



Christian Archaeology in Malta between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries from Two Unknown Letters

RESEARCH PAPER:
EUROPE/MIDDLE
EAST/AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The article presents two unpublished letters from Maltese archaeologists (Giovanni Gatt Said and Paolo Bellanti) to Giovanni Battista de Rossi and Alfred Louis Delattre, the most important early Christian archaeologists of the Mediterranean in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two texts have recently been discovered in the Vatican Library and in the Archive of the Missionaries of Africa in Rome respectively. Both deal with topics of great importance for Maltese Christian archaeology: St Paul's Grotto in Rabat and the evolution of Christian underground tombs and Christian lamps. The two authors appealed to two authorities in the field of scientific research at the time to allow Maltese archaeological research to advance. These letters are presented here with the full text and critical commentary, with the aim of using them as good examples to contribute to the reconstruction of the history of Christian archaeological research on the island, and to understand the role of their authors in the reconstruction of the problematic past of the Church of Malta.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Cecalupo, C. 2022. Christian Archaeology in Malta between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries from Two Unknown Letters. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 32(1): 1, pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-661>

For many centuries the only monumental and archaeological traces of Malta's early Christian history have been its catacombs. Malta is characterised by the presence of many Christian hypogea of different sizes, excavated in the typical local limestone from the late fourth to the mid-fifth century. The structure of these hypogea, usually contained in extension, is not comparable to the long Roman tunnels, because they are composed of rooms linked together not in succession but in a centripetal sense. Such a conformation is mainly due to the fact that these Christian hypogea are implanted in several ancient Punic burial chambers, which have been extended and connected while maintaining their main structural characteristics. A typical archaeological form of these catacombs consists of large round tables with a raised frame, carved into the rock and used for funeral banquets in the open spaces in front of various groups of tombs. The predominance of rock in the appearance of Maltese Christian cemeteries is accentuated by the paucity of pictorial decorations and epigraphs, with only common objects such as oil lamps and vases. This architectural homogeneity between pagan and Christian (or even Jewish) burial grounds, often located in the same areas, making them difficult to distinguish, especially when the common incision of crosses near the tombs are missing, remains one of the main problems of catacomb studies in Malta.¹

This difficulty in defining the Maltese catacombs, also due to the lack of late antique and early medieval sources mentioning local cemeteries and/or martyrs, conditioned the approach to the subject and remained a concern of scholars until the nineteenth century. In this sense, the history of Christian archaeology in Malta has rarely received special attention from scholars. While there are numerous critical references to previous research studies on specific early Christian sites, to date the only work to have presented the chronological development of the subject from its origins to the present day is the fundamental essay published by Mario Buhagiar in 1983, which focused particularly on the catacombs.² This almost exclusive focus on hypogeal cemeteries has left other expressions of early Christian Malta somewhat by the wayside due to their scarcity and difficulty of reading. Consequently, in most cases the topic of the early Maltese Church has been analysed from a historical point of view rather than a material one.³ However, in recent years, alongside the high-value historiographical studies on Maltese Phoenician-Punic and general pre-Roman archaeology, analyses on the history of the discovery of Maltese Christian catacombs have appeared, either focused on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries⁴ or in more general academic works.⁵ With this paper, which focuses on the period at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I aim to contribute to the enrichment of studies on the history of the Christian catacombs of Malta during the period of transition from a more confessional nineteenth-century archaeology to archaeological research as a science in the early twentieth century. The starting point for this work is the simultaneous discovery of two unpublished letters from Maltese scholars, Giovanni Gatt Said and Paolo Francesco Bellanti, to Giovanni Battista de Rossi and Alfred Louis Delattre on topics of Christian archaeology. After a brief presentation of the history of research on Malta, the texts of these letters will be presented, explained and commented on, following which, I will conclude with a critical reflection that may contribute to the reconstruction of the history of Maltese Christian archaeology.

CHRISTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY IN MALTA

Currently, there are no comprehensive publications that trace the history of Christian archaeology in Malta. It seems necessary, therefore, to give a brief account of the main studies on the topic to better situate the theme of this paper within a broader historiographical

1 See Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*, for a detailed account on Maltese Christian catacombs.

2 Buhagiar, *The Study*. The introductory chapter of Becker, *Malta Sotterranea*, is also worth mentioning.

3 Starting from Mayr, *Zur Geschichte*, and in modern times with Borg, *Malta*; Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*.

