published his epigraphic study of these texts, which he considered to form rather a single text separated into five lines (Fig. 2) (1972b, 67). The tentative dating offered by Rocco was the second century BC as *terminus a quo* and the first century AD as *terminus ad quem* (1972b, 68). Unfortunately, the inscription was partially lost due to the friable surface of the Globigerina limestone walls, and possibly also owing to vandalism and/or looting.⁵ Of the fifth line, only one undeciphered letter was noticeable at the time of Rocco's publication, but was never published. Moreover, no record at all

of this fifth line turned up in the National Museum of Archaeology archives. Today, all that remains of the fifth line are very faint daubs of paint, which are reproduced in this study (Fig. 7).

As was previously noted, Ferrua proposed identifying the alleged text as a form of Neo-Punic, yet without being able to read a single word. The reason for this would appear to have been motivated by the notion that Neo-Punic is often very difficult to decipher, therefore, if illegible then Neo-Punic, which at that time was seen as a largely unreadable script rendering a 'corrupt' form of the Punic language, then on its last legs. By the latter, we mean the highly cursive script ductus which evolved from the Punic script in the former Carthaginian realm and which after the destruction of this metropolis by Rome in 146 BC became the lapidary standard. It should be noted that Neo-Punic actually refers exclusively to the script employed and has no linguistic implications. While the script is on occasion attested before the Third Punic War, its widespread usage throughout North Africa and beyond was probably due to the demise of the use of Punic in any official capacity after the Roman conquest. Hence, most Neo-Punic inscriptions, in the absence of contradictory evidence (such as at Carthage), are dated roughly to the Roman period. This delimitation is by no means rigid, so for example KAI 173 (see Jongeling 2008, 275-76) from Chia in Sardinia, probably dating to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (see the discussion proffered by Zucca 2001, 528-30, n. 70; see also Mastino 2005, 237-40), displays a script which is typologically Punic rather than Neo-Punic. This local idiosyncratic development is attributable to Sardinia coming under Roman suzerainty already in the third century BC. Furthermore, while Neo-Punic denotes the cursive *Weiterentwicklung* of the Punic script, it can by no means be viewed as a uniform entity: the script differs considerably from site to site and often, seemingly to a considerable extent dependent on the abilities of the lapicides, who were often illiterate.⁶ Even forms of one and the same grapheme can differ in one inscription (Kerr 2013). Consequently, these texts are largely unsuited for in-depth palaeographical analysis.

Two further caveats must be noted here. Firstly, due to the difficulty involved in reading Neo-Punic, often only lapidary texts which render standard funerary or sacrificial formulae are readily legible. Second, despite the sizeable yet fragmentary corpus (see Pisano and Travaglini 2003), our understanding of the

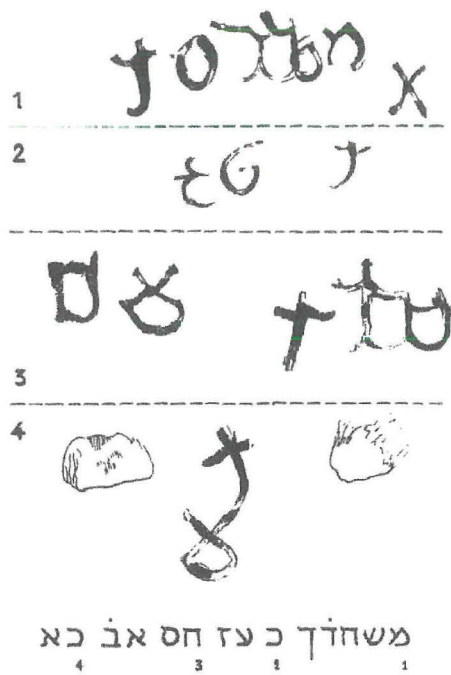


Figure 2. Illustration of the four visible lines of 'Inscription' A, with Hebrew transliteration (Rocco 1972b, 67, fig. 1).

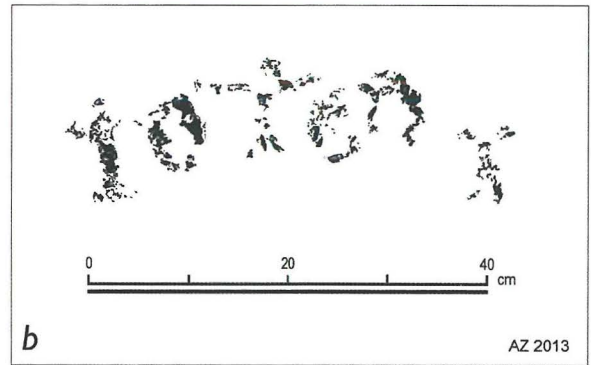


Figure 3. Line 1 ('Inscription' A) (Photograph [a] and Drawing [b] by A. Zammit).

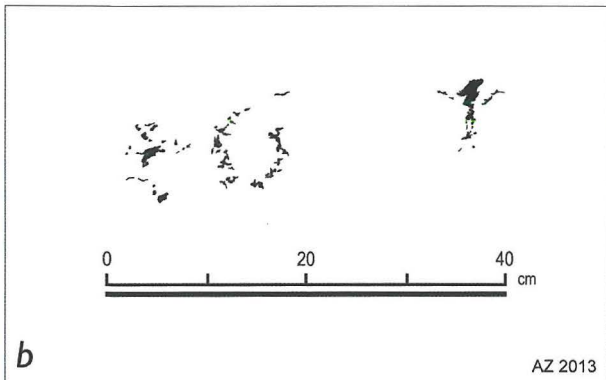
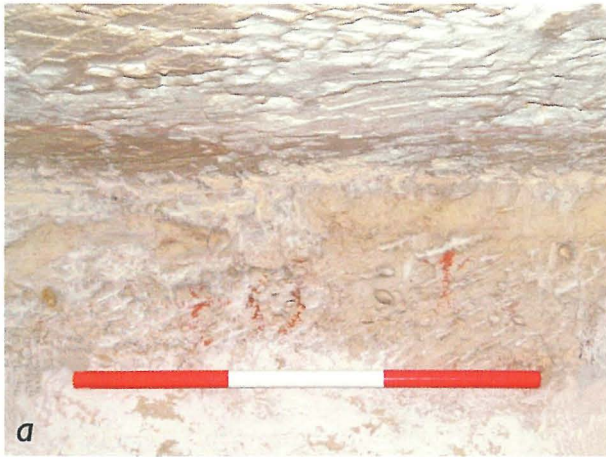


Figure 4. Line 2 ('Inscription' A) (Photograph [a] and Drawing [b] by A. Zammit).

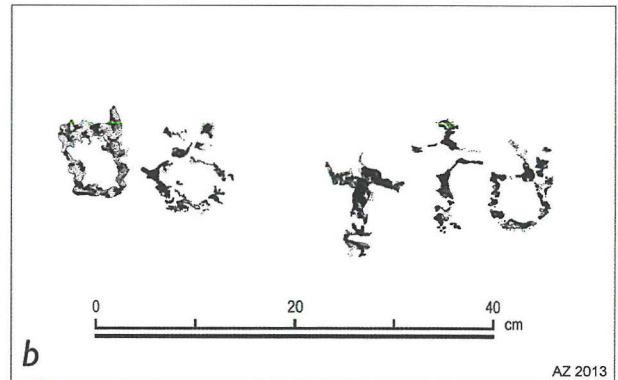


Figure 5. Line 3 ('Inscription' A) (Photograph [a] and Drawing [b] by A. Zammit).

Punic palaeography of *dipinto* texts is quite rudimentary at best. Moreover, as the subject matter of the latter naturally does not overlap with the former, it is often difficult to glean certain readings from such texts.

Thus, while Neo-Punic texts have been found in Malta (Jongeling 2008, 262-67), and there is clear archaeological/epigraphic evidence of the survival of the Punic language in Roman Malta (namely, during the Late Republican and Early Imperial ages) (see Zammit 2011, 78-87 and references therein), as in Sardinia and Sicily (Jongeling 2008, 274-83, 269-71 resp.), the texts under discussion here actually display no resemblance to either the lapidary, or more relevantly the *dipinto* texts found at these sites hitherto. The initial identification by Ferrua, in a period when the rudiments of Neo-Punic writing were still quite poorly understood, strikes us today as *ignotum per ignotius*. Hence, until at least even a letter can be certainly identified, there is no credible reason to view these texts as Neo-Punic.

Ferrua's identification in all likelihood appealed to Rocco, who was then studying what he believed were Neo-Punic texts in neighbouring Sicily, namely the cave-sanctuary of Grotta Regina, on the slopes of Monte Gallo in Palermo, and the caves of Grotta del Pozzo, in Favignana (off the western Sicilian coast). Rocco further considered the Tač-Ċaghqi find to belong to the same cultural setting as what he thought were Punic/Neo-Punic inscriptions at the two Sicilian caves (Rocco 1972b, 68 and references therein). The validity of this assumption remains unproven, especially since Rocco's proposed reading of the Tač-Ċaghqi text is highly problematic both with regard to palaeographical analysis and morpho-lexemic identification. This observation also applies for Rocco's questionable interpretations of the above-mentioned Sicilian inscriptions, for that matter.

First, let us comment on Rocco's readings of the Tač-Ċaghqi glyphs (1972b, 67, 70), which, at the time, corroborated observations and speculations made on the tomb furniture *in situ*, namely decorated holes in the burial chambers' plug-doors, allegedly for libation rites (see Borg 1972):

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. <i>In forza del dono a te offerto,</i> | משחדך |
| 2. <i>o tu che sei forte,</i> | כ עז |
| 3. <i>sta tranquillo, Spirito,</i> | חם אב |
| 4. <i>desisti...</i> | כא |
| 5. (?) . | |

Line 1: מִשְׁחָדְךָ

Written in somewhat semicircular fashion, and, *contra* Rocco, comprising six and not five glyphs (Fig. 3), this line starts off with a cross-like glyph, which Rocco interpreted as the Neo-Punic letter *mê̄m*, standing for the preposition *m-* prefixed to the following consonant, a *šin*. While the shapes of these two glyphs may bear some vague resemblance to certain realisations of Neo-Punic *mê̄m* and *šin* respectively, and recall somewhat similar 'letters' Rocco allegedly identified at Grotta Regina and Grotta del Pozzo,⁷ the supposed *mê̄m*, however, has further traces of paint on top, which casts this reading in severe doubt. Rocco's proposed interpretation of the third glyph is even more problematic. First of all, it seems rather to consist of two separate symbols. Rocco (1971, 7, n. 9) however identified it as *hêt̄*, based on his reading of the Grotta Regina inscriptions. The typical Neo-Punic *hêt̄* is usually composed of three strokes next to each other with the first and third sometimes resembling a *kāp̄*, and the second having a variable form, but sometimes the first part of *hêt̄* has the shape of a mirrored capital R (see examples in Rocco 1971, 7; Jongeling & Kerr 2005, 11), or even three hooked parallel strokes (such as e.g. at Hr. Maktar: cf. e.g. the illustrations in Jongeling 2008, 129). Nevertheless, the strokes rarely link to each other to form a single letter, as would seem to be the case here. Rocco (1972b, 69) deemed the fourth letter a *dālet̄*, given its circular shape and flat top, or as a closed 'ayin, yet he adds that an open 'ayin may also be read, according to him, with certainty in line 2. Even so, the shape of the glyph in line 1 is quite odd, and steers away from the typical triangular Punic or Neo-Punic *dālet̄*. While in Neo-Punic, *dālet̄* on occasion often seems quite similar to 'ayin, especially if lacking a tail, it is only on rare occasions that there is any doubt as to the actual reading (cf. Jongeling and Kerr 2005, 17-18). According to Rocco, the second, third and fourth signs therefore constitute the noun *ṯṯw* 'gift, offering, bribe', which is known from the Hebrew Bible and Aramaic inscriptions of post-700 BC (Hoftijzer & Jongeling 1995, 1120), but otherwise unattested in Phoenicio-Punic (and is seemingly an Aramaic loan word in Canaanite, and hence very unlikely in Punic). The final glyph is allegedly the pronominal *kāp̄* (-*k*) of second person masculine (or feminine) singular (although given his reading of 'b in line 3, one must assume that the gender implied here is masculine). Similar shapes of *kāp̄* are found in Grotta Regina.⁸

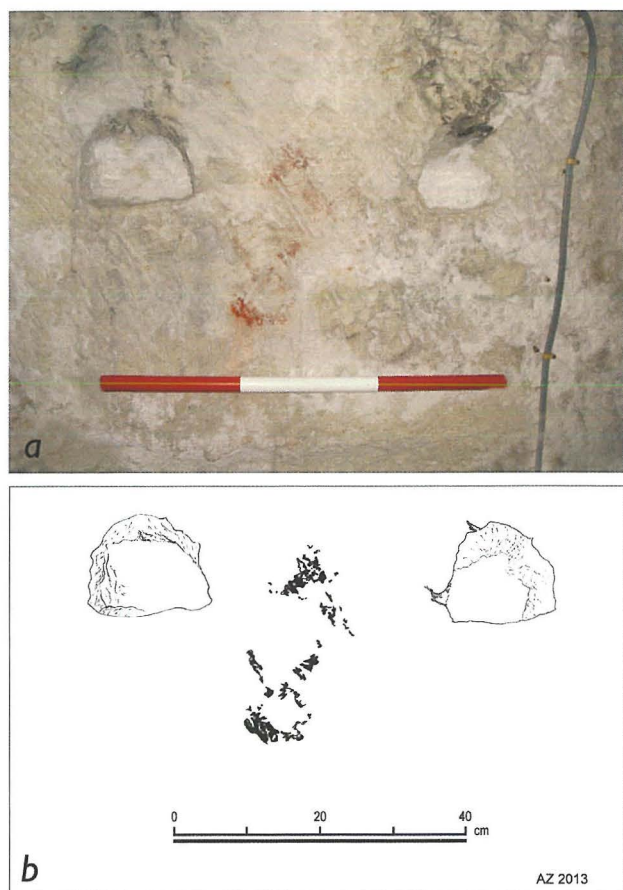


Figure 6. Line 4 ('Inscription' A) (Photograph [a] and Drawing [b] by A. Zammit).

Oddly enough, though, Rocco (1972b, 70) stated that the pronominal suffix *-k* is here used with dative force: 'your gift' (i.e. *donum tibi offerebatur*). The preposition *m-* in this interpretation is said to specify the logical cause, therefore 'on account of the gift offered to you'.

There is evidently a curious space between the first and second signs, even though the marking of word boundaries by dots or spacing is very rare in Phoenician, Punic and Neo-Punic, as continuous writing in lapidary inscriptions was practised as a rule (cf. e.g. Segert 1976, 54-55 §21.82-83, yet note Lehmann 2008). If this is actually a text, there indeed might be exceptions, not only in line 1 but also in lines 2 and 3. Rocco (1972b, 69, n. 11) suggested the space in line 1 might have been intentional to distinguish initial monosyllables from the subsequent words, as the monosyllables might have been pronounced in a distinct accent, possibly in proclitic fashion, yet he does not mark the space in his transliteration. Rocco attempted valiantly to establish space syntax to indicate word boundaries, which if present actually

