

Ghajn Klieb, Rabat (Malta)

Nicholas C. Vella with Kevin Borda, Josef M. Briffa, Katrin Fenech, Kristi Grinde, Eleanor Scerri, Matthew Sisk, Hanna Stöger and Maria Elena Zammit

A preliminary report of an archaeological survey

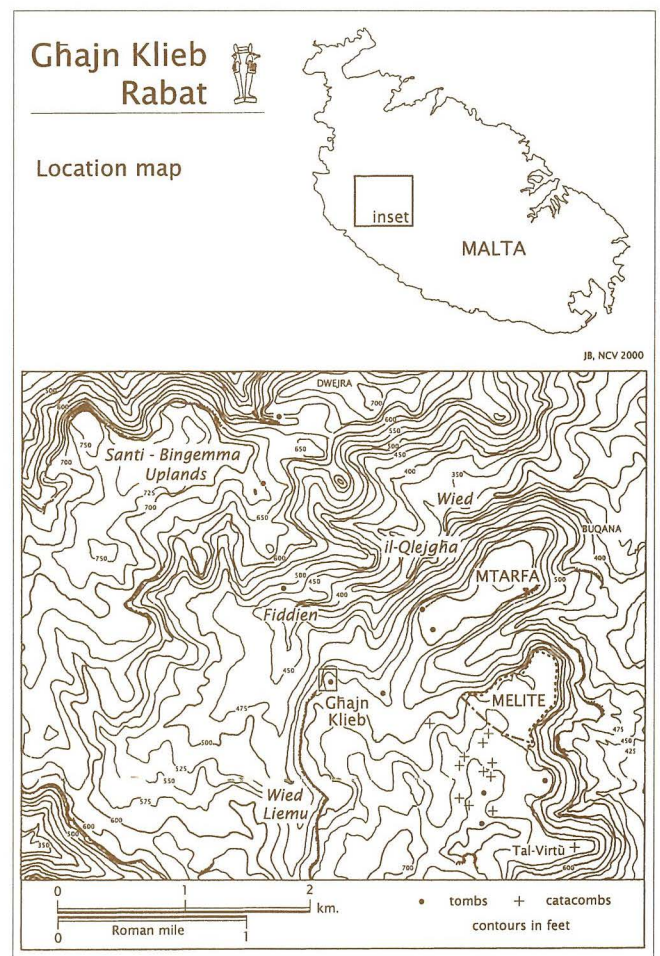
Between October and December 1999 a team of local and foreign undergraduates from the University of Malta carried out a survey of the site at Ghajn Klieb outside Rabat. The exercise constituted the practical part of a unit on the Principles of Archaeological Surveying directed by Dr Nicholas Vella of the Department of Classics & Archaeology. For the survey the team was joined by Hanna Stöger, a graduate of the same department, who also researched some of the references used in this article. Initial reconnaissance of the site was carried out on 15 October 1999 with Nathaniel Cutajar and Michelle Buhagiar, Curator and Assistant Curator respectively at the National Museum of Archaeology. The scatter of surface ceramics and the existence of previously known and unknown features revealed the extent and potential of the site. It was decided that the locality of Ghajn Klieb warranted systematic study that could be carried out in various stages, with the long-term aim being an assessment of human activity and cultural behaviour at the site. The Museums Department gave the go-ahead for this project, and permission to collect the surface ceramics was granted. This short report is intended to give an outline of the work undertaken to date. Emphasis is placed on the field methods adopted and on the presentation of what we believe to be worth talking about at this stage. An effort is here made by the senior author to unravel the collaborative nature of the exercise by lending weight to individual thoughts and interpretations that arose while work progressed in the field.

Geomorphology and land use

The locality known as Ghajn Klieb (GR 44500, 71525) occupies a spur of the Rabat-Dingli Uplands in west-central Malta (Figure 1). Topographically, this region is clearly marked. To the east, the Coralline Limestone plateaus at Mtarfa, Mdina-Rabat, Tal-Virtù and Verdala stand at a height of 180 m. overlooking the central plain; deeply incised valleys with streams that descend to the central plain cut back in the upland giving the plateau an extremely irregular outline. To the west, a minor though well-defined escarpment with a precipitous drop of 15 m. runs south from the spur at Ghajn Klieb to Dingli overlooking Wied Liemu, a tributary of the main stream draining Wied Qlejgha, converging at Fiddien Bridge. At a height of 178.9 m. Ghajn Klieb overlooks the upper Wied Qlejgha and the undulating and rocky Santi-Bingemma Uplands to the north, with views of Mdina to the East and Qalet Marku Bay to the North-East.

Present-day land use of the Ghajn Klieb area (Figure 2) is typical of Upper Coralline hill-lands elsewhere in this region of the island. Bleak *xaghra* lands characterise the higher, exposed parts of the spur (Fields I-IV) with fig trees, laurel and rose bushes growing inside the sheltered rock-cut tombs, pits and other crevices, while stone huts serve as observatories for bird-trapping or hunting; walled plots of land to the south-east sustain a mixture of almond, olive and carob trees, while to the east (Fields X-XI) fields lie fallow or abandoned having once been sustained by wind-pump irrigation; one field (VI; *id-demmiela*) with an entrance on the road has been partly cleared to bedrock and manure is left to settle there. On the fringe-slopes of the spur to the north, amidst a clump of mature carob and olive trees, a farmhouse controls narrow, terraced plots of agricultural land on lease from the Government (Cabreo 1867: tenement garden 471). One of the present owners rears fowl in the stockyard at the back of the farmhouse. A commercial poultry farm occupies a large building to the south-east, enlarged over the last two decades. A cluster of rooms further south lie abandoned amidst overgrowth, olive and almond trees, overlooked to the east by an enlarged

fig. 1 Site location map



farmhouse converted into a residence; one of the rooms is partly rock-cut, where an abandoned kiln is served by two chimneys built of brick. To the west, a car scrapyard occupies an abandoned field.

Past fieldwork

Archaeological discoveries at Ghajn Klieb have been reported since the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Table 1). It was probably a combination of antiquarian lore and the popular legend associated with the toponym Ghajn Klieb (Cassar Pullicino 1975: 99) that brought the local litterati to the area. The earliest reported discovery at Ghajn Klieb goes back to 3rd October 1890 when a “tomb-cave” was discovered by the Governor’s wife, Lady Smyth, accompanied by Dean Vassallo and Major Baden Powell. A. A. Caruana, Director of Education, reported the discovery in a letter to the *Malta Times* a few days later, informing the public that the objects were presented by Lady Smyth to the National Museum. In actual fact, one of three bracelets (probably of gilt leather) lifted from the tomb (Mayr 1905: pl. III), depicting griffons on either side of a stylised palmette, was donated to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (no. G440; Evans 1900: 8-9). Subsequent to this discovery, Caruana provided details of other tombs examined and surveyed between 1881 and 1897 in the same locality in his monograph on the ancient pagan tombs of Malta (1898). In her forthcoming monograph on Punic Malta, Claudia Sagona refers to the discovery of another tomb in January 1887. In his capacity of Curator of the National Museum, Themistocles Zammit inspected a large tomb (Z, see below) with several rock-cut niches in the area in October 1906 whence he lifted a small composite gold amulet representing the ancient Egyptian gods Horus and Anubis. Zammit returned again to Ghajn Klieb in the spring of 1926 and 1933 to survey other tombs. The only other pertinent reference to the area is David Trump’s (1990: 91), who places here the ruins of a Roman round tower.

Present fieldwork: design and methodology

The primary aim of this first stage of fieldwork was to prepare a plan of the site because although we came across evidence that one was prepared in 1925, this was not traced in the National Museum archives or at the Chief Draughtsman’s office. The plan was limited to Fields I-IV, covering an area of approximately 0.9 ha. A combination of traverse and chain survey was carried out over several days and a plan was drawn at a scale of 1:200 (Figure 3). Sixteen rock-cut tombs (A-K, M-S) were plotted together with two bell-shaped pits (U, V), various rock-cut features (L, T, W-Y), and quarry marks; six tombs in Field V where noted but remain to be planned. Given constraints of time and weather, only



Plate 1 Prof. Themistocles Zammit investigating Tomb B, Ghajn Klieb. May 1926. Photo probably by H.D. Colt. University of Malta Library.

plans and sections of a small selection of tombs (R, J, F) were drawn, at a scale of 1:20, complementing those (of tombs B, J, Z) in the archives at the National Museum. It should be noted that the survey could only be carried out once the fig trees and wild rose bushes growing inside the sheltered tomb shafts were trimmed. While the survey was being undertaken discrete concentrations of stone and soil heaps were identified close to some of the tombs, clearly spoil from past explorations of the area; their position and extent was added to the plan. The team also observed scatters of pottery on the calcareous rock and in small soil pockets and other crevices. It became clear that part of our work would have to account for the distribution and patterning of artefacts over the terrain. The study of the movement of artefacts from a buried, rock-cut site to the surface, and other processes that create surface sites, has not been tackled systematically in Maltese archaeology. At Ghajn Klieb we are interested to know where the surface scatter was deposited or disturbed by cultural and natural processes, by noting the deterioration of the artefacts from exposure to the elements. We also became aware that the rock surface at Ghajn Klieb had been quarried repeatedly, even cutting through at least two rock-cut tombs (C, D). This evidence could be put to good use as it immediately provided us at least with an idea of a sequence of events through time. Indeed, the value of recording rock-cut and other structural features has already been stressed by other landscape archaeologists, who maintain that ‘whereas a variety of forces disperse artefacts over the terrain, features often represent permanent, in situ elements of the landscape and thus are better markers of cultural behaviour.’ (Kardulias *et al.* 1995: 9)

These, and others, were problems that stimulated and steered our thinking during the course of the fieldwork.

The strategy followed in investigating this site was to collect *all* the artefacts present on the surface of Field I. A grid of 2 m. squares was laid out from a line starting at Site Station XX and running along the north-east rubble wall in Field I. Each square was inspected with great care, often on hands and knees when rock-pools or low vegetation provided poor visibility. Every artefact, including pottery sherds and utensils of enamel, tin and iron, within each square was collected and bagged.

Preliminary results: narrating thoughts and interpretations

The work conducted thus far at Ghajn Klieb has led to some important observations and conclusions. Of all the tombs investigated earlier this century, nine have been identified. These are: tomb Z with its chamber right underneath the secondary road; the series of tombs AA-DD along the face of a rock-cut depression skirting the alleyway leading to the farmhouse, already noted by Caruana (Table 1); and tombs C, B, E, K, and N. In a photo (Plate 1) traced at the Palestine Exploration Fund in London (Vella & Chapman forthcoming), Temi Zammit is seen writing in his notebook inside the shaft of tomb B, surrounded by local farmers in traditional garb. Those fifteen tombs ‘cleared and surveyed’ by Lewis Upton Way, Harris Colt and Robert Galea in May 1925 on the rocky plateau at Li Msierah tan-Nigret (MAR 1925-26: III) are none other than the tombs and the pits in Field I. Maps at the Lands Department clearly refer to the area with that name rather than the commonly known toponym Ghajn Klieb; besides, faint traces of the number fifteen in Roman numerals can be made out above the entrance to the chamber of tomb F. Also, in a manuscript held at the University of Malta Library, Paul Bellanti ([1910-1912]: 64-66, 244) uses the Nigret

Plate 2 The large farmhouse at Ghajn Klieb with the threshing floor in the foreground. May 1926. Photo probably by H.D. Colt. University of Malta Library.

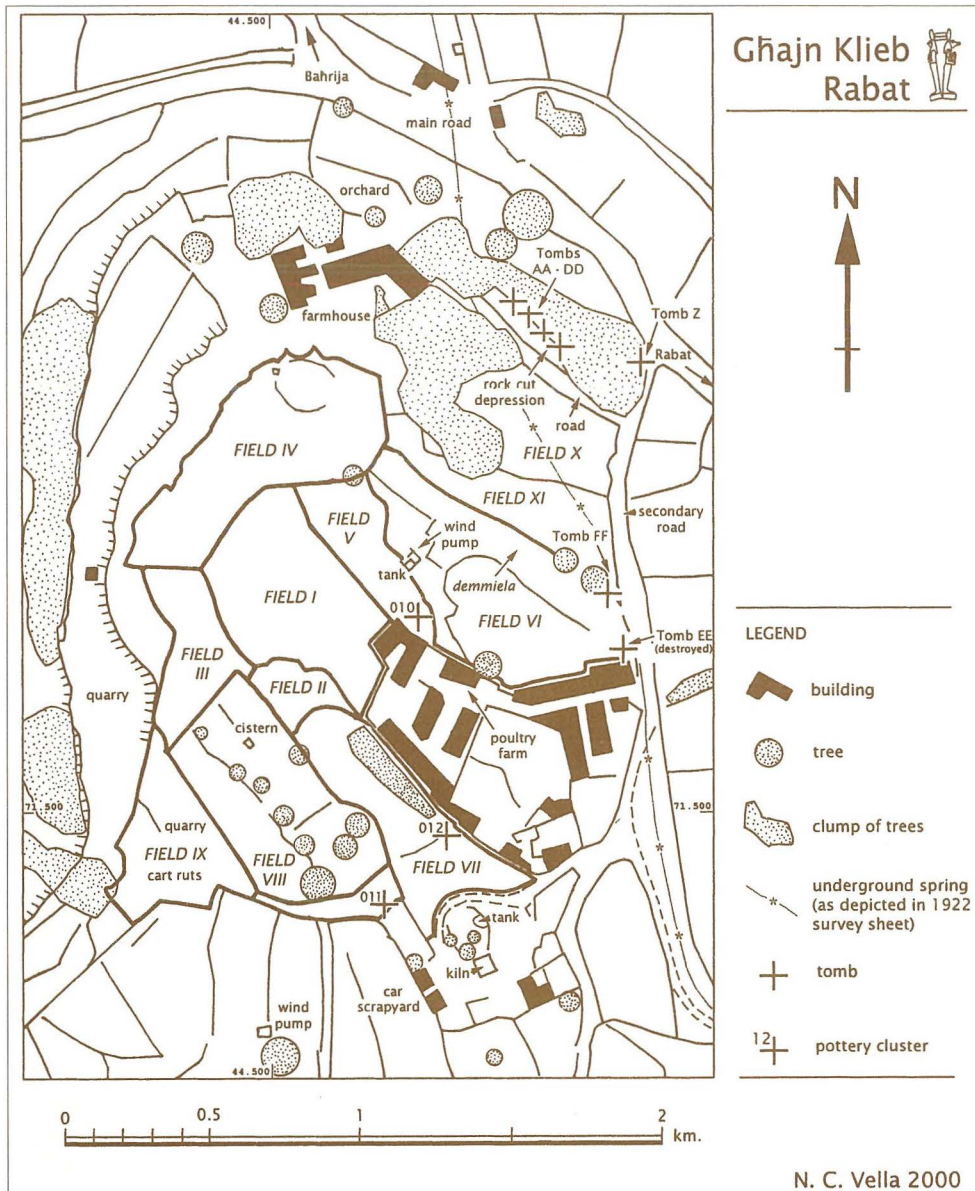


toponym for the barren ground where he inspected eleven tombs. The ‘northernmost tomb with a deep shaft’ and ‘steps at the side’ is probably tomb E, while ‘the tomb with two chambers on two sides of the shaft next to each other’ would correspond to the layout of tomb N; the tomb with ‘a gutter that divides a one-chambered tomb longitudinally for nearly the whole of its length, then, near the door, it turns at right angles towards one of the sides reaching nearly the side-wall’ is probably to be identified with tomb K.

‘Tomb Z (Figure 2), whence the gold amulet was lifted, was re-located on 24th February 2000 by two members of the team (HS, NCV) assisted by Keith Buhagiar. A wall three courses high surrounds the deep shaft of the tomb. Hanna Stöger remarked that it was unclear whether tomb Z was the same tomb opened by Lady Smyth in 1890 and reported by Caruana (1898: 67, pl. XII, fig. 1). In manuscript notes held at the National Museum of Archaeology, Bellanti (nd: 33) refers to the tomb opened by Smyth, stating that ‘years after Prof. Zammit on re-opening it found in the litter the magnificent gold idol now in the Museum’. Even in the guide to the Valletta museum (Zammit 1919: 41) the objects lifted by Smyth and the gold idol are placed in the same show case, with only one tomb at Ghajn Klieb listed as provenance. But in spite of these textual glosses the data refuse to gel into a clear picture. It is hard to believe that no mention whatsoever is made by Caruana (1890, 1898) of 45 niches or *columbaria*, even if we suppose that he was too busy to make a trip to Rabat while warding off accusations of slander and defamation. Besides, in his letter to the newspaper, Caruana states clearly that the tomb was discovered ‘owing to the falling of a portion of its roof’. Now tomb Z has no holes through the roof, which is intact. It also lacks the steps and the deep trench or gutter described by Caruana, while the shaft is 3 feet shorter. Although nothing resembling Smyth’s tomb as reported by Caruana has been located,

we find it difficult to reconcile tomb Z with Smyth’s tomb and we contend that these are two different tombs.

The issue of whether remains of a Roman tower exist at Ghajn Klieb was also brought up during the fieldwork, when the team was surveying a large circular feature in Field IV, consisting of a semi-circular cut in the rock and a low semi-circular wall. Trump’s suggestion should be considered if only because dimensions and topography recall sites in Malta with remains of round towers dating to the third century AD. We found no



or overburden was removed; narrow grooves and cuts made to dislodge the blocks, are visible along the vertical walls of the quarry. In Fields II and VII, however, a different quarrying system was in operation, dislodging boulders and leaving irregularly-shaped cuts or scoops in the rock; the boulders were probably fed into the kiln nearby to produce quicklime (*ġir*).

Dating of the quarries is, of course, fraught with difficulties because the method of cutting stones has remained largely unchanged since antiquity. The room built above the kiln does not feature in the 1922 survey sheet of Ghajn Klieb, so an early twentieth-century date for the second type of quarry could be put forward if the connection with lime burning is correct. For the quarry in Field IV, a *terminus post quem* would be provided by tombs C and D, if only dates for their use were available; tomb B nearby would suggest the possibility of utilisation down to the 1st century AD (C. Sagona, pers. comm.).

fig. 2. Land use and archaeological remains of the Ghajn Klieb area

other evidence, however, to posit the existence of a round tower. The name of the locality, *Il-qigha ta' Ghajn Klieb* ('the threshing floor of Ghajn Klieb') would suggest that the circular feature is exactly what local farmers say it is: a platform for threshing and winnowing cereals, cut into an earlier quarry that destroyed tombs C and D (Figure 3, Plate 2). Although a threshing floor would not be out of place in a context of ancient death rituals, as Kevin Borda pointed out to us quoting an episode from the Bible (Genesis 50:10), the arrangement at Ghajn Klieb would seem to be contemporary with the nearby farmhouse or its precursor. A few metres away, a post-hole with concentric marks around it provides evidence for another threshing floor over a quarried surface, the marks having been produced by the trampling hooves of an ass or a horse.

Two types of quarry were noted at Ghajn Klieb (Figure 3). The first, just mentioned, was used to extract ashlar blocks for use in coursed masonry from the surface outcrop in Fields III and IV, once the superficial layer

The presence of terracotta lozenge-shaped tiles, observed to cluster on rubble heaped by the side of fields (GHK99/010, GHK99/011), and commonly used for tiling floors of villa and bathing establishments of Roman Imperial date in Malta (Magro Conti 1996: 135-136, 157, fig. 20), would suggest the existence of a substantial building in Roman times in the area, for which stone would have been needed for construction; the Paleochristian catacombs noted by Caruana (Buhagiar 1986: 221) are in fact dug into the face of a large rectangular rock-cut depression which could have started as a quarry. Likewise, the presence of Medieval pottery from the dump in tomb Z noted by T. Zammit, for which Nathaniel Cutajar has put forward to us an early eleventh-century date, would suggest the possibility of a rural establishment here at the time. Finally, 'a kiln located in an orchard with a vineyard', 'in contrata Hayn il Klieb', in the Late Middle Ages, intended for the baking of terracotta roof tiles (Buhagiar & Fiorini 1996: 68 – a reference we owe to Keith Buhagiar), provides evidence of activity in the locality immediately prior to the Early Modern period when the district is then known for its vineyards and orchard (*giardino di diversi alberi*;

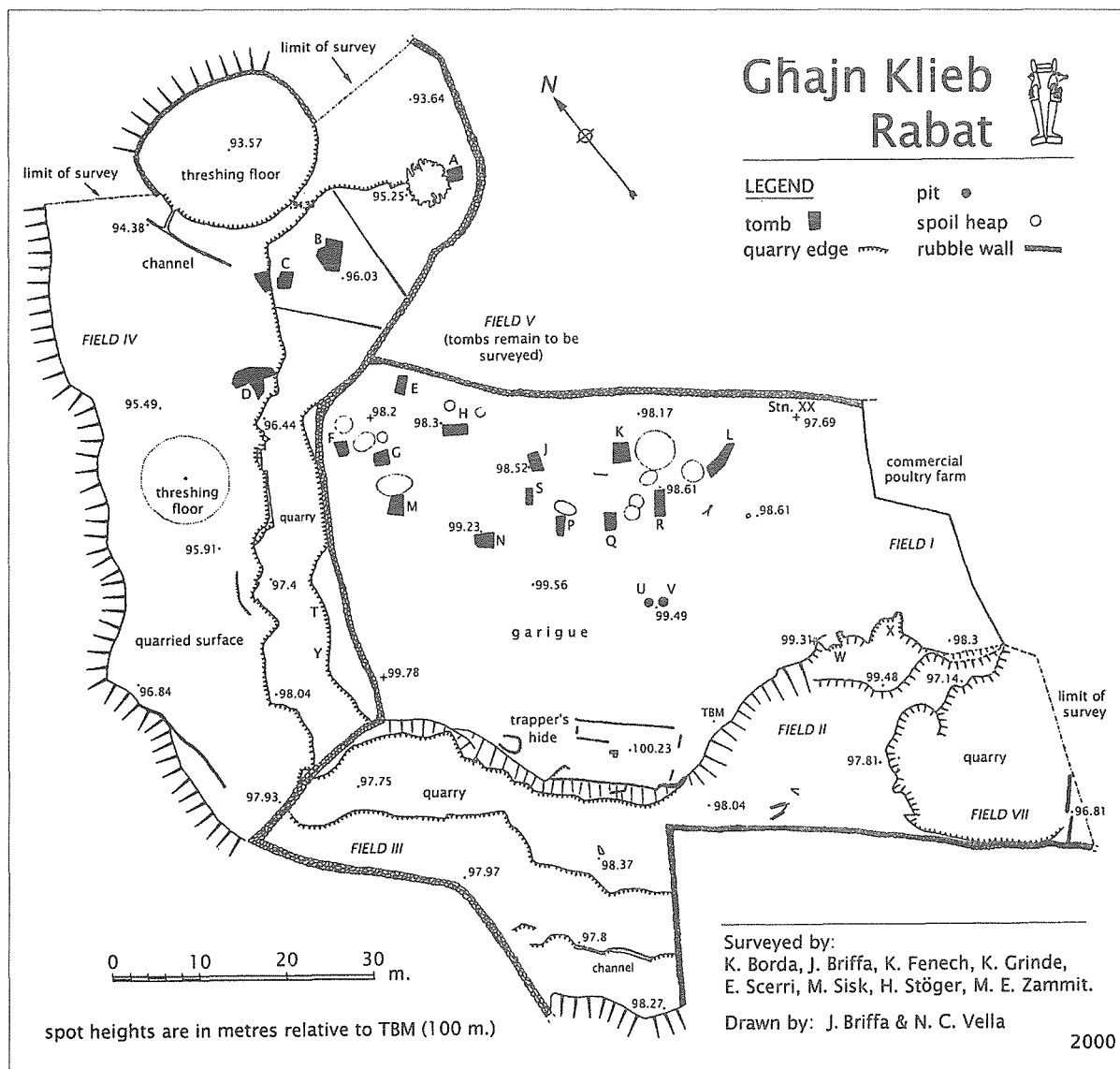


fig. 3.
Site plan of
Ghajn Klieb

Wettinger 2000: 185). Having said this, it is still tempting to think that the blocks quarried from Fields III and IV were intended for the construction of the nearby farmhouse in the nineteenth century at the latest; the quarrymen would have recognised the suitability of the stone by observing the cuts in the rock where the tomb shafts had been dug.

Finally, prehistoric activity at Ghajn Klieb is suggested by the presence of the two bell-shaped pits (U, V) in Field I. A cut in the rock which channels water away from the pits suggests that these were not meant to be cisterns. Elsewhere in Malta such pits set in a landscape not dissimilar to Ghajn Klieb, are usually indicative of a Late Bronze Age site; amongst the sherds collected, now undergoing study by Maria Elena Zammit, are a few of Borg in-Nadur phase, thus lending strength to our proposition. It is also likely that tomb L was originally a similar pit to which a shaft was added.

Concluding remarks

The observations and preliminary results presented here are meant to put on paper our initial thoughts and related problems, and to provoke discussion. If cultural

behaviour on the garigue at Ghajn Klieb appears chronologically fuzzy, we hope to have given at least an insight into why this is so. Meanwhile, the study of the scores of pottery sherds has only just started. The time-consuming investment in intensive surface collection is justified, in our opinion, by the need to understand what happens to artefacts once they are exposed. General principles of settlement and land use will only emerge from the systematic study of sites in locations that are similar and different, that are contemporary and not. The archaeology of the Maltese countryside is an interesting and challenging pursuit: this is an exercise that necessitates comparisons between data along divergent trajectories of time and space. This is, we believe, one way of writing a cultural history of the long-term.

Postscript

On 8th April 2000, Keith Buhagiar informed the senior author that authorised excavation works for a substation at Ghajn Klieb had destroyed a tomb, EE (Figure 2).

The damage sustained was confirmed the following day. On behalf of the National Museum of Archaeology, members of the team (HS, MEZ, JMB, NCV) recorded what remained, excavating one layer of reddish-brown deposit (GHK99/1003) at the bottom of a section of the mutilated chamber. Two fragments of glass, a few pot sherds and some human bones were recovered. A report has been prepared (Vella *et al.* 2000). Another tomb, FF (Figure 2) was also located nearby under a carob tree. Joseph Magro Conti from the Environmental Management Unit of the Planning Authority visited the site to ensure that a larger buffer zone is drawn up for the Ghajn Klieb area in an effort to protect its unique cultural heritage.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the team, the senior author would like to thank the following: Anthony Bonanno, Keith Buhagiar,

Michelle Buhagiar, Charles Dalli, Edgar Depasquale, Aloisia de Trafford, Nathaniel Cutajar, Karmenu Farrugia (Lands Department), Reuben Grima, Joseph Magro Conti, Joe Mifsud (Chief Draughtsman's Office), Claudia Sagona, John Samut-Tagliaferro, Katya Stroud; they will all know why their name appears here.

References

- P. Bellanti. nd. *Manuscript notes on various archaeological sites in the Maltese Islands*. National Museum of Archaeology Archives.
 [1910-1912] *The Rock Tombs of Malta*. University of Malta Library Archives.
 M. Buhagiar. 1986. *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*. BAR International Series 302. Oxford.
 M. Buhagiar & S. Fiorini. 1996. *Mdina: the Cathedral City of Malta*. 2 vols. Central Bank of Malta, Malta.

Table 1 Discoveries at Ghajn Klieb, Rabat
 (source: partly original and partly after Sagona forthcoming)

Date & Location	Reference	Excavator	No of tombs	Sagona's Gaz. No.	Identification on Figs 2, 3
? <i>Ghajn-Klieb</i>	Caruana 1898: 71, pl. XIV, figs 3-4	A. Caruana	4 tombs	—	Tombs AA-DD
3 October 1890	Caruana 1898: 67, pl. XII, fig. 1	Lady Smyth	1 tomb	—	?
January 1887	Correspondence Caruana-Hutchinson	A. Caruana	old tomb caves	[85]	Tombs AA-DD ?
1890-1891	Caruana 1898: pl XI, 1	A. Caruana	1 tomb	[87]	?
1890-1891	Caruana 1898: pl. XI, 2	A. Caruana	1 tomb	[88]	?
1890-1891	Caruana 1898: pl. XI, 3	A. Caruana	1 double tomb	[89]	?
1890?	Caruana 1898: 71, pl. XIV, figs 1-2	A. Caruana ?	1 tomb	[91]	?
13 October 1906 <i>Ghain Klieb</i>	MAR 1907: E2-3	T. Zammit	1 tomb	[90]	Tomb Z
12 May 1926 <i>Ghain Klieb</i>	MAR 1926-27: IV	T. Zammit	1 double tomb	[92]	Tomb B
16 May 1926 <i>Ghain Klieb</i>	MAR 1926-27: IV	T. Zammit	1 double tomb	[93]	Tomb J ?
12 May 1933 <i>Il-Qigha ta Ghain Klieb</i>	MAR 1933-34: VII	T. Zammit	1 double tomb 1 double tomb 1 tomb 1 double tomb	[94] [95] [96] [97]	? Tomb C ? ?
30 May 1925 <i>Li Msierah tan-Nigret</i>	MAR 1925-1926: III	L. U. Way, H. Colt, R. Galea	15 tombs	—	Tombs in Field I

- Cabreo 1867 = No 368 Old Tenement, New Tenement 471. Pianta del Giardino denominato Ghain Cliep Sito nei limiti della Notabile e nella strada ta l'Imtahlep. In Hon. Giovanni Vella, *Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property in Malta and its Dependencies*. Malta.
- A. A. Caruana. 1890. Discovery of a Roman tomb-cave at Notabile. *Malta Times* second supplement 17 October 1890, [p. 9].
1898. *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta explored and surveyed from the year 1881 to the year 1897*. Government Printing Office, Malta.
- J. Cassar Pullicino. 1975. Norman Legends in Malta. In *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, edited by Anthony Luttrell, pp. 96-103. London, The British School at Rome.
- P. N. Kardulias, T. E. Gregory, & J. Sawmiller. 1995. Bronze Age and Late Antique Exploitation of an Islet in the Saronic Gulf, Greece. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 22: 3-21.
- J. Magro Conti. 1996. *Roman Bathing Establishments in Malta and Gozo*. 2 vols. Unpublished BA (Hons) Long Essay, University of Malta.
- MAR = *Annual Report on the Working of the Museum Department*. Government Printing Office, Malta.
- A. Mayr. 1905. *Aus den phönikischen Nekropolen von Malta*. K. B. Akademie der Wissenschaften, München.
- C. Sagona. Forthcoming. *The Archaeology of Punic Malta*. Peeters Press, Leuven.
- D. H. Trump. 1990. *Malta: An Archaeological Guide*. 2nd edition. Progress Press, Malta.
- N. C. Vella, K. Chetcuti Bonavita, E. DeGaetano, K. Fenech, and J. Samut-Tagliaferro. 2000. *Report on the Salvage Excavation of Tomb EE at Ghajn Klieb, Rabat (Malta) on behalf of the National Museum of Archaeology*. Department of Classics & Archaeology, University of Malta. Unpublished.
- N. C. Vella & R. L. Chapman. Forthcoming. Harris Dunscombe Colt in Malta. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*.
- G. Wettinger. 2000. *Place-names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*. PEG Publications, Malta.
- T. Zammit. 1919. *Guide to the Valletta Museum with a historical summary*. Government Printing Office, Malta.