



THE ŻEJTUN VILLA AND ITS ANCIENT LANDSCAPE – THREE NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, surveillance policies and fieldwork by the former Museums Department and now by the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, have provided significant new insights on the landscape archaeology of the Żejtun villa and its broader environs. The landscape around what are now the modern towns and villages of Żejtun, Marsaskala, Marsaxlokk, Birzebbuga, Hal Ghaxaq, Gudja and Tarxien, has evolved over a number of millennia into its present configuration. In ancient times, this complex landscape was an agro-industrial setting of road networks, extensive agricultural terraces, burial grounds, prominent buildings and settlements, as well as sea ports. Valleys, hills, harbours and other land formations contributed to the use of large tracts of land to support the small communities that inhabited the area during antiquity. Boundaries, if these existed at the time, were different from our modern municipal jurisdictions, as defined by the 1993 Local Council legislation. These ancient boundaries – political, economic and social in dimension – were physical and social,

both dimensions now difficult to establish with absolute certainty, though perhaps easier to understand in general terms with the help of specific types of monuments and land formations. Here, we provide a brief overview of a series of archaeological discoveries which throw new light on the ancient landscape of the Żejtun area. These discoveries were made in recent decades. They include: the Late Roman and Byzantine Catacomb at Tal-Barrani, the Roman tomb cluster and field systems at Tal-Hotba and the Roman tomb-cluster and quarries at Bulebel. The significance of each site will be briefly described, together with the current state of study, as well as an outline of the measures that have been taken for their physical conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Maltese landscape archaeology is still in its infancy. The area comprising Żejtun and its environs provides a good case study for understanding the various ways in which ancient communities used and transformed their natural environment. The geo-cultural morphology of this particular landscape is a complex combination of natural formations and

their transformation by natural causes, and the steady millennial construction of an extensive network of human settlement together with all the associated economic, ritual and transportation infrastructure. These elements have been created and reworked through several generations, a factor which colours our precise understanding of continuity and change. Indeed given the limited territory of the archipelago and the long history of intense land use for subsistence purposes, there is today hardly a tract of land on Malta, Gozo and the smaller islands that has not been extensively modified by human beings. Critical in this respect, is the gradual but steady demise of antiquity, the transmission of some of its elements into the Middle Ages, and finally the transformation of the Medieval and Baroque settlements into the urban centres of Modern Malta. We list here salient aspects of this long period of change.

The historic core of Żejtun is located on an elevated promontory of globigerina limestone, at an altitude of 60m above sea level. The promontory is defined to the north by *Wied iz-Ziju* which distinguishes Żejtun from Tarxien and other outlying high ground. This valley is now partly obscured by the Bulebel industrial zone and the old road that links Tarxien and Żejtun, as well as by the widened road of Tal-Barrani. The valley meanders gently until it reaches the harbour of Marsaskala. To the south, the Żejtun promontory is marked by a drop in the landscape which then forms the greater port area of Marsaxlokk. The higher ridge of Żejtun is marked by the Late Medieval chapel of San Girgor, and the important cross-junction of Bir id-Deheb.

Żejtun is strategically located between three important ancient harbours, that of Marsa to the north, and Marsaxlokk and Marsaskala to the south. The area which the Arabs named Żejtun was occupied

since prehistoric antiquity. The megaliths of Ħal Ġinwi and the megalithic remains at tas-Silġ date back to the Late Neolithic, though the sites remained in use during the Bronze Age and later historical periods. The Żejtun villa is a reflection of activity and habitation since the Bronze Age, although the currently visible remains can be mainly dated to the Punic period right up to Late Antiquity. More evidence of ancient habitation comes from burial grounds, such as those known from San Girgor, Tal-Barrani, Tal-Ħotba and Bulebel.

Various Late Medieval toponyms, such as *Bir id-Deheb*, *Tal Barrani*, *Tal Ħotba* and *Bulebel il Ħbir* serve to highlight the intensity with which the area around Żejtun was used (Wettinger 2000). The large number of place-names attests to the extensive accessibility of the land, and therefore of its use. These lands may have in fact been intensely used since antiquity, with the Arabs then using the established agro-industrial infrastructure as the basis for their presence in Malta and Gozo. For more recent times, the importance of the Żejtun landscape as a critical land-based subsistence source is highlighted by various historical sources which document various agricultural estates essential for the economy of early modern times. Examples of such agricultural estates are those of *Bulebel iz-Zghir*, *Bulebel il-Kbir* and *Barrani* as documented in a 1620s property book of the Order of St. John (*Cabreo del Magistero*).

An aspect of change which requires research is the Early Modern growth of Żejtun and its configuration into a major town. As happened at various other localities, Żejtun grew considerably in the years following the lifting of the Great Siege of 1565. Today post-Medieval Żejtun can be appreciated in the historic centre of the town. The expansion of Żejtun would have fluctuated according to demographic and economic patterns of growth, but the

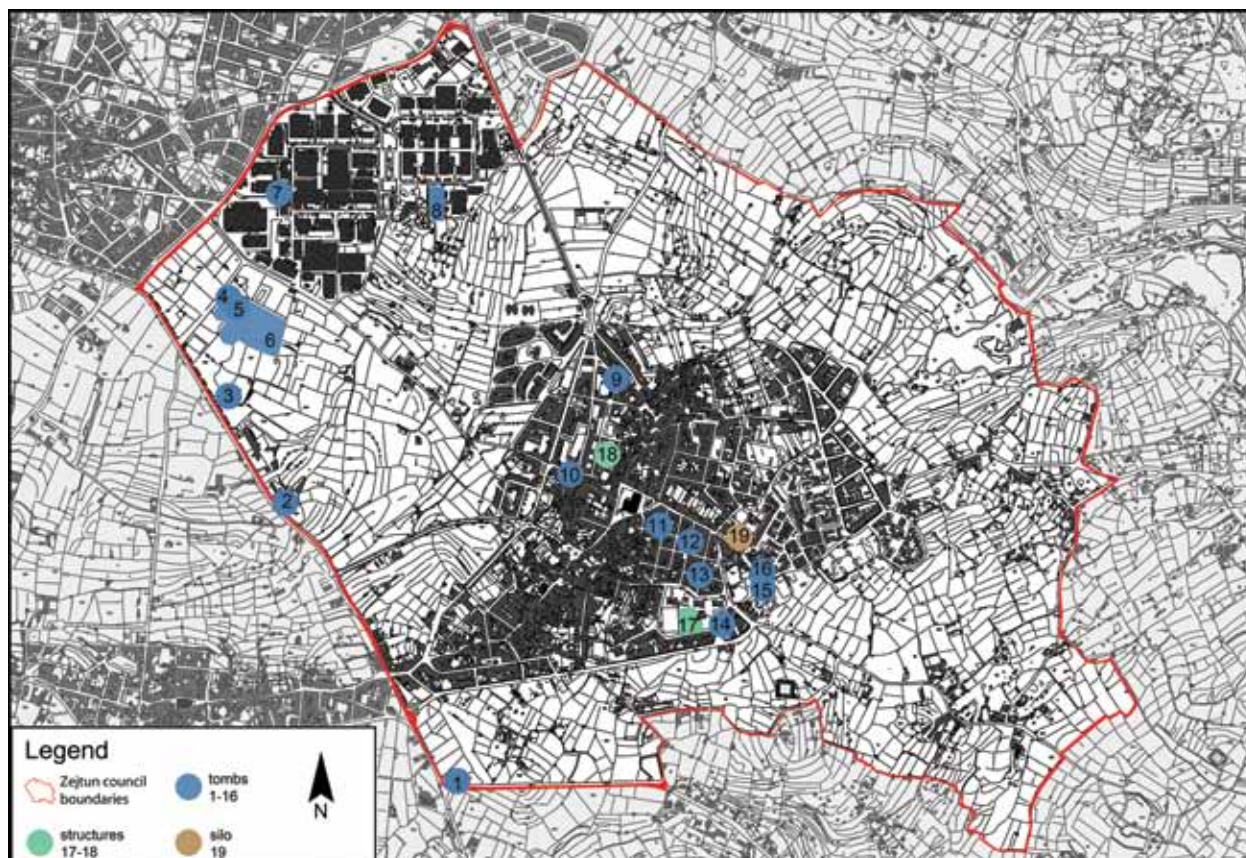


Figure 1: General site plan of the Žejtun Local Council indicating the location of known Punic and Roman archaeological sites

next major period of growth occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much of this growth followed those centres that had already been established. During the twentieth century, the built-up part of Žejtun extended as far south as the areas of *Bir id-Deheb* and San Girgor Chapel, and northwards up to the area known as *Il-Minzel* (Ordnance Survey Sheets 1912/14).

It is unlikely that this urban expansion did not leave a negative impact on the preservation of the ancient remains within this locality. Indeed, the intense modern urbanisation of Žejtun was the phenomenon that contributed to profound change of the area. As a result, no evident picture of the ancient use of the Žejtun area was known until recently. Much of what has been written about the town is based on the scarce Late Medieval sources, namely toponyms that were hardly geo-referenced in a secure manner, and on archival material of the Early

Modern and Modern periods, which still require much research.

Here we contribute an altogether different source of information about Žejtun. As a result of modern post-World War II development in the previously un-built areas, numerous archaeological remains have been unearthed. From these discoveries we are now able to present a tentative picture of ancient land use of an area that is often difficult to understand for lack of information, research and the sheer impact of modern development. The Museums Department and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage have implemented a number of case-by-case policy decisions aimed at protecting the archaeological heritage. Among the adopted measures were a number of excavations carried out at archaeological sites threatened by modern construction and land development. Among these excavations one finds the Late Roman and Byzantine Catacomb at Tal-Barrani, the

ancient tomb cluster and field systems at Tal-Ħotba and the Roman tomb cluster and quarries at Bulebel.¹

TRACES OF ANCIENT LAND USE: TOMBS, BUILDINGS AND OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

Numerous archaeological discoveries provide an indication of the type and extent of land use around Žejtun, including settlement sites, economic sites and funerary sites (Fig. 1). During the twentieth century, a total of seventeen rock-cut tombs and a catacomb were unearthed across the Žejtun area (MAR 1910/11, 1911/12, 1912/13, 1963, 1965, 1966; Zammit, T 1909-12, 1912-17). At least, a total of another eighteen tombs were discovered in the early twenty-first century. The tombs are of a Punic and Roman typology, consisting of a rectangular or in some cases cylindrical shafts from which a subterranean burial chamber of a rectangular or oval shape is reached. (Fig. 1)

The Tal-Barrani catacomb and four rock-cut tombs, discovered in 1915, 1963 and 1993, were found underneath the present road footprint of Tal-Barrani (Fig. 1: 1-3). At least, seventeen other tombs unearthed in 1965, 1966 and 2008 were found in fields in an area known as Tal-Ħotba close to Tal-Barrani road (Fig. 1: 4-6). The nineteen-sixties discoveries at Tal-Ħotba consisted of the finding of three tombs within the footprint, now demolished, of an old Milk Collection Centre. The discoveries of Tal-Barrani (1993) and Tal-Ħotba (2008) will be described in greater detail further on in this paper.

To the NE of Žejtun, today the industrial area of Bulebel, five other tombs were discovered (Fig. 1: 7, 8). The first discovery reported by Zammit in 1911, was that of a 'well-tomb' found in the fields of Bulebel

il-Kbir. The tomb was found mostly disturbed, but still contained human remains and some Punic pottery. The other four rock-cut tombs discovered in 2012 are found in the same area of Bulebel il-Kbir at a short distance from the 1911 tomb. The finding of these latter four tombs will be tackled in much more detail further on in this paper.

In the NE of the Žejtun village core, two other tombs were discovered in 1912, from which pottery fragments were associated with Punic shapes (Fig. 1: 9, 10).

Further to the south of Žejtun, a cluster of seven tombs are known to have been found in the immediate vicinity of the Žejtun Roman Villa (Fig. 1: 11-16). These tombs are of the same Punic or Roman typology as the other tombs already described above. Some of the rock-cut tombs also contained cremation urns beside inhumation burials.

In the grounds of the Jesus of Nazareth Institute, located in this same area, a bell-shaped silo was found sealed by two stone blocks (Fig. 1: 19) (MUS 1938-39). The remains of animal bone, including horse, dog, pig, ox, sheep and goat together with cooking pots, amphorae and other forms of a Punic date were found within the silo. This type of archaeological evidence indicates that a settlement must have existed at this location in antiquity.

Settlement sites are also known as suggested by the Žejtun Villa site itself and the remains of another structure reported in 1964 in the grounds of the Žejtun Primary School (Fig. 1: 17, 18) (MAR 1961, 1964). At the Secondary School, the remains of a rustic villa including the remains of a residential building and a complex for the production of olive oil, were uncovered in 1961. The excavation of this site has also revealed traces of earlier Bronze Age settlement, as well as of Late Antique occupation. The site

uncovered at the Primary School features a Punic and Roman structures including the remains of a large cistern, stone water channels, the foundation of a wall and a stone-paved area were covered by a thin layer of agricultural soil.

Other important archaeological indicators of ancient land use consist of intricate field systems of rock-cut trenches associated with ancient agricultural activities and quarries. In recent years, such features have been recorded in various parts of the Maltese Islands. In the Żejtun area, remains of rock-cut trenches and quarries were uncovered at Tal-Ħotba in 2008 and 2011 and Bulebel in 2012 (Fig. 1: 6, 8). The study of these remains provides a more coherent picture of the economic landscapes of antiquity.

LATE ROMAN AND BYZANTINE CATACOMB AT TAL-BARRANI

In May 1993 an important Late Roman to Byzantine burial site was discovered during trenching works along tal-Barrani road, on the approach to the high ground just before 25 November Avenue leading to Żejtun (Fig. 1: 2). The trenching works were part of a more extensive power cable project linking the Delimara and Marsa electrical power stations. Two subterranean monuments were discovered at a distance of about 10m from each other: a multi-chambered burial catacomb and a Late Roman rock-cut chamber tomb (Fig. 2). The catacomb was located on the Żejtun side at a slightly higher point to the chamber tomb, located towards Tarxien. The importance of the discovery lies mainly in the intact burial strata which survived and were sealed within the catacomb. In addition the catacomb of tal-Barrani was the first to be scientifically examined following centuries of unrecorded clearing by and pilfering of almost every

known catacomb in the Maltese islands. The presence of a Christian catacomb near a rock-cut chamber tomb is a rare occurrence, normally encountered in the Rabat area. Tal-Barrani provided evidence of continuity in the use of a much larger common cemetery which originally comprised chamber tombs and certainly a multi-chambered catacomb. Short notes in Zammit's notebook (TZNB 1912-1917) and in the Museum Annual Report of 1963 outline a number of discoveries in the same location. This is an indication that the burial ground was extensive and that it contained a mixture of tombs and other burial facilities. (Fig. 2)

The road of tal-Barrani very likely formed part of old road networks, some of which date back to antiquity. The position of the burial tombs and catacomb along a main road is in fact not uncommon in the Maltese islands as recent field work has shown. The road was widened and in places realigned, in modern times. As a result, some of the tombs of tal-Barrani were discovered (Fig. 1: 1, 3) while others remained concealed underneath the old road surface. This accounts for the preservation of the catacomb.

The rock-cut chamber tomb, located down hill to the NW of the catacomb, was cut into a natural terrace which was later concealed by a number of road-surfaces making up the present tal-Barrani road. Part of the shaft was concealed by the rubble wall of the old tal-Barrani road, which is still preserved *in situ* underneath the present 'central strip'. The shaft is in a good state of preservation. At the time of the discovery, the sealing slab was still lodged securely in the access of the tomb. The structure of the tomb was largely intact, except for a section at the back which was cut through during the modern trenching works. Apart from the trenching debris, the tomb chamber and its contents were intact and undisturbed.

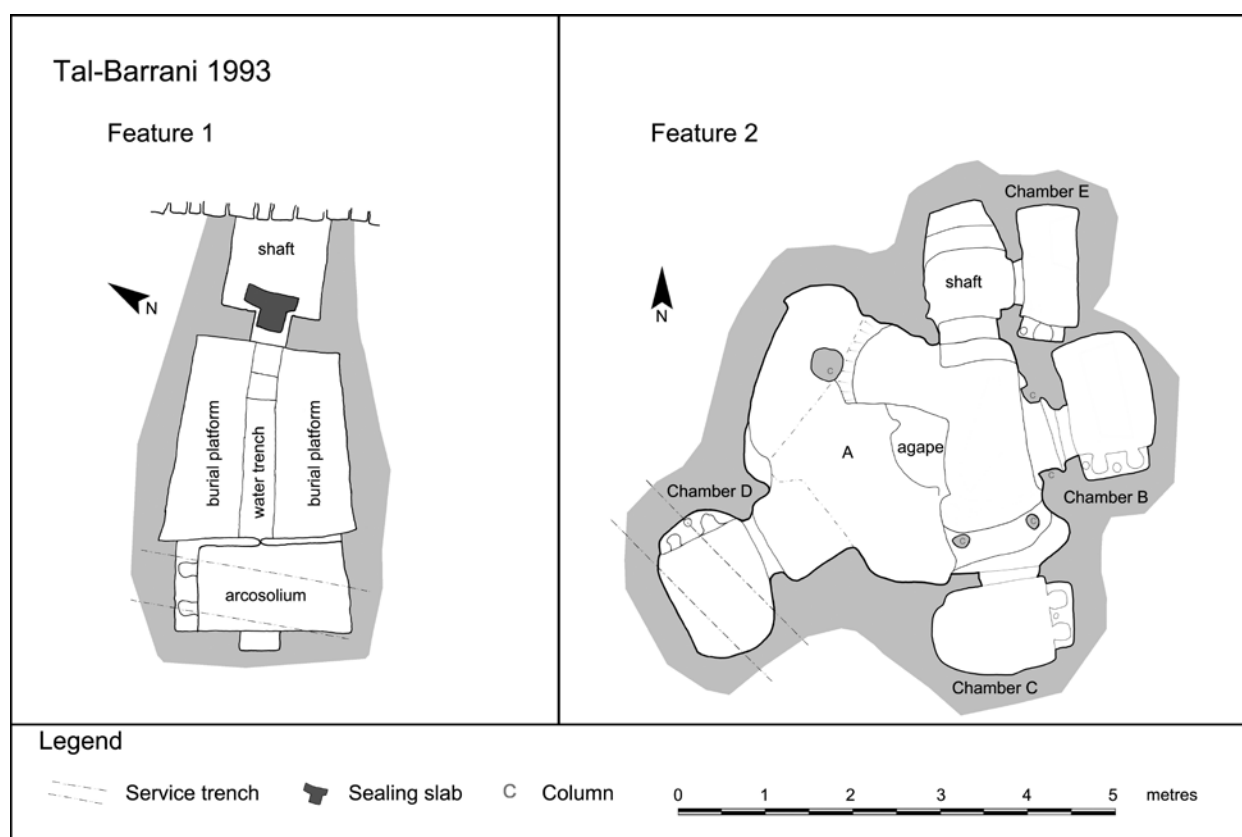


Figure 2: Plan of the Tal-Barrani catacomb and rock-cut chamber tomb (1993 investigation)

The tomb's burial chamber contained two principle areas: a rectangular burial area with a water trench cutting through the middle, and an arcosolium at the back (Fig. 2: Feature 1). The front area measured about 2.50m in length, making it slightly longer than the arcosolium which measured 2.10m. The water trench in the front area provided standing room and height, and it separated the two burial platforms of the area. The water trench was reached by three steps leading down from the entrance. The arcosolium provided a focus point and an unusual tomb design, suggesting a Late Roman date for the burials. The burial platform of the arcosolium comprised two carved head-rests.

The tomb contained the remains of six adult individuals, all articulated. Pottery discovered in the tomb has been dated to Late Roman period.

The Christian catacomb is larger than

the chamber tomb and contained more features (Fig. 2: Feature 2). Its general dimensions are however significantly smaller than for instance the more extensive Rabat catacombs. The catacomb is accessed through a flight of steps and a full-height door, giving the structure a NE-SW axis. The interior consists of a central area, A, containing a small rock-cut agape table which extends into a platform, a column of un-hewn rock and an L-shaped floor area which provides comfortable standing room in the catacomb (Fig. 3). The catacomb contains four burial chambers: one at the bottom of the access shaft (chamber E), and three (chambers B, C and D) set around the interior central area. On first entering the catacomb through the damaged opening in chamber D, it was noted that the central area was still full of soil deposit and that the disturbed sealing slabs of the chambers lay on top of the soil surface. A large 'cone-like' deposit of very fine water-borne dark brown soil was resting on top

of the disturbed sealing slab of chamber B, and the soil deposit fill of the central area, A. The entrance to the catacomb was still in place since the last time it had been blocked up at some unknown time in the past. It was clear therefore that the chambers around the central area A had been opened and disturbed, and that the water-borne soil mound which had percolated into the catacomb from the entrance door, was still sealing important undisturbed levels stratigraphically sealed by the chamber capstones which rested on top, and out of their original place. (Fig. 3)

On removing the percolated soil mound, an undisturbed burial context comprising the remains of three individuals was encountered in the upper soil layers in area A. These human remains raise a number of interesting interpretations. It was noted that by their stratigraphic position, these human skeletal remains had not only been undisturbed by the later events that had led to the pilfering of the chamber tombs, but had also sealed deeper untouched deposits. In all likelihood, the human remains encountered in the central area A were those of individuals buried in Late Antiquity. This was confirmed by the underlying deposit which yielded a range of ceramics – lamps, plates, jugs and small amphorae – dating to between the fourth century AD and later Byzantine periods.



Figure 3: Inside view of the Tal-Barrani catacomb

Though simple and small, the catacomb was also embellished with relief decorations. The entrances to chambers B and C were decorated with carved columns. Chamber C originally had a small removable stone shelf which may have accommodated offerings or used sacred rituals.

The tal-Barrani chamber tomb and catacomb are today preserved underneath the modern road surface. Access to the site is however impossible unless suitable entrance arrangements are provided. Designs for such an entrance were made in 1993, but never implemented. At the time of writing, the archaeological data from tal-Barrani are being processed for the preparation of the report of findings.

THE ANCIENT TOMB CLUSTER AND FIELD SYSTEMS AT TAL-HOTBA

The first archaeological reports from the area of Tal-Hotba date back to 1965 and 1966 (Fig. 1: 4, 5). In those years three ancient rock-cut tombs were uncovered and investigated by the Museums Department (MAR 1965, 1966). These discoveries were made during the construction of a Milk Collection Centre within what was till then an undeveloped agricultural area. In 2008 a development permit was issued for the demolition of the 1960s industrial building, and its replacement with a new private hospital. Construction works started later that same year under the surveillance of an archaeological monitor. By October 2008 the monitor reported the discovery of the first rock-cut tombs in the course of the building site. Following this discovery, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage started an extensive investigation of the area covered by the development permit (area marked as Zone A on Fig. 4). By early 2009, fourteen rock-cut tombs had been identified and partially investigated.

Given the importance of this discovery, the Superintendence together with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority took measures for the protection of these remains and started procedures for their scheduling. The developer then proposed to redesign the development in order to guarantee the physical conservation of this important cluster of ancient tombs. The redesign involved the relocation of the new hospital building to a new site within the same property. This new location was archaeologically investigated by the Superintendence in 2011 (area marked as Zone B on Fig. 4). At the time of writing, the planning process for the redesign of the hospital development has not yet been completed. Similarly the archaeological investigation in both Zones A and B is not completed. The information and the conclusions presented below must

therefore be considered as of a preliminary nature, and may be reviewed following the collection and analysis of additional data from this site.

ANCIENT TOMB CLUSTER

The Tal-Hotba site is located within the fields found between Triq San Anard and Triq tal-Barrani on the edge of the modern boundaries of Żejtun close to Tarxien (Fig. 1: 6). The tombs were cut on a relatively elevated terrain of globigerina limestone. The terrain's elevated form very likely inspired the toponym 'Tal Hotba'. Nearby, the toponym *il hofra il hamra* refers to the lower levels of the landscape *Tal Hotba*, perhaps to distinguish this place from the higher landform.

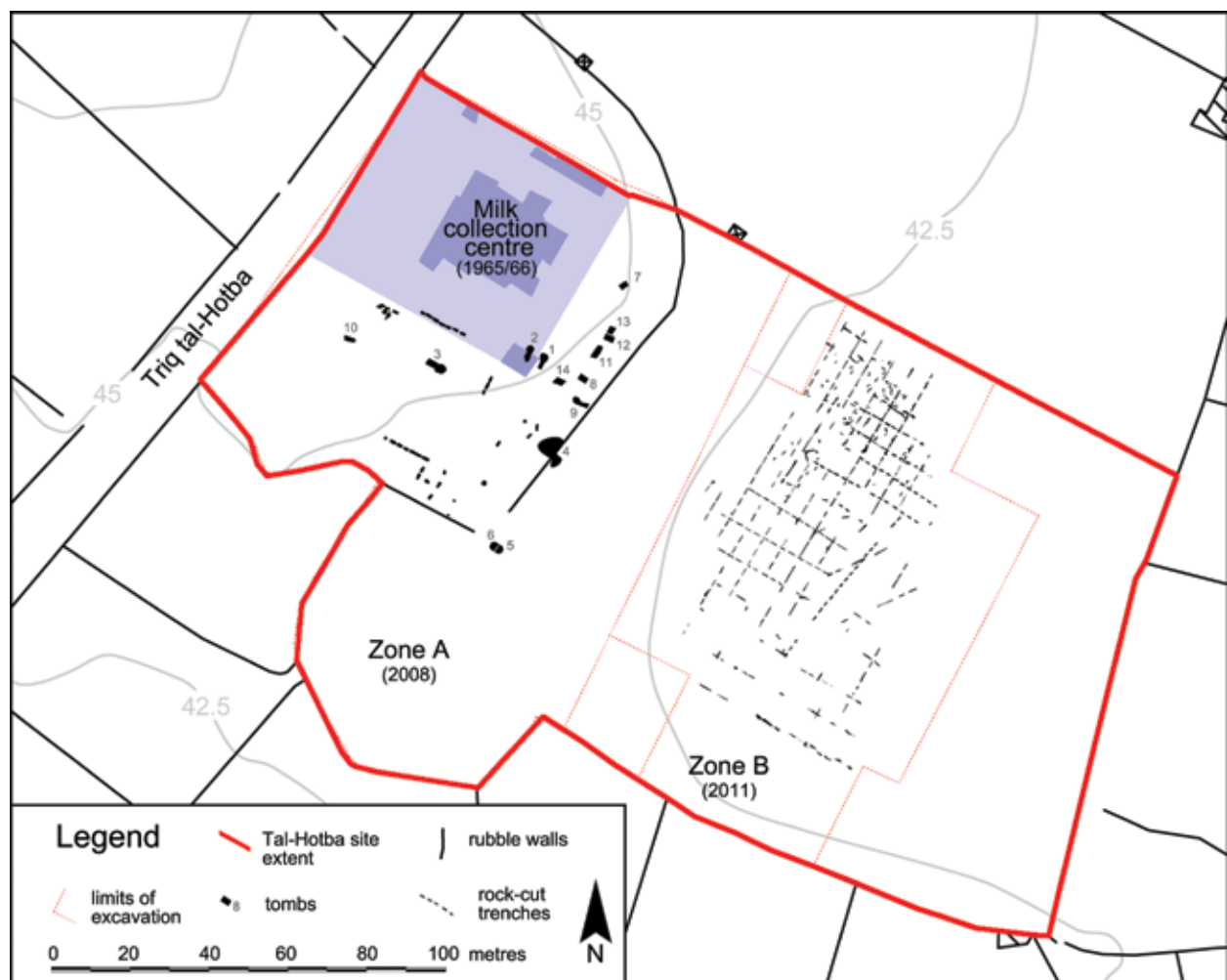


Figure 4: Plan of the Tal-Hotba site indicating the location of the tombs and of the agricultural features

In total, fourteen rock-cut tombs were found grouped into two distinct, overlapping alignments (Fig. 4). All the evidence collected so far indicate that these tombs were used during the Roman period. However it is as yet not possible to exclude an earlier Punic phase of use at Tal-Hotba. Future investigations at this site will help establish this point more conclusively.

Only nine out of the discovered fourteen tombs were investigated during 2008 and 2009. Tombs 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10 were completely excavated whilst Tomb 7 and Tomb 14 were never completed. The remaining five tombs were recorded (Tombs 5, 6, 11, 12, 13) but are still unexcavated. The first group (Tombs 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13) was dug in a NE to SW axis, while the second group (Tombs 1, 2, 9, 10, 14 and perhaps even Tomb 3)

is oriented on a NW to SE axis. It is very likely that Tomb 2 corresponds with one of the two tombs reported in 1965. (Fig. 4)

In general, the tombs at tal-Hotba have a common typology, but defer in minor details of internal rock-features. The tomb structures consist of a shaft from which a subterranean burial chamber is reached (Fig. 5). Most of the shafts (Tombs 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14) are rectangular in shape measuring 2.30m by 1.10m, and their depths range from 1m down to 3m. The shaft of Tomb 2 has an irregular shape. Recent rock cutting may have reduced the original upper level of some of the shafts. Only three tomb shafts had features. Two of these (Tombs 7 and 8) had footholds, and Tomb 1 had steps cut into the rock. (Fig. 5)

In plan, four of the chambers (Tombs 2, 3, 9, 10) were roughly oval in shape, while three others (Tombs 1, 4, 8) had rectangular chambers. Typically, the chambers measured 1.7m by 2.10m, and 1m in height. The tombs were sealed in two ways. The first type of sealing consisted of a rectangular stone, as in Tombs 7 and 9. Tomb 8 did not have a sealing slab, and its chamber entrance seems to have been blocked by a rubble construction. In Tombs 1 and 3, access to the burial chamber was through a small rectangular entrance, while in Tombs 8 and 9 the access was through an irregular cutting. The average space of the tomb entrances measured 1m by 0.60m.

On the inside of some chambers, typical funerary architectural elements were found; these included the water trench, niche and the rock platform. The water trench was found in four of the studied tombs (Tombs 1, 2, 4, 8). Tombs 3, 9, 10 did not have water trenches. These water trenches are thought to have been drains for water entering the chamber. Tombs 1, 4, 8, 13 had a niche in their burial chambers. Of particular interest is Tomb 8

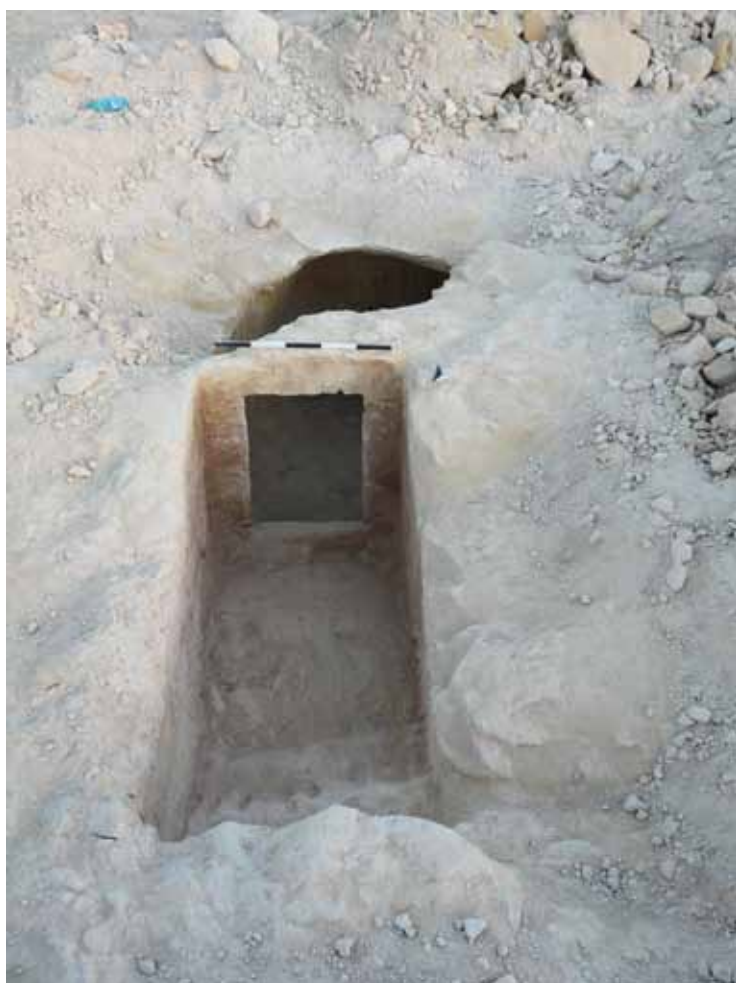


Figure 5: The shaft and chamber entrance of Tomb 8 at Tal- Hotba

which had two oil lamps still *in situ* inside the niche. Tombs 2, 3, 9, 10 did not have any niches. Only two tombs (Tomb 1 and 4) had an elevated rock platform in their chambers which was possibly used for the laying of the deceased and for placing the grave goods. Tombs 2, 3, 8, 9, 10 had no rock platforms.

Only two tombs contained articulated human skeletal remains. Tomb 1 contained one articulation, whilst Tomb 8 contained three articulated individuals lying next to each other. One of the three skeletons was found buried on top of slabs which were placed intentionally on the water trench to provide a floor for the dead. Tomb 8 also contained a cinerary urn containing cremated human bones. Stratigraphic evidence within Tomb 8 indicates that the cremation was introduced into the tomb chamber after the three inhumations. Since inhumation and cremation were practised at different phases, it is being suggested that Tomb 8 was opened up for burial at least twice during its use. Tombs 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9 contained disarticulated human bone which means that they were not found in anatomical skeletal position. This could be due to roof collapse, machinery disturbance or water infiltration.

Various grave goods were deposited within the graves. These included pottery vessels, glass objects, animal bones and seashells, and metal items such as nails. Typical Roman pottery shapes found inside the chambers of these rock-cut tombs include: oil lamps, small vessels (unguentaria, open vessels and juglets), as well as some coarse wares.

TAL-HOTBA AGRICULTURAL TRENCHES AND POST-HOLES

At Tal-Hotba, numerous rock-cut features were uncovered in both Zone A and B (Fig. 4). In the main part, these features

consisted of rock-cut trenches that were dug in the rock to facilitate water drainage or to provide extra depth for root penetration. Such improvements in the agricultural conditions were essential for a flourishing cultivation of vines and other similar crops. In turn, the emerging patterns from such sites start to shed light on agricultural field systems of Roman and later times. The Superintendence has recorded several similar features in Malta and Gozo.

At Tal-Hotba, rock-cut trenches were first encountered in Zone A in 2008 along with the ancient tombs described above. A more extensive and better preserved system of trenches was later uncovered and documented in Zone B in 2011. In both areas, two distinct typologies of rock-cut trenches were identified. The first type is rectangular in shape, but particularly long and narrow. At Tal-Hotba these Type 1 trenches are cut in rows approximately 5m apart, and are laid out on a NE to SW alignment. The second trench-type is also rectangular in shape, but shorter and wider than the first type. These shorter trenches are also cut in rows almost 10m apart, and are laid out on a NW to SE alignment. In fact, there are points where two trenches set on different axis intersect each other forming what looks like a 'cross-type' rock-cut trench. The two systems seem to belong to different historical periods, and may have been created to host different agricultural practices or crop-types. The trenches were filled with a fine reddish earth, occasional large stones as well as a few abraded pottery fragments. Also associated with these agricultural features is the presence of a number of rock-cut post-holes located along the sides of the trenches. The relationship between the post-holes and the trenches is still unclear.

It is interesting to note that both the tombs and the agricultural trenches were probably in use contemporaneously during the Roman period. The spatial and

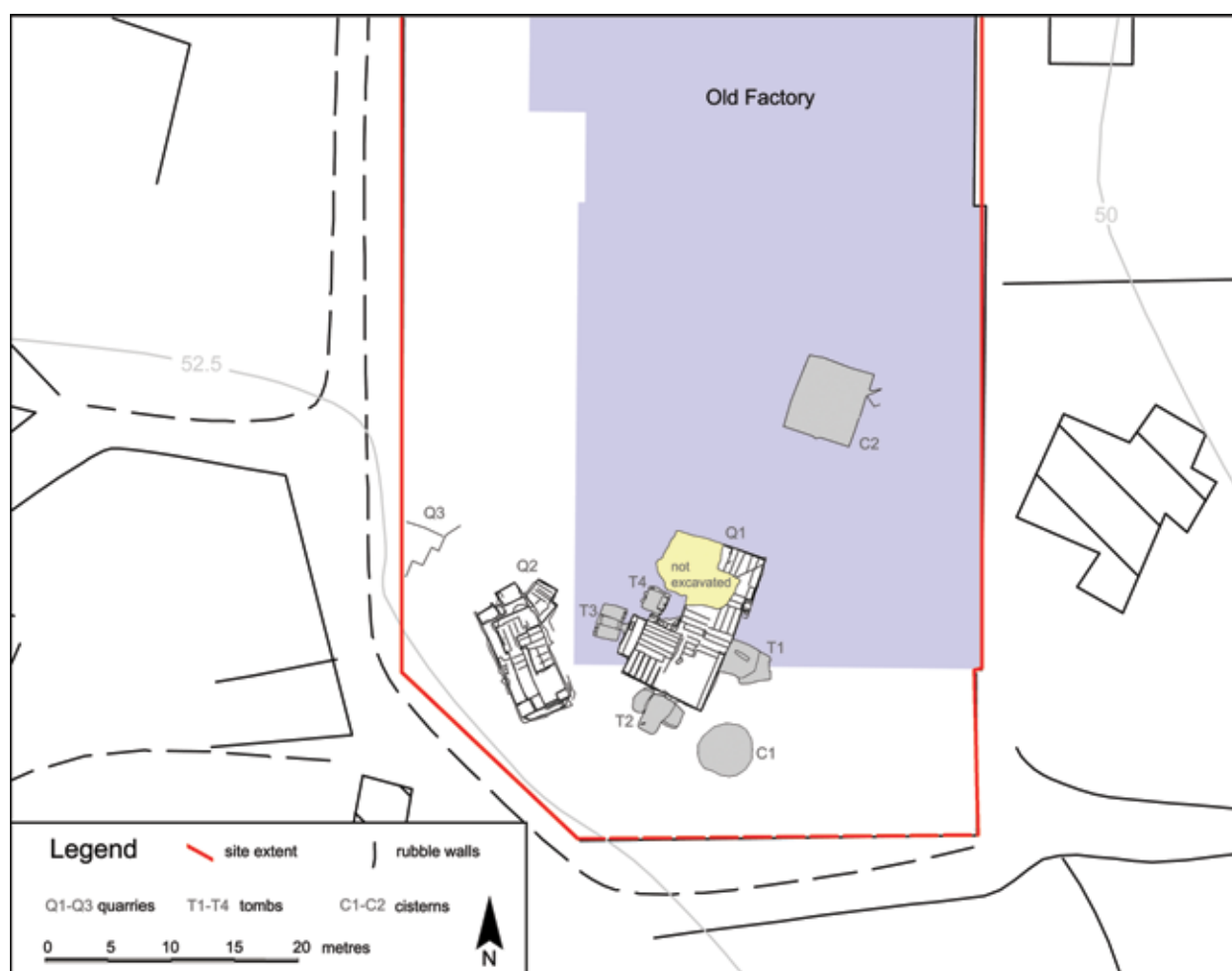


Figure 6: Plan of the Roman quarries and tombs from Bulebel

chronological relationship between these two sets of Roman remains must still be fully determined.

ROMAN TOMB CLUSTER AND QUARRIES AT BULEBEL

An unusual setting of tombs and quarries was uncovered during the recent development of the new Actavis Malta factory at the Industrial Estate of Bulebel. These remains are located within an area known as *Bulebel il Cbir* situated on the outskirts of Żejtun, with Tarxien to the NW and Fgura to the north (Fig. 1: 8). The archaeological remains were uncovered in March 2012 during the demolition of an old factory for the construction of a new industrial plant. During the clearing of the demolition debris, a number of rock-cut features emerged

which the developer recognised as being of potential archaeological importance. The developer immediately informed the Superintendence of these discoveries, and their archaeological investigation was immediately undertaken. So far the investigation has identified three ancient quarries, four rock-cut tomb chambers, and two water cisterns (Fig. 6). Concurrently with these investigations, the developer has also started to take measures for the preservation of all of these remains, including the redesign of the foundations of the factory to ensure both the conservation and the continued access to the main area of archaeological importance. (Fig. 6)

At the time of writing, investigation works are still ongoing and the post-excavation analysis of the data collected must still be undertaken. The data and

the interpretations which are being presented in this paper are therefore of a preliminary character and may be revised as more information becomes available. In particular we are here presenting information relating to Quarry 1 at Bulebel in view of its intrinsic importance and its unusual setting.

ANCIENT QUARRY WITH TOMBS

Quarry 1 is of a rectangular shape measuring 14 m in length and 8 m at its widest. In the southern half of the quarry, four rock-cut chamber tombs were found cut very close to the quarry upper rim (Fig. 7). Two rock-cut stairs, one leading to Tomb 4, another cut in the east face of the quarry were also noted. The quarry had been partially impacted and cleared of part of its fill during the demolition of the previous factory. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of deposits survived with clear stratigraphic sequences, allowing a reconstruction of the phases of use of this quarry. (Fig. 7)

It is likely that the rock-cut chamber tombs are older than the quarry. From the grave contents examined so far, it appears that they date to Roman and Late Roman times. At some point, it appears that the shaft and chamber tomb structures were truncated by the quarrying. Rock-cut chamber tombs of this period generally possessed an access shaft. In the case of these tombs, the access shafts were truncated by the deep quarry, leaving the burial chambers untouched as a sign of respect of burial customs of the time. This scenario would account for the unusual position of burial chambers close to the rim of a deep quarry.

At some point after the tombs were last used and after the rock cutting had ceased, the deep quarry was abandoned and filled with construction debris

which appears to have also dated to antiquity. A series of debris layers were found resting immediately above a layer of stone chippings and torba, normally encountered in rock-cutting contexts. This layer of stones and torba rested immediately on the final quarry bed. Apart from ceramic materials, the debris deposits contained every day life remains, including seashells and complete sea urchins. Immediately above these debris deposits, sealing the layers below, a massive layer of material, mostly soil, filled the quarry almost to the edge, about 3m above the bottom.

Within this fill a wall constructed of large stones was encountered. This wall was carefully constructed, perhaps to serve as a foundation wall for a building. No traces of this building have survived beyond the level of this foundation wall. Any structure that could have survived above this level would have been destroyed by the construction of the 1960s factory, itself now replaced by the present new factory building.

Particularly interesting are the rock-cutting marks and the tool mark impressions located on the quarry bed and sides. The impressions left by the cut out stone indicate the size, shape and



Figure 7: General view of Quarry 1 at Bulebel

method of extraction of ashlar blocks. The tomb entrances are now located on the uppermost edge of the quarry faces. The quarrying has left very little indication that these tombs once had a shaft or any other form of access. The present visible context may however be misleading as explained earlier. Indeed in the case of Tomb 4 there are traces of a floor and a small part of a rock face, two surviving elements of a possible shaft. At some point during quarrying activities, the shaft was almost completely removed. In addition, stairs were hewn out of the rock. These stairs link the floor just outside the chamber of Tomb 4 with the quarry bed below. The objective of this link is unclear. Another set of stairs is cut into the east face of the quarry, this time linking the external surface around the quarry with the quarry bed.

The roof of three of the tomb chambers were found to be damaged by the modern development. In the case of two tombs (Tomb 1 and 2) only the floor has survived. The plan of Tomb 1 could not be made out since only part of its water trench survived. This tomb was oriented along a NW to SE axis. No human remains were found in this tomb. Few pottery fragments were found in disturbed deposits. Tomb 2 oriented on a NE to SW axis has two roughly rectangular areas each measuring 2m by 1m on either side of a rectangular space of 3m by 2m. The side areas were probably used for interments, perhaps of one or more individuals. No skeletons were found except for a few human and animal bone fragments. This tomb contained a ceramic assemblage consisting of complete vessels known from Roman funerary contexts.

Tomb 3 was oriented on a NW to SE axis and has a rectangular chamber measuring 2.80m by 2m. The chamber is divided into three areas: two rectangular side platforms measuring 1m by 2m, and a deep water trench separating them. The trench is rectangular in shape and

measures 0.80m by 1.60m, and its longest sides are oriented on the tomb axis. The side areas had a slightly elevated rock pillow in which two head-rests were cut in relief. The rock pillows of the two side areas are at opposite ends of the chamber. The tomb could accommodate at least four individuals. The tomb entrance has a square shape of 0.50m. The entrance was found blocked with large stones, probably placed intentionally to block off the tomb after the last interment.

The contents of the tomb included very fragmented and deteriorated human bone, which gave no indication of articulated skeletons. The deterioration is probably due to periodic seasonal flooding of the burial chamber in ancient times, as suggested by different waterlines on the sides of the chamber. The grave goods included pottery, coins and personal ornaments such as a bone hair pin.

The most preserved tomb, both structurally and in its contents, is Tomb 4. This tomb is oriented on a NE to SW axis. As mentioned above, presently this tomb is accessed through a flight of stairs from the bottom of the quarry. Like Tomb 3, its entrance is also square in shape and measures 0.50m. The entrance was sealed with a slab.

The chamber is square in shape measuring 2m. On one side, in front of the entrance is a water trench measuring 1m by 0.50m. On the other side is a space intended for interment. An elevated rock pillow with head supports is found at the back of the chamber. One of these supports is a rock-carved head-rest, the other consists of stones simply placed on the rock pillow. These stones would have outlined and supported the head of the deceased person placed on this platform. The carved head-rest also includes a similar stone setting, similar to the neighbouring stone supports. In total, two articulated skeletons were found in supine position lying next to each other. No other bones

were found in this chamber. The pottery assemblage consisted of complete vessels including plates, jugs and oil lamps. In addition metal objects and beads were found with the skeletons.

CONCLUSION

The setting of the Żejtun villa is a complex landscape which has been densely occupied throughout antiquity. Evidence of ancient activity has been obscured by intensive modern development. The ongoing work of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage in monitoring ongoing land development works, and the documentation of any emerging

archaeological remains, is an essential tool in building up our understanding of the ancient landscape in the area of Żejtun. The archaeological interventions at Tal-Barrani, Tal-Hotba and Bulebel are especially clear examples of this process of landscape reconstruction. From these investigations it is becoming increasingly apparent how the main monuments of antiquity, such as the villa site at Żejtun, were located within a dense network of agro-industrial activities, such as agricultural field systems and stone quarries. These investigations are also throwing light on the relationships, spatial and otherwise, which tied ritually significant sites such as tombs and catacombs with the key infrastructure of antiquity – the roads, fields and settlements.

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FOOTNOTE

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