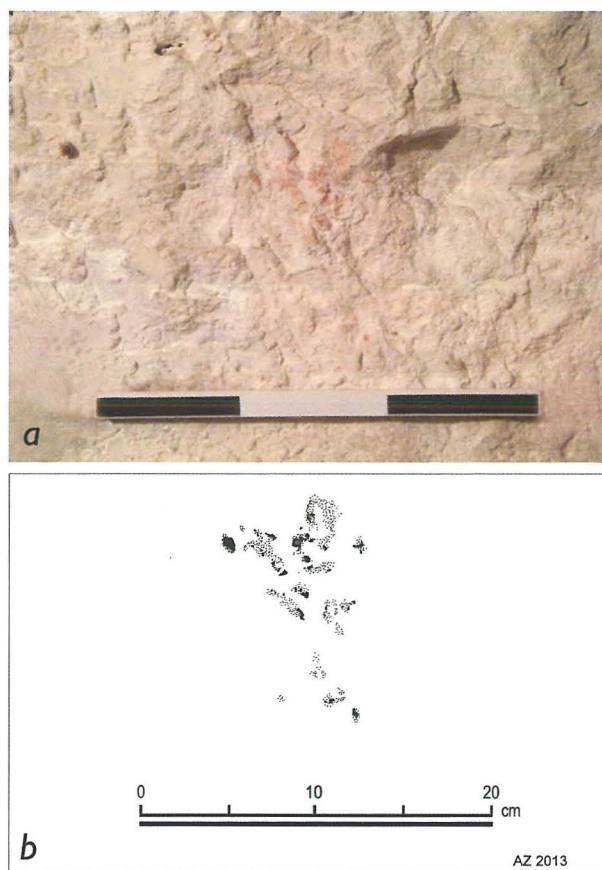


Figure 7. The faint daubs of paint of line 5 ('Inscription' A) (Photograph [a] and Drawing [b] by A. Zammit).

render unlikely the text's identification as Neo-Punic, in order to lend his otherwise unfounded reading support.

Line 2: עז | כ

Rocco (1972b, 69) notes line 2 consists of three glyphs, which today are very badly preserved and barely legible (Fig. 4). The first glyph might bear some superficial similarity to a *kāp*, similar to the one he reads in line 1, and is spaced out from the other two glyphs. What Rocco subsequently deems an open *'ayin* is quite impossible as this is the one grapheme seemingly even the most incompetent Neo-Punic scribe gets right, allegedly followed by a *zayin*. Let us consider Rocco's reading first. The conjunction *k* (Hebrew כ) 'for, because' is written in Phoenicio-Punic without the *yôd* (Jongeling 1986), which in Rocco's reading would be an otherwise unattested Punic emphatic demonstrative particle. Moreover, the conjugation *k* can be employed adverbially in Phoenician Punic in the emphatic sense 'behold' (cf.

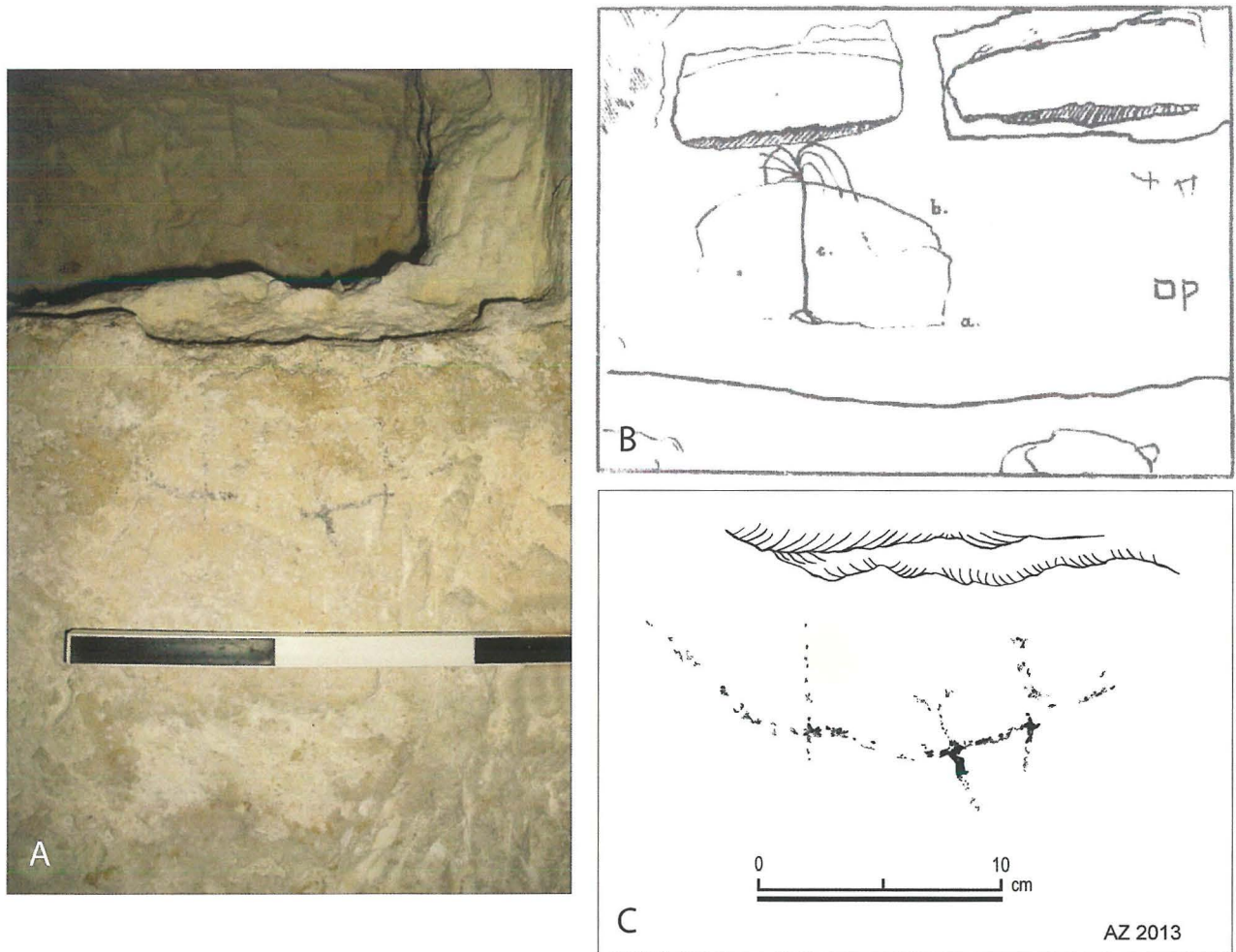


Figure 8. [A] Illustration of the alleged 'Tree of Life' (with the letters a, denoting the earthly ground; b, the arch of the heavens; and c, the palm that connects the two); on the tree's right is the hypothetical qm inscription, with Hebrew transliteration (Rocco 1972b: 72, fig. 2); the traces of black pigment that were mistaken for the Neo-Punic qm ('Inscription' B), and which clearly seem to continue into further lines (Photograph [B] and Drawing [C] by A. Zammit).

CIS I, 4; see Kerr 2016). The other two glyphs in line 2 allegedly form the adjective עז 'strong, powerful, fierce, violent'. Rocco (1972b, 70-71) called the construction עז כ(י) 'un costruito di grande eleganza stilistica che si ritrova in alcuni salmi biblici', but nevertheless quite un-Punic, and the second masculine singular pronoun אַתָּה would be unnecessary in such a phrase of supplication, since עז כ(י) reinforces the address that follows (cf. the use of כִּי in Psalms 52:9 and 54:6 (note Rocco's different [non-Hebrew] biblical numerology), and the phrase כִּי עֹז (or כִּי־עֹז) in Genesis 49:7; Numbers 13:28; 21:24).

Nevertheless, due to the bad state of preservation, we cannot confirm any of Rocco's proposed readings. Even based on his drawings, none of his proposals appear to have any merit.

Line 3: חס | אב

This line is ambiguous, owing mostly to the shape and identification of the first glyph. Despite its complexity, Rocco (1972b, 69) considered it to be a *hêt*, supposedly similar in shape to the one in line 1, which we already deemed highly improbable. The one in line 3 is even more ambiguous, as can be seen in Fig. 5. Once again, there seem to be two separate glyphs instead of Rocco's one: the first, on the far right, is almost circular in shape, with a diagonal upstroke and further paint traces on top, while the second sign from the right is cross-shaped, with a slight tail at the bottom right, which does not link with the first sign, as Rocco thought and reproduced in his drawing (Fig. 2). Supposedly following is an alleged cross-shaped *sāmek*, of which Rocco found

join up with the alleged letters *qm*, not to mention that faint traces of pigment seem to tie the two 'letters' (Fig. 8). Through careful scrutiny of the actual daubs of paint *in situ*, we therefore completely dismiss the idea that this 'Inscription' is a text at all. The fact that there are further traces of pigment that seem to be part of the letters read by Rocco as $\square\eta$ could very well indicate the presence of either further glyphs of sorts (now faded), or (parts of) a linear drawing, given the presence of the alleged 'Tree of Life' drawing on the same wall surface towards the left side. Even so, the schematic nature of the general decoration in black pigment and its present degraded state inhibit further judgement.

Conclusion

'Inscription' A within the Taç-Ċaġhqi south-east hypogeum is by all accounts a unique artefact, though whether we are actually dealing with an inscription or the remnants of a drawing remains uncertain. Given its location, assuming it is an inscription, this long text might well be of the funerary type, but it remains illegible. The fact that this 'Inscription' is supposedly divided into five parts on five separate chamber doors makes it even more peculiar. One cannot rule out the idea that each individual text could equally stand for names, perhaps those of the deceased or the original ancestor first interred within each individual chamber. However, as the matter now stands, none of Rocco's readings can be confirmed. Furthermore, even if we are to take his drawings at face value, the glyphs illustrated can in no way be read or interpreted as Neo-Punic.

'Inscription' B is definitely part of a faded out linear decoration or drawing in black ink on the outside wall of window-tomb VI/chamber II. Therefore, one can confidently abandon the hypothesis proposed by Rocco that this was the Neo-Punic word *qm* addressed to the deceased. The remnant traces of ink could have formed part of the drawing of the palm-tree on the left, but the effaced state of the wall inhibits any further judgement. It is nonetheless quite certain that we are not dealing with Neo-Punic texts.

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Abigail Zammit
St Antony's College
Woodstock Road,
Oxford OX2 6JF
Oxfordshire
UNITED KINGDOM
abigail.zammit@sant.ox.ac.uk

Robert M. Kerr
Ermerzand 38
7843 PN Erm
NETHERLANDS
robert.martin.kerr@gmail.com

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- Abigail ZAMMIT** graduated with a BA (Hons) and a MA in Archaeology from the University of Malta. She was later awarded a MSt degree in Jewish Studies at the University of Oxford, and is currently reading for a doctorate (DPhil) in Oriental Studies at the same university. Ms Zammit is specializing in North-west Semitic epigraphy and philology, with her current research focusing on a reappraisal of the 'Lachish Letters' and their significance during the last days of pre-exilic Judah.
- Robert Martin KERR** read Classics and Semitics at the universities of Tübingen and Leyden. From Leyden he received his doctorate on the survival of Punic in Roman North Africa.

Notes

- 1 For more information on the two hypogea see Baldacchino 1954, I-III; Borg 1972; Buhagiar 1986, 182, 186-90.
- 2 Two letters dated 16 February 1952 and 26 March 1952 respectively (National Museum of Archaeology archives).
- 3 Letter dated 11 March 1952 (National Museum of Archaeology archives).
- 4 Letter dated 22 April 1952 (National Museum of Archaeology archives); Ferrua stated that he had consulted with linguist [Giorgio] Levi Della Vida and other Semitic scholars, but without any successful interpretation whatsoever.
- 5 In his first letter to Ferrua (dated 16 February 1952), Baldacchino refers to the south-east hypogeum as a 'rifled family catacomb'; and in his replies (two letters dated 11 March 1952 and 22 April 1952 respectively), Ferrua in fact laments about the vandalism and looting that have so unfortunately inhibited further conclusions about the inscription and the hypogeum in general (National Museum of Archaeology archives).
- 6 For a striking Punic example of lapical illiteracy see Jongeling 1996.
- 7 For *mem* see Grotta Regina inscriptions 10, 11, 21 and 26b (Rocco 1971, 5-6), and for *šin* see inscriptions 12, 13, 16 and 21 (Grotta Regina) and inscription 1 (Grotta del Pozzo) (Rocco 1972a, 11-13).
- 8 See inscriptions 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 16, 17, 23, 26, 32, 33, 38 and 40 (Rocco 1971, 3).
- 9 One cannot tell whether there was a ligature between the two glyphs, owing to their faded state. The glyphs of an alleged (Neo-Punic) text are similarly written in a downward motion in Grotta Regina ('inscription' 14), close to the present ground level, and the scribe apparently had to write the glyphs in a squatting or kneeling position (cf. Rocco 1971, 16-17).
- 10 For further reading on the St Paul Shipwreck controversy in relation to the early Christianisation of Malta see Buhagiar 2007a: 1-10 and references therein; 2007b.
- 11 Furthermore, Sagona (2009, 27-28) speculates that the alleged palm tree might refer to the canopy of the firmament, and that both drawing and inscription were inspired by Mithraic beliefs concerning resurrection.
- 12 Dr Keith Buhagiar, *pers. comm.* 2010, following a close examination of the wall drawing *in situ*.