





A general view of
Ghar Gerduf (Photo:
Catherine Tabone)

Ghar Gerduf rediscovered

Godwin Vella examines what the existing remains and accounts of it written in the past tell us of Ghar Gerduf in Gozo and makes a case for the need to save it from impending collapse

The 1870s witnessed the brutal mutilation of Ghar Gerduf, Gozo's most representational, and one of Malta's more distinctive, late-roman hypogea. Writing in 1876, Vassallo recounts "*E' ora vandalicamente, e peggio, ridotto a latomia; sicchè pochissimo ne rimase delle camerette e dei corridoi, e tra non molto anche questi scompariranno ai reiterati colpi dello scavatore*".¹ Six years later Caruana confirms that "*the greatest part of this cluster has been lately destroyed*".² Subsequently, the adjacent globigerina limestone quarries inflicted further damages, and Ghar Gerduf was altered into two interconnecting and cubic caves overlooking Lunzjata's picturesque valley.

By the turn of the 20th century Ghar Gerduf was forced into a limbo of mystery, albeit never erased from communal memory. Its association with a notorious lady who wore an immaculate white outfit, looped her long silky hair with a scarf and masked her face with a black veil lingered on.³ Likewise, the meaning of the term *gerduf* solicited interest amongst a number of scholars.

Godwin Vella heads
Heritage Malta's
Ethnography Unit



Preca⁴ defines it as a place for the exile of foreign convicts and reads *gerdulf* as an amalgamation of two distinct words *ger* and *duf*, meaning 'a foreigner' and 'to condemn' respectively.⁵ Magri and Farrugia⁶ decipher it as *ghar-duf*, whereby *ghar* stands for cave while *duf* is a corruption of *dfin* (burial) – therefore the cave of burials. Serracino Inglott⁷ asserts an Arabo-Spaniard origin and decodes *gerdulf* as a scarf, which is evidently very much evocative of the legendary white lady. More recently, Mizzi⁸ suggested a Siculo-Berber derivation. In the region of Agrigento *gerdulf* is synonymous with the widespread practice of troglodytism. According to Mizzi *ger* is a corruption of *ghar* while *duf* implies hospitality and translates *gerdulf* as a hospitable cave dwelling.⁹

Significantly, Ghar Gerduf was the only Phoenician, Carthaginian and Roman site in Gozo featured in the List of Buildings, Sites and Remains for the purposes of Article 6 of The Protection of Antiquities Act 1925,¹⁰ even if the then surviving remains were already poorly legible. The photographic collection of the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta includes two monochrome views of Ghar Gerduf datable to the turn of the 20th century.¹¹

These portray a general view of the eastern section and what looks to be a close up of some tomb structures in the western end respectively.

This general view of the eastern area depicts a central flight of steps, two *arcosolia* or barrel-vaulted recesses at the centre-top, a likely damaged *arcosolium* at the bottom-left, a rectangular cup-board at the centre-right, and the less legible sections of two *arcosolia* to the upper right and left respectively. The upper and lower tiers of the walls exhibit different textures and patina, and seem to delineate the 1870s disfigurement. Equally significant is the almost two-metre variation between the ceiling of the aforementioned potential *arcosolium* in the bottom left and the floor of the overlying section. Ghar Gerduf was either spread over two levels, else the lower *arcosolium* belonged to an independent catacomb.¹² The second option looks more tempting though difficult to prove from the evidence in hand.

The gloomy background suggests that the western section of Ghar Gerduf was still not punctured by the present cave opening that spans the whole breadth of the southern wall, while the partly-damaged tomb structures

opposite:

The eastern area at the turn of the 20th century: note the darker hue of the upper wall and roof as opposed to the fresher look of the lower wall section, and what looks to be a walled up *arcosolium* in the bottom left

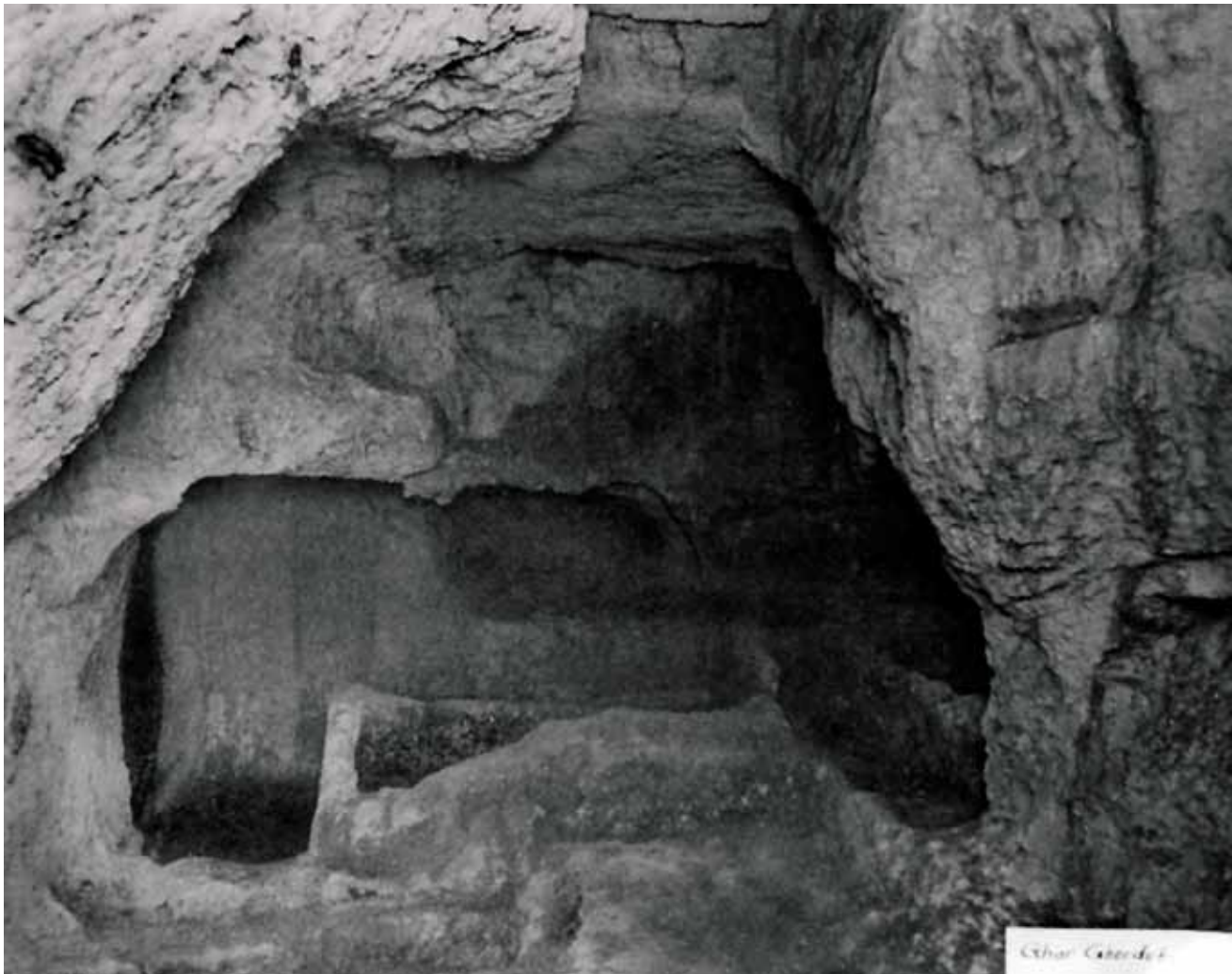
below:

A cluster of tomb structures formerly located at the inner extremity of Ghar Gerduf

featured in the second photograph were to be located therein. In this cluster of tomb structures one can identify an *arcosolium* with at least two burial-troughs to the right, the likely inner extremity of the corridor's floor in the centre, and the damaged rock-hewn partitions of a number of *arcosolia* and related burial-troughs at the centre-back and to the left. These tomb structures were eventually wiped away at some stage before the 1950's, when Francis Cremona recorded the then state of preservation through

a set of four snapshots.¹³ Likewise, a rock-cut water cistern was sunk into its floor during the last five decades.

Invariably, the successive disfigurement and quarrying initiatives triggered serious structural stability issues. The resultant rock pillars reaching up to the overhanging friable and relatively thin rock ledge are giving way progressively as attested by various threatening cracks. Unless propped up in the immediate future, Ghar Gerduf is destined to face an unbearably sad fate.





1950s general view of Ghar Gerduf by Francis Cremona: note a walled up *arcosolium* section beneath the tip of the rock ledge.

An Outline Reconstruction

Except for Becker,¹⁴ the available 20th century interpretations of the surviving ruins differ substantially from pre-1870s sources. For instance, Farrugia¹⁵ and Pisani¹⁶ confused the surviving ruins with the remains of a nearby ancient bathing complex recorded by Ciantar,¹⁷ while Borg¹⁸ and Buhagiar¹⁹ propagated a misleading reconstruction. The predecessors of Vassallo and Caruana had the opportunity to explore a better preserved and more legible site, whereby various bits of information can be extrapolated from their respective descriptions and fused together to craft an outline, though comprehensive, reconstruction.

Abela²⁰ describes Ghar Gerduf as hewn out of the live rock and full of tombs similar to those found on mainland Malta but fails to indicate its form and extent or specify which type/s of tombs are to be found. Writing a full century later, Agius De Soldanis²¹ notes that unlike the ones in Malta, Ghar Gerduf was dug horizontally into the cliff face and lacked the *catebatica* or entrance flight of steps. Ciantar's revised edition of *Malta Illustrata* offers the first description of Ghar Gerduf's internal setup by stating that the respective tombs were grouped within a series of *arcosolia*.²² A second late 18th century short chronicle of Ghar Gerduf is supplied by the French traveller, writer and artist Jean Houel, who could still count about sixty relatively wide and six-foot long tombs.²³ Significantly, Houel compares Ghar Gerduf with the prevailing catacomb layouts he had explored in Sicily. Houel's description was translated into English and in Italian and published by Boisselin²⁴ in 1804 and by Lacroix²⁵ in 1851 respectively.

In his dissertation on the presumed Christianisation of Gozo during the first century AD,²⁶ Mgr. Farrugia cites a presumed 19th century manuscript entitled *Succinta Relazione dell'Isola del Gozo*, whereby the author corroborates Houel's observation regarding Ghar Gerduf's

affinities with the catacombs in Syracuse, and describes the internal set-up as an unpretentious corridor with a series of tombs (including small *loculi* or rectangular recesses) along its walls. On piecing together the various clues filtered from the highlighted pre-1870s documentary sources, the original layout of Ghar Gerduf looks to have consisted of a modest corridor dug horizontally into the cliff face to accommodate a succession of deep *arcosolia* and small *loculi*.

Correlating the Archaeological Evidence

By their very nature, documentary sources tend to have a dose of subjectivity. To this effect, it is considered opportune to cross check the abovementioned outline reconstruction in relation to the surviving ruins. Prima facie the task looks unattainable due to the site's sorry state of preservation. As observed by Becker in 1913,²⁷ though, the ceiling and some sections of the wall surfaces preserve a decipherable record of the original layout.

The most prominent feature in the ceiling is a 75 to 80cm-wide strip stemming out from a partially damaged and rectangular opening along the east facing wall. It runs along an east-west axis for the whole length of the surviving cavernous complex, and on nearing the westernmost extremity it turns sharply south, proceeds for circa 1.2m and bends west again. This rectangular opening seems to mark the hypogeum's entrance whereas the strip outlines the corridor's trajectory. Judging from the respective wall markings Ghar Gerduf's corridor was barely 1.75m high.

Ghar Gerduf's crumbling ceiling reveals also the layout and extent of the respective rock-hewn burial structures, namely a sequence of six *arcosolia* (five of which accommodated five or six burial-troughs) along the corridor's south wall and five *arcosolia* (three of which accommodated four or five burial compartments) aligning the corresponding wall. The *arcosolia* have an average width

Internal view facing east: note the ceiling/wall/floor markings of the corridor heading to a partially blocked opening at the far end, and two *arcosolia* to the right.

of 1.8 metres, while the burial-troughs are between 55 and 60cm deep. An 8 to 10cm wide rock ledge around the top of the burial-troughs supported the sealing stone slabs.

The surviving burial-troughs preserve the headrests or shallow rock-hewn cushions. These are invariably placed on the western side and have an average depth of 25cm. A small recess along the corridor's wall seems to have been originally intended to receive an oil-lamp. Very little is still to be found of the tomb structures formerly lying in the western end. The extant wall markings are poorly legible and very little can be said of the original layout. Also, no indications of the aforementioned small *loculi* are traceable.

A Distinctive Catacomb

Compared to mainland Malta, the recorded discoveries of classical tombs in Gozo are appreciably fewer. Likewise, the available evidence implies distinctive traits in the burial customs of the sister island. During the late 19th century an intriguing large glass bottle containing human remains turned up from Vajringa Street, while an unusual series of small terracotta sarcophagi emerged from St. Francis Square.²⁸ Equally unorthodox for the Maltese context is the communal burial from the coastal locality of Qbajjar. Consisting of a passageway with large *loculi* on either side,²⁹





A close up of one of the burial troughs: note the rock ledge to support the sealing slabs and the low rock hewn headrest.

the Qbajjar hypogeum echoes Italian and North African arrangements where, unlike mainland Malta, *loculi* were widely exploited for the inhumation of adults.³⁰

Similarly, Għar Gerduf diverges from the prevailing scenario in Malta because of the sheer number of burial-troughs contained in eight out of a total of eleven *arcosolia* aligning the corridor walls. Generally, the Maltese *arcosolia* contain only two or, occasionally, three burial-troughs. The largest known one, at St. Paul Catacombs, has seven burial-troughs and is an exception to the general rule.³¹ Għar Gerduf exhibits closer affinities with neighbouring Sicily where consistent numbers of burial-troughs are often placed in each *arcosolium*.³²

Gozo's distinctive funerary customs with respect to mainland Malta seem to mirror the political state of affairs. By the second century of Roman rule the citizens of Gaulos enjoyed a separate administration set-up and were allowed to run their own affairs through a local council responsible for the administration of justice, public works, foods, financial affairs and related governance issues. They even minted their own coinage bearing the Greek legend "ΓΑΥΛΙΤΩΝ". The Island's political autonomy was further accentuated through its promotion to the status of *municipium* during the 1st century AD.

Alleged Christian Connections

In their recent publications, Azzopardi³³ and Buhagiar³⁴ qualify Għar Gerduf as an "alleged exclusively Christian catacomb" and as an "apparent paleochristian burial-place" respectively. This falls in line with a deep rooted tradition reminiscent of the 16th and 17th centuries.³⁵ St. Paul is said to have crossed over to Gozo and converted its inhabitants to Christianity contemporaneously with those of Malta, while Għar Gerduf was without tangible evidence recognised as a tangible remnant of the early Gozitan Christians.³⁶

A major challenge in the interpretation of Maltese catacombs is the distinction between Christian and non-Christian sites. Several units point towards Jewish and Neo-Punic origins and in the absence of inscriptions or distinguishable iconographic features, one apparent way to assign a Christian identity is the occurrence of *triclinia* or rock-cut tables with sloping sides in the form of dining couches.³⁷ Since no indications of the existence of such *triclinium* are identifiable at Għar Gerduf, one needs to look for other potential clues to support or discard the alleged Christian connections.

Indicative evidence is provided by the surviving headrests, which, as observed above, are hewn on the western side of the respective burial-troughs. Corpses were, therefore, inhumed with their feet pointing east. Christian burials commonly observed this orientation in anticipation of the Universal or Final Judgement, scheduled to take place on Dooms Day and in the Valley of Josaphat close to Jerusalem.³⁸ All peoples are to rise again, resume their physical form and be summoned to render an account of their deeds. Resultantly, those Christians that entered afterlife and had their corporal remains buried would unmistakably view the coming of Christ in his glory. Except for this volatile hypothesis, though, no other legible clues are detectible to determine with an acceptable dosage of certainty Għar Gerduf's assumed Christian ascription.

Valorising the Surviving Ruins

Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to explore Għar Gerduf as left by the *fossores* and subsequent users some fifteen centuries ago. A faint shadow is all that survived of its ancient charm. Even if stripped of all funerary contents and eventually mutilated by man's urge to exploit and manipulate earlier remains to suit his egoistic short term needs, the mystery of Għar Gerduf's vanished past equally



Two severely damaged arcosolia: note the surviving ceiling and wall markings outlining their original configuration. Each arcosolium accommodated four burial troughs.

fills the enlightened viewer with awe and respect. The crux remains what type of access suits best.

As stressed earlier on, unless prompt consolidation measures are enacted, the greater part of the surviving ruins will shortly cave in. Such solidification works can take the form of a partial reconstruction. A less intrusive, and yet capable, medium to explore in three dimensions and from an infinite number of viewpoints Ghar Gerduf is via virtual reconstruction. Over and above its strong popular impact, computer reconstruction allows the presentation of complex information in an easily comprehensible and interactive manner. From a management point of view, virtual access through a research terminal in a museum or a related public institution is equally advantageous since the substantial financial and administrative burdens synonymous with the day-to-day running of a cultural attraction are done without.

Virtual access, though, does not relieve us of our obligation to safeguard the remnants of Gozo's most representational catacomb for the enjoyment of present and future generations. We need to act and act fast.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Vassallo C., *Dei Monumenti Antichi del Gruppo di Malta: Cenni Storici* (Malta 1876), p 40.
- 2 Caruana A.A., *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of Islands of Malta* (Malta 1882), p 102.
- 3 Pisani G., *Mill-Gżira tal-Holm* (Malta 1995), p 1-4.
- 4 Preca A., *Malta Cananea: Ossia Investigazione Filologico-Etimologiche nel Linguaggio Maltese* (Malta 1904), p 564.
- 5 During the Middle Ages the Maltese Islands were utilized by foreign rulers for exile purposes, whereas after 1530 Gozo was in turn employed for the same purpose by the Order.
- 6 Farrugia G., *S. Paolo Apostolo e Padre dei Gozitani* (Malta 1915), p 185.
- 7 Serracino Inglott E., *Il-Miklem Malti* Vol. III (Malta 1976), p 91.

- 8 Mizzi P., 1994
- 9 Giov. Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis (*Il Gozo Antico e Moderno Sacro e Profano*, Book II, Chapter X, Section 5) confirms the use of Ghar Gerduf as a cave dwelling.
- 10 *The Malta Government Gazette* No. 6836, 18.12.1925, p 983.
- 11 Farrugia's description (p194-5) suggests that the present south-facing breach into the western section was opened up before 1915.
- 12 Agius De Soldanis, (Book II, Chapter X, Section 5) suggests the likely existence of other hypogea close by.
- 13 Kindly made available by his son John.
- 14 Becker E., *Malta Sotterranea – Studien zur altchristlichen und jüdischen sepulkalkunst* (Strassburg, 1913), pp 68-9.
- 15 Farrugia, p 187.
- 16 Pisani, p 1.
- 17 Ciantar G., *Malta Illustrata* Lib. I, Not. X (Malta 1772), pp 367-8.
- 18 Borg V., *Malte: Une isle et ses hypogees de l'ere des premiers Chrétiens* (Les Dossiers de l'Archéologie, No. 19 1976), p 58.
- 19 Buhagiar M., *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands* (BAR International Series 302 1986), pp 370-1.
- 20 Abela G.F., *Descrizione di Malta* (Malta 1647), p 387.
- 21 Agius De Soldanis Book II, Chapter X, Section 5.
- 22 Ciantar Lib. I, Not. X, pp 367-8.
- 23 Houel J., *Voyage Pittoresque des Isles de Sicile, de Lipari et de Malte*, Vol. IV (Paris 1787), pp 77-8.
- 24 Boiesglin L., *Ancient & Modern Malta* Vol I (London 1805), pp 63-4.
- 25 Lacroix F., *L'Universo o Storia e Descrizione di tutti i Popoli: Isole dell'Africa* (Venezia 1851), pp 47-8.
- 26 Farrugia p 187.
- 27 Becker, p 68-9.
- 28 Bonanno A., 'The Archaeology of Gozo from Prehistoric to Arab Times' in Cini C. (ed) *Gozo the Roots of an Island* (Malta 1990), p 49. Similar glass bottles and small clay sarcophagi seem to have been unearthed during the 18th Century (Agius De Soldanis Book II, Chapter X, Section 1)
- 29 Lewis H., *Ancient Malta: A Study of Its Antiquities* (Malta 1977), p 150.
- 30 An oddity of Maltese catacombs is that *loculi* were almost exclusively reserved for the burial of young children – Buhagiar M., 'The Maltese Paleochristian Hypogea: a reassessment of the archaeological, iconographic and epigraphic source material', in R. Ellul-Micallef and S. Fiorini (ed), *Collected Papers* (University of Malta 1992), p 145.
- 31 Buhagiar M., *The Christianisation of Malta – Catacombs, cult centres and churches in Malta to 1530* (BAR International Series 1674, 2007) p 24.
- 32 Stevenson J., *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity* (London 1987), pp 133-5.
- 33 Azzopardi G., *The Extramural Necropolis of Gaulos* (Malta 2007), p 23.
- 34 Buhagiar 2007, p 117.
- 35 Abela (p 387) associates Ghar Gerduf with the Christian (*sacred*) cemeteries on mainland Malta, while Agius De Soldanis (Book II, Chapter 10, Section 5) links it to St. Augustine's Square cemetery.
- 36 Farrugia 1915, p 179-198.
- 37 Buhagiar 1986, p 29.
- 38 Old Testament, Book of Joel Chapter IV, Verse XIV.