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[p.67] The Punic Tombs

of the Maltese Islands

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This study analyzes the distribution of the Punic tombs found thus far in various parts of the Maltese Islands. It also discusses the main burial methods and customs which the natives of these islands practised in the Punic Period.

The distribution of tombs

Archaeological investigations carried out locally have so far brought to light 668 Punic tombs; 649 were found in Malta, another 18 were discovered in Gozo, while only a single grave was unearthed from Comino (*Table 1*). It has to be borne in mind that most of these tombs were found during building operations. Certain others were excavated illegally or were even destroyed before the authorities concerned took the necessary measures to undertake decent excavations and to preserve the funerary material. *Figure 1* illustrates the distribution of known tombs or tomb groups in Malta and Gozo. Whenever it was not possible to pinpoint their exact position, the tombs were located by parish.

Figure 1 indicates that the major tomb clusters were identified in the Rabat area, in the Grand Harbour area and in the Victoria area (Gozo). The tombs of Rabat were generally discovered in clusters, the largest necropolis being that of tac-Caghaki, which is so far presented with 156 tombs. The earliest tombs found in the Rabat area have been ascribed to the second half of the eighth century B.C., while the latest to about the end of the first century A.D. One of the earliest tombs found at Rabat was explored by Baldacchino.¹ This tomb contained two inhumation burials and a cremation; the inhumations apparently took place between the second half of the eighth and the early seventh centuries B.C., while the cremation took place in the first century B.C. Apart from the wide range of red-slipped and burnished pottery, Baldacchino also found an imported protocorinthian kotyle and a Rhodian bird-bowl; these were dated to the late eighth and the early seventh centuries B.C. respectively. The upper part of a bronze torch-holder was identified in association with the second interment. [p.68] This torch-holder is of well-known Cypro-Phoenician type and has been dated to the seventh century B.C.²

Most of the Punic tombs found in the Grand Harbour area were also identified in clusters. The most extensive necropoleis were those of Ghajn Dwieli, tal-Liedna, Kordin and tal-Horr. The archaeological evidence indicates that the earliest burials found in these tombs did not precede the mid-fifth century B.C.³ This suggests that this part of the island was apparently not exploited by the natives prior to the middle part of this century.

¹ Baldacchino, J.G. and Dunbabin, T.J., "Rock-tomb at Ghajn Qajjet, near Rabat, Malta", *Papers of the British School at Rome* 21, London 1953, 32-41.

² Gouder, T.C., "Phoenician Malta", *Heritage*, Vol. 1, Malta 1979, 179.

³ Said-Zammit, G.A., "Paola: Another Punico-Roman Settlement?", *Hyphen* 7, Malta 1992, 7-11.

On Comino archaeological excavations have so far brought to light only a single burial. This was found in 1912.⁴ The skeletal remains of a male adult were discovered in a large amphora which was divided into two halves. The amphora containing the human bones was interred in a simple soil depression. No grave goods were apparently deposited with the deceased person.

As regards Gozo, it is unknown why only 18 tombs have so far been identified. It seems that during this period the natives were reluctant to live on that island. Whether the Maltese Islands, including Gozo, were prone to persistent pirate raids, as some ancient writers have claimed,⁵ has not yet been ascertained by the archaeological evidence. Archaeological investigations have so far brought to light nine Punic tombs in the Victoria area, while the other graves were found in isolation (*Table 2*). However, one cannot exclude the possibility of other Punic tombs still undiscovered or which have been clandestinely destroyed. For instance, Caruana claims that at the end of the nineteenth century several Punic and Roman tombs were identified during building operations.⁶ However, he does not specify the exact number of tombs found in that area.

The remaining tombs found in Malta and Gozo were presumably related to other settlements, the inhabitants of which may have dwelt either in caves, or in [p.69] country houses, or else in hamlets still undiscovered.⁷ The location of tombs indicates which were the lands likely to be chosen by the natives for habitation and for the exploitation of the land resources. The distribution of tombs suggests that certain areas were intensively inhabited while certain others, for instance the northernmost part of Malta, were left completely barren.

The burial customs

In the Phoenician-Punic world, the principal methods of burial were inhumation and cremation.⁸ The former was probably commoner, the body was normally laid to rest in a horizontal position on the floor of the grave, but sometimes it was deposited in a wooden coffin or in a terracotta sarcophagus.

Although cremation was less common, it seems to have been popular all over the Phoenician-Punic world. The body was burned and its ashes were often deposited in a terracotta cinerary urn. Embalment was the least popular type of burial and was reserved mainly for kings and princes. There is archaeological evidence of this burial custom in Phoenicia and Carthage, but not in the other colonies. This method was not only intended to mummify the body, but also to preserve it from rapid putrefaction.⁹

In the Maltese Islands the dead were either inhumed or cremated, just as occurred in the rest of the Punic world; presently there is no evidence of embalment. From 668 tombs

⁴ [M]useum [A]nnual [R]eport 1911-12, 4.

⁵ Bonanno, A., "Distribution of villas and some aspects of the Maltese economy in the Roman Period", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* 6, Malta 1977, 78.

⁶ Caruana, A.A., *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta*, Malta 1898, 10-11.

⁷ Virzi-Hägglund, R., "Ghar ta' Iburdan: un insediamento trogloditico in età romana", *Kokalos* 22-23, Palermo 1979, 396-399.

⁸ Ribichini, S., "Le credenze e la vita religiosa", *I Fenici*, Milan 1988, 123.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

were identified 641 inhumations and 243 cremations, but no information was acquired about the burials of 370 tombs either because these had already been looted or the excavation reports failed to provide the necessary information. *Table 3* shows a detailed breakdown of inhumation and cremation burials found in each part of these islands.

This table suggests that in the Maltese Islands there was a higher incidence of inhumation than cremation. There are archaeological indications that in the early Punic Period cremation was more popular than inhumation, but from the middle part of the sixth century B.C. inhumation apparently became the exclusive method of interment. In the Punic-Hellenistic Period although inhumation remained the more popular method of burial, cremation became again increasingly [p.70] popular, through Hellenistic influence, and its practice in the Maltese Islands seems to have persisted uninterruptedly up to late Roman Period.¹⁰

The Punic tombs were generally preceded by an open shaft and were intended to accommodate several burials; in fact, several tombs were furnished with a second or even with a third chamber. Cremation burials were occasionally identified in grave-pits. In Malta there are two types of grave-pits: the rock-cut grave-pit and the simple soil depression. The archaeological evidence revealed that grave-pits did not necessarily pertain to poor people.¹¹

The Afterlife

The Phoenicians believed in the afterlife and in the long sea-voyage which led the deceased to the world of the dead. This has been corroborated by the fact that in all parts of the Phoenician-Punic world the people used to deposit with their dead several grave goods, the quality and the quantity of which varied from one tomb to another. The deceased were generally accompanied by a set of ceramic vases which consisted of an amphora, a plate, a lamp, a cup, an oenochoe and an additional jar. Glass unguentaria started to appear in the local Punic tombs from about the late third century B.C., and their presence in burial deposits persisted up to about the second half of the first century A.D.

Amulets were intended to scare away the evil spirits of the dead. A bronze amulet-container was identified in 1968 in one of the tombs of tal-Virtù, Rabat. The talisman contained a rolled-up piece of papyrus bearing a Phoenician script and a figure of the goddess Isis. The script consisted of the words of Isis to ensure a safe journey to the deceased person on his way to the afterlife (*Figure 2*).¹² The talisman is very egyptianizing in style and its cover represents the head of the falcon deity Horus.

In Malta, personal ornaments like rings, ear-rings and bracelets do not seem to have been commonly deposited with the dead; most of the personal ornaments were made of bronze and copper, while certain others were made of silver and [p.71] gold. For instance, a burial identified in 1890 in one of the tombs of Ghajn Klieb, Rabat, was provided with five-hollowed gold beads which probably formed part of a necklace, parts of a silver bracelet

¹⁰ Jones, R.F.J., "Cremation and inhumation - Change in the Third Century", *The Roman West in the Third Century* (ed. A. King and M. Heing), Vol. 1, Oxford 1981, 15-19.

¹¹ M.A.R. 1937-38, 3-4; Pellicer-Catalan, M., "Ein Altpunisches Gräberfeld bei Almuñécar (Prov. Granada)", *Madridrer Mitteilungen* 22, Madrid 1963, 17; Battoloni, P., *Studi sulla ceramica fenicia e punica di Sardegna*, Roma 1983, 69-70.

¹² Gouder, T. and Rocco, B., "Un talismano bronzeo da Malta contenente u nanstro di papiro con iscrizione fenicia", *Studi Maghrebini* 7, Naples 1975, 5-6.

covered with gold foil, a gold ring and fragments of a gold foil. These objects were dated to the seventh century B.C.

The cremation urns

Since the late fourth century B.C. the calcined human remains started to be deposited in a standard type of locally manufactured cinerary urns (*Plate 1*). Their average height is of about 35 cm, whilst their average diameter is of approximately 28 cm. These urns are normally characterized by a sinuous body, a flat rim, a convex lip, and sometimes the lower part of the body leads to an extended flat or concave base.¹³ They normally have two vertical ear-shaped handles on the upper part of the body, but similar urns are single-handled.¹⁴ The form of this particular urn survived until the first century A.D., following various stylistic modifications, particularly in the rendering of the handles and in the lower part of the body.

Pre-burial customs

Archaeological investigations have so far provided little knowledge about Punic pre-burial customs. For instance, it is unknown how the body of a deceased person was cremated before its ashes were buried in the tomb. Likewise, how a deceased person was accompanied on his way to the grave is also unclear. From the Near East, one may gather some information from the sarcophagus of Ahiiram of Byblos, where we have scenes of a funeral banquet and of women lamenting over the body of the dead king.¹⁵ The scenes which appear on this twelfth century B.C. sarcophagus do not provide an entire picture of Phoenician pre-burial customs, because this belonged to a king and not to the common people. Therefore, although this sarcophagus provides an idea of how regal pre-burial customs were apparently conducted in Phoenicia, archaeology has unearthed very little knowledge about the traditions practised leading to the burial of common people. Probably, on its way to the cemetery the wrapped body was presumably laid on a wooden platform or in a wooden coffin, was then cremated, and the charred osseous remains were subsequently deposited in a cinerary urn. [p.72] Finally, the urn was buried in the chamber or in a grave-pit together with the grave goods. The presence of unguentaria and perfume bottles suggests that before interment the body of the deceased person was apparently treated with perfumes and unguents.

After interment, the chamber was closed and sealed by a stone slab, while the shaft was apparently filled with soil and debris. When the tomb had to be reutilized for a new burial, the shaft was cleared again and the chamber opened. The remains of previous burials, including the human skeletal remains, were usually deposited into one of the corners of the chamber to accommodate the new interment.

The sarcophagi

Anthropoid and non-anthropoid sarcophagi were often reserved for the interment of important people. They appear to have been common in the Near East, Carthage and Spain,

¹³ Baldacchino and Dunbabin, 34: figure 3; Zammit, T., "The Maltese Rock-cut Tombs of a Late Pre-Christian Type", *Bulletin of the Museum* 1, 3, Malta 1931, 105-106, 110, 113, 117, 121, 125-126, 130.

¹⁴ Zammit, 126.

¹⁵ Moscati, S., "I Sarcophagi", *I Fenici*, Milan 1988, 292-293.

but were less popular in the central Mediterranean colonies.¹⁶ From Malta and Gozo there is evidence of five terracotta sarcophagi. The two surviving terracotta coffins, one of which is anthropoid, are conserved at the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta. The third anthropoid sarcophagus was discovered in 1624.¹⁷ As regards the Gozo sarcophagi, the available sources indicate that an anthropoid sarcophagus was found in the seventeenth century, while the other was unearthed from a grave-pit in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ Unfortunately, Agius de Soldanis and Caruana do not provide the exact find-spot of these two sarcophagi.

The three terracotta sarcophagi discovered in Malta were discovered in the cemetery of Għar Barka, Rabat. The tombs in which these coffins were found appear to have been located close to one another and each contained a single inhumation. About the typology of the tombs no information was acquired, but through Abela we learn that one of the tombs consisted of a square shaft and a square chamber.¹⁹ The anthropoid sarcophagus exhibited in the Valletta Museum has been dated to the fifth century B.C. The rendering of the face and the hairstyle portray clear egyptianizing, Ionian and Rhodian motifs, suggesting either that the coffin was imported from the east or it was manufactured locally at time [p.73] when these islands were still under Phoenician cultural influence.²⁰ It is a lifesize coffin, where only the unbearded face, the hair and the toes appear. The non-anthropoid sarcophagus exhibited in the same museum is rectangular in form and its cover consists of three terracotta slabs; this has been dated to the late fourth or the early third century B.C. The presence of only three sarcophagi and their derivation from the same cemetery indicate that the tombs in which these coffins were found possibly pertained to a particular class of people, for example priests or landowners.

Death in Phoenician mythology

In Phoenician mythology, Death was conceived as a supernatural power called Muth. It was never worshipped, because it played no part in any Phoenician religious cult.²¹ The Benghisa inscription refers to the tomb as *beth olam*, which means the *house of eternity*.²² This inscription shows that the Phoenicians considered the tomb as a sacred place where the deceased enjoyed eternal rest. The epigraphic evidence also shows that the Phoenicians considered grave robbery as a sinful act which led to eternal damnation. On the sarcophagus of Ahiram of Byblos there is the following inscription:

If a king among the kings, or a governor among the governors, or the leader of an army attacks Byblos and discovers this coffin, his sceptre will be shattered, the throne of his majesty will be destroyed, and peace will be away from Byblos.

A similar admonition appears on the sarcophagus of Eshmunazer II:

¹⁶ Ibid., 292.

¹⁷ Abela, G.F., *Della Descrizione di Malta*, Malta 1647, 153.

¹⁸ Agius De Soldanis, G.F., *Gozo antico e moderno*, Malta 1746, 30; Caruana, 51.

¹⁹ Abela, 153.

²⁰ Gouder, 177.

²¹ Ribichini, 123.

²² Amadasi Guzzo, M.G., *Le iscrizioni fenicie e puniche delle colonie in occidente*, Rome 1967, 17 (Malta 2).

Whoever you may be, a king or a man, do not open this coffin and do not search elsewhere in this tomb because nothing has been placed there. Do not open this coffin, the place of my repose, and do not carry me from this tomb to another place of repose. Even if men tell you to do this, do not listen to their words, because every king and man who will open this place of repose, there will be no place for him among the dead, he will not be buried in tomb, and he will have neither a son nor a descent after him.

Hence, the Phoenicians believed that the deceased were laid in their tombs [p.74] to enjoy eternal rest and not to be disturbed in any way by the enemy. Ultimately, they were not only afraid of grave-robbers, but also of the intangible supernatural powers which may have threatened or feared the dead on their way to afterlife.

TOWN/VILLAGE	NUMBER OF TOMBS
Mġarr	33
Mosta	25
Naxxar	6
Għajn Tuffieħa	6
St. Paul's Bay	3
Mellieħa	2
Burmarrad	1
Rabat	343
Attard	17
Mtarfa	15
Siggiewi	8
Baħrija	5
Żebbuġ	5
Dingli	4
Paola	39
Tarxien	17
Birkirkara	14
Hamrun	12
Qormi	12
Luqa	8
Sliema	5
Żabbar	3
San Ġwann	2
Msida	3
Hal Far	12
Żejtun	10
Qrendi	10
Żurrieq	9
Mqabba	6
Gudja	5
Għaxaq	3
Burżebbuġa	2
Kirkop	2
Marsaxlokk	1

Safi	1
Comino	1
Gozo	18
Total	668

Table 1: Distribution of Punic tombs in the Maltese Islands.

[p.76]

TOWN/VILLAGE	NUMBER OF TOMBS
Victoria	10
Xlendi	2
Ghasri	1
Sannat	1
Mġarr	1
Marsalforn	1
Qala	1
Unspecified areas	1
Total	18

Table 2: Distribution of Punic tombs in Gozo.

[p.77]

Town/village	Inhumations	Cremations	Unknown burials (number of tombs)
Mġarr	22	15	20
Mosta	6	3	9
Naxxar	13	6	0
Għajn Tuffieħa	13	1	1
St. Paul's Bay	7	1	1
Mellieħa	1	0	0
Burmarrad	2	0	0
Rabat	172	92	270
Attard	29	8	4
Mtarfa	39	5	4
Siggiewi	6	1	3
Baħrija	2	2	2
Żebbuġ	11	5	1
Dingli	3	0	2
Paola	58	13	10
Tarxien	13	19	10
Birkirkara	51	7	5
Hamrun	51	7	4
Qormi	19	4	2

Luqa	3	2	4
Sliema	7	2	0
Żabbar	4	1	1
San Ġwann	5	2	0
Msida	1	0	0
Hal Far	20	6	2
Żejtun	17	3	1
Qrendi	8	5	3
Żurrieq	4	10	5
Mqabba	7	1	1
Gudja	6	4	1
Ghaxaq	5	1	0
Burżebbuġa	6	0	0
Kirkop	2	0	0
Marsaxlokk	0	5	0
Safi	2	0	0
Comino	1	0	0
Gozo	25	12	4
Total	641	243	370

Table 3: Types of Burials.

[p.78]

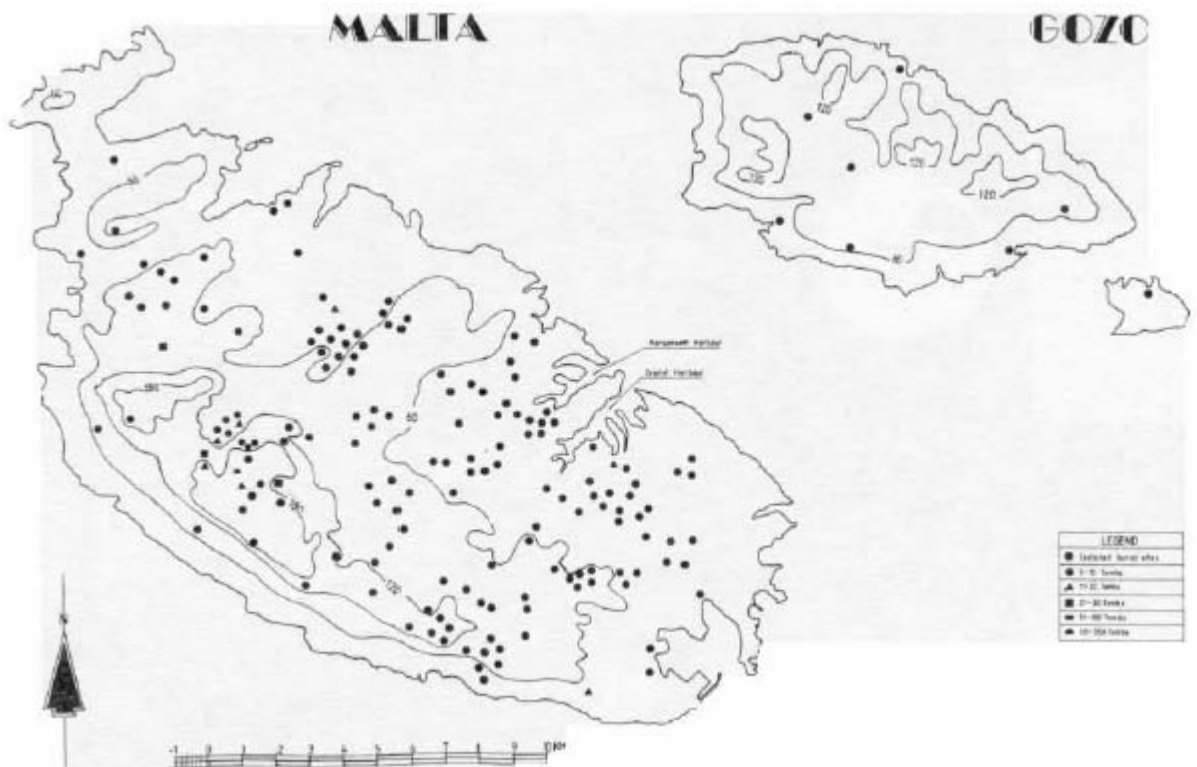


Figure 1: Distribution of Punic Tombs in the Maltese Islands.



Figure 2: A papyrus bearing a Phoenician script and a figure of the goddess Isis. (after T.C. Gouder and B. Rocco, “Un talismano bronzo contenente un nastro di papiro con iscrizione fenicia,” *Studi Maghrebini* 7, Naples 1975, 9 Figure 1)

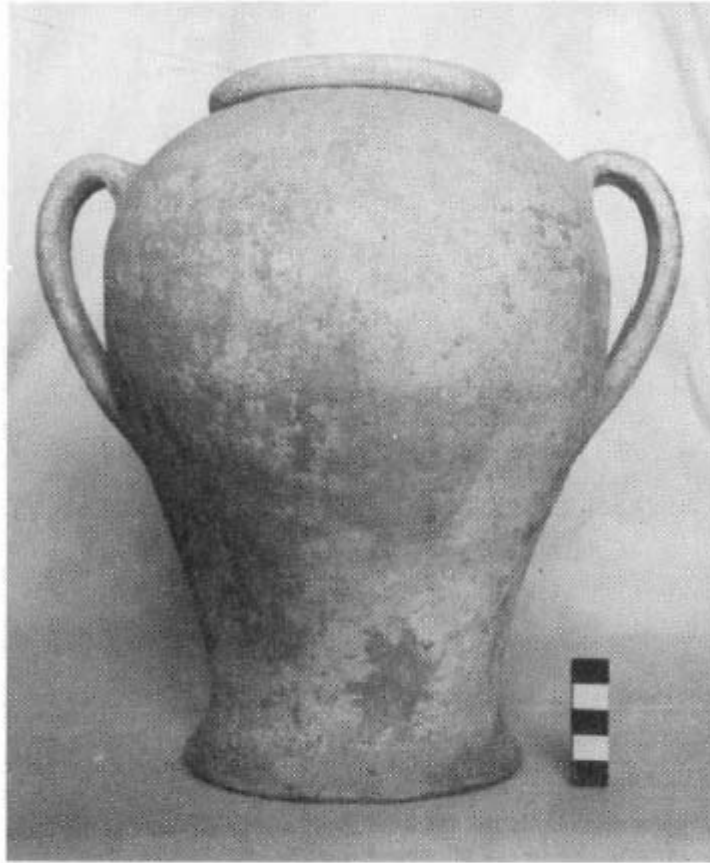


Plate 1: A two-handled cinerary urn found in one of the tombs at Rabat. This urn is conserved at St Agatha's Museum (Rabat) and is datable to the first half of the first century B.C. (By courtesy of the St Agatha's Museum, Rabat, Malta)