4 Cecalupo, *La riscoperta*; Cecalupo, *Giovanni Francesco Abela*.

5 Xerri, *A historiography*.

development. Christian archaeology in Malta started to become an interesting subject for local and European scholars during the seventeenth century. After a century of social restructuring of the island by the Order of Malta, Giovanni Francesco Abela, the father of Maltese historiography, published his 'Della Descrittione di Malta' in 1647, including the first surveys and descriptions of catacombs, churches, relics and Christian sites in the archipelago.⁶

Many other religious contemporaries of Abela wrote about the main sites of Maltese Christianity, in particular about the so-called Cave of St Paul.⁷ Such studies represented the basis for the few eighteenth-century writers who explored the subject, among whom Giovanni Antonio Ciantar stands out. Ciantar, in 1772 and 1780, republished Abela's work in two volumes, updating it with new discoveries concerning the catacombs.⁸ The works of the early nineteenth century, almost exclusively by foreign scholars, did not add much, repeating what has been written, often with little critical acumen,⁹ with the exception of the 'Malta Antica Illustrata' by Onorato Bres. He presented the catacombs as one of the 'most curious monuments of Malta', comparing them with those of Syracuse and pointing to a continuity of use of the pre-Roman hypogea, later used by Christians.¹⁰

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Maltese scholars characterised the local archaeology – even the Christian one. In a period when the history of the archipelago was perceived as an unripe subject, archaeology at that time was still linked to eighteenth-century scholarly rather than scientific knowledge, but with particular points of interest. Between 1865 and 1866 the first Archaeological Society was founded;¹¹ and when the antiquities cabinet of the Royal Public Library of Valletta was about to be structured with more modern criteria,¹² a few scholars who were involved in studying, recording and publishing Christian hypogeal monuments with the wider works on Maltese antiquity stand out. The first was Cesare Vassallo, Librarian and Keeper of Antiquities of the Malta Public Library.¹³ Annetto Caruana followed with his numerous publications: his prolific research activity on the hypogea of the island since 1860 made him a key-figure of Christian archaeology in Malta despite the problematic nature and inadequacy of many of his interpretations and critical analyses. In his works,¹⁴ enriched by Filippo Vassallo's drawings,¹⁵ Caruana (on whom a complete critical study is still lacking) looked at the Christian archaeology discoveries in Rome at the end of the nineteenth century by the Jesuit Giuseppe Marchi and the archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi. In fact, in the wake of the Roman discoveries, many archaeologists and scholars from various parts of the Mediterranean reawakened their interest in monuments of Christian antiquity,¹⁶ and Malta was no exception. In the case of the island, there was also the need to impose on the European scene, even from an archaeological point of view, the tradition of the foundation of the local church by the Apostle Paul.¹⁷ This was done through the enhancement of ancient sites commonly associated with the apostle and the first Christian community. Among these was the site most intimately connected to Pauline memory on the island, the Grotto of St Paul in Rabat.¹⁸

According to the Acts of the Apostles, the boat in which St Paul sailed to Rome with his jailers and St Luke foundered and the passengers found themselves on the island of Melita. The inhabitants treated them humanely and welcomed them all around a fire where Paul was bitten by a viper that jumped out because of the heat. Despite the fear of the locals, Paul

6 Abela, *La Descrizione di Malta*; Cecalupo, *Giovanni Francesco Abela*.

7 I.e. Manduca, *Relatione*; Axiaq, *Relazione*.

8 Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata I*; Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata II*.

9 Buhagiar, *The Study*, 293.

10 Bres; *Malta antica illustrata*, 230–235.

11 Skeates, *An Archaeology*, 44; Buhagiar, *The Study*, 294.

12 Delia, *National Museums*.

13 Vassallo, *Guida al Museo*; Buhagiar, *The Study*, 294.

14 Particularly Caruana, *Monografia critica*; Caruana, *San Publio*; Caruana, *Ancient pagan tombs*.

15 Buhagiar, *The Study*, 295.

16 Ferretto, *Note storico-bibliografiche*, 366–444.

17 Azzopardi, *St. Pauls Grotto*; Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*, 1–10.

18 Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*, 4–5.

threw the snake into the fire without injuring himself. This immunity to the viper's bite made Paul a deity in the eyes of the Maltese population. During his stay in Malta, Paul and his companions were welcomed and housed by the governor of the island, Publius. At the same time, Publius' father, suffering from fevers and dysentery, was visited and healed by Paul, who also began to heal the other inhabitants of the island who were ill, until his departure for Syracuse (Acts 28: 1–13). This story generated the tradition of Paul's curative power against poisons and of the similar power of his relics, together with the conversion of the Maltese to Christianity and the Pauline foundation of the Maltese Church with the election of the proto-bishop Publius in his Mdina palace, where the cathedral stands today.¹⁹

Since the late Middle Ages, Maltese tradition had identified the Grotto and the cave-church beneath the present-day Church of St Paul in Rabat with the Apostle's underground dwelling place during the period of his Maltese imprisonment.²⁰ On the monumental history of the whole complex, there are only a few fixed points, but the reconstruction, although complex, can be clarified according to the most recent studies.²¹ Underneath the present-day church of St Paul in Rabat and its oratory of St Publius, built from the seventeenth century onwards, the hypogeal areas remain, while all the medieval places of worship have disappeared. The Cave complex of St Paul today has several sections of unclear chronology. To the south is a medieval rock-cut church with three altars, belonging to the Maltese cave-church tradition and enlarged in the eighteenth century. To the west there are several recently explored private Christian burial hypogea dated to the late fourth century.²² These were partially destroyed at an unspecified time for the construction of the Grotto where St Paul is said to have lived, which must surely be dated instead to after the fifth century and not to the apostolic period.

Critical interest in the monumental and historical phases of the complex arose in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the wake of studies on Early Christian Rome and in a difficult period for the Church of Rome at the end of its temporal power. The Maltese case in this period is interesting because it opens a window on the reasons why archaeological excavations and researches were started on the island: these became part of the wider objectives of the Maltese church of the time. With the end of the theocracy of the Order of St John, after the French interregnum, Malta entered the British Empire, which was characterised by a fair degree of religious tolerance. While for the first time the island's rulers were not Catholic, the Catholic Church on the island began to experience a phase of great vitality. Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous local religious congregations were founded, the majority of the island's churches were restored,²³ and there was a growing interest in the material expressions of the Catholic faith on the island and Catholic scholars responded with ever more extensive, but often highly confessional, studies.

THE TRADITION OF THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A representative of this strand in Malta is Giovanni Gatt Said, rector of the Church and Grotto of St Paul in Rabat (author of the first letter presented in the appendix – Doc. 1). On the 23rd of November 1867, Gatt Said wrote to the archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi and sent him a short text he had just finished to prove the martyrdom of Eutychia, claiming how far behind Maltese scholars were in such studies and how much they needed instruction and enlightenment.

This was not the first time Gatt Said had addressed the father of Christian archaeology in Rome and appealed to his kindness, which was well known by international scholars.²⁴ Indeed, de

¹⁹ For the controversy concerning identification of Melita in the Scriptures see Buhagiar 1997; Buhagiar, *St. Paul's Shipwreck*.

²⁰ Fiorini, *Il Comm. Abela*; Luttrell, *Girolamo Manduca*; Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*, 1–4.

²¹ In particular Buhagiar, *The St. Paul's Cave*.

²² Buhagiar, *The St. Paul's Cave*, 54–62.

²³ Ferres, *Descrizione storica*.

²⁴ According to Buhagiar, *The Study*: 295, there is at least one other letter from Gatt Said to de Rossi on epigraphic matters recalled by Father Antonio Ferrua in his letter to J. G. Baldacchino on 2 June 1949, which I have not been able to trace.

Rossi received numerous requests for advice, opinions, and suggestions from all parts of Europe during his lifetime, as evidenced by the impressive number of letters preserved in the Vatican Library's *Vat. lat. fund.* It is clear that de Rossi's collection of letters can be studied today as a major source for reconstructing relations between scholars of the time, and have become an incredible mine for the history of the discipline.

Gatt Said presented de Rossi with a paper of his own 'to prove the martyrdom of Eutychia', evidently not the Roman or Thessalonian martyr, but rather the mother of Saint Lucia, a Sicilian saint and therefore closer to the Maltese hagiographic tradition. He turned to de Rossi because he was unable to find bibliographical references and comparisons in Malta on which to base his ideas with certainty, and asked the archaeologist to review and correct his work as much as possible.²⁵ The publication of this work and its final form seemed to depend totally on de Rossi's final verdict. I have no knowledge about this booklet on the martyrdom of Saint Eutychia promised by Gatt Said, perhaps because de Rossi's opinion was not entirely positive. No reply from de Rossi has been found but, at the end of this same letter, Gatt Said announces that in the event of a positive opinion from de Rossi he would include it as an appendix to his 'Risposta' (Answer) to the Anticritical Dissertation by Vincenzo Galea, which was then about to be printed. However, in this text, whose historical implications we shall analyse, there is no trace of the appendix about Eutychia.

In fact, the 'Risposta alla Dissertazione anticritica' was published in 1868 without any appendix beyond the treatise itself. The story is as follows.²⁶ In July 1863, the rector of the church and the Grotto of St Paul in Rabat published the devotional booklet 'La Grotta di San Paolo a Malta, considerazioni archeologico-critiche.'²⁷ He sought to prove, by the authority of past scholars and by the observation of monumental remains, that the famous grotto was not only the first place of Christian worship on the island, but also the Maltese bishop's church until the Constantinian peace, when the first phase of the present cathedral of Mdina was installed in Publius' family palace. As an answer to this text, in July 1864, the 'Dissertazione anticritica intorno la Primitiva Chiesa Vescovile in Malta' by Vincenzo Galea,²⁸ canon and professor of philosophy at the Seminary and University of Malta, was printed in Rome. Galea identified the cave as nothing more than a narrow oratory affiliated to the Episcopal Church founded by Paul himself in Publius' palace, on the site of the present cathedral of Mdina. The following year Gatt Said prepared his 'Risposta del Sacerdote Giovanni Gatt Said alla Dissertazione anticritica,'²⁹ which was only published in 1869 due to 'force majeure.'³⁰ As he announced to de Rossi, the text served to vindicate the episcopal dignity of the Grotto of St Paul until the Constantinian period.

Apart from the historical-archaeological question itself, which has been superseded by more recent studies,³¹ Gatt Said's letter has interesting implications for shedding light on Christian antiquities in Malta in the 1860s.

It is Gatt Said himself, almost as if to justify his claims, who stated 'how far behind the Maltese are in such Christian studies, how much they need education and enlightenment,' perhaps exaggerating in his defeatism but pointing out a certain 'backwardness' in the study of early Christian archaeology. This was partly due to the scarcity of clear written archaeological sources that could help Maltese scholars, as was the case in Rome in a macroscopic way, but also due to a tradition of religious and hagiographic stories so deeply rooted in local customs and traditions as to be seen as untouchable. This predominance of the tradition of the apostolic antiquity of the Maltese Church and the remains of its monument was the offspring of an important local catholic strand of historiography, which began with Abela and continued throughout the nineteenth century with a series of religious scholars monopolising

25 The lack of an up-to-date bibliography led to the need to consult more expert scholars, as also witnessed by Emmanuel Magri in 1903 and Napoleone Tagliaferro 1907 in some of their letters to Alfred Louis Delattre, Cecalupo, *Note on letters*.

26 Gatt Said, *Risposta*, Introduction to the reader; Caruana, *Monografia critica*, 6–7.

27 Gatt Said, *La Grotta di San Paolo*.

28 Galea, *Dissertazione*.

29 Gatt Said, *Risposta*.

30 Gatt Said, *Risposta*, 136.

31 Galea & Ciarlò, *St. Paul in Malta*; Buhagiar, *The St. Paul's Cave*; Azzopardi, *St. Paul's Grotto*; Rizzone and Sabatini, *Gli ipogei*.

the subject. In this sense, Gatt Said, with his work on St Paul's Cave, was the heir of a long tradition of religious antiquarians characterising the history of Christian archaeology in Malta and beyond,³² since his intention was mainly to promote the devotion of the holy places.³³ This is mainly evident in the sources he used in both works. On the one hand, he was interested in the monument from an architectural perspective, giving it a certain weight and often referring to the work of Marchi and de Rossi to establish comparisons with Rome. Likewise, his use of local archival sources (such as apostolic visits and the *tabularium* of the cathedral of Mdina) for the reconstruction of the sites is commendable. Alongside this, however, his sources were all religious; beyond the indispensable Abela and Ciantar's reprint, we find the important scholars of Sicilian-Maltese historiography (Falzello, Mongitore, Caietano, Lapide), Jesuit scholars such as Manduca,³⁴ and foreign Roman researchers such as Boldetti, an exponent of the catacombs official "relic-hunters" of Rome.³⁵ Surprisingly, we find abundant references to Cardinal Wisemann, who, in his 1855 novel, 'Fabiola or the Church of the Catacombs', had spread throughout Europe the story of the catacombs being used as hiding places for persecuted Christians. The presence of numerous references to Wisemann (who also was a Commander of the Order of Malta) in these texts³⁶ seems to me highly indicative of Gatt Said's confessional and edifying approach to Christian archaeology in Malta.

Given this assumption, it is clear that all of Gatt Said's texts, including his letter to de Rossi, revolved around exclusively hagiographic and apostolic themes, which became the axiom to be proved by archaeology and the monument.

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: NEW CHRISTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY IN MALTA

The Catholic and apostolic interests of a long-standing school of Maltese antiquarians were tempered by new trends at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this period, the island's archaeologists embarked on major excavation campaigns, buoyed by a new European scientific spirit. At the same time, the British government approved many excavations and fervent nationalists started looking at the island's past with great interest.³⁷ The new scientific spirit of the century, which arrived in Malta with the fundamental works of Albert Mayr and Erich Becker,³⁸ was embodied in the methodical approach of Themistocle Zammit. Zammit's merits for Maltese (and therefore also Christian) archaeology at large are numerous and well known: he was the first director and curator of the Museum of Antiquities of Valletta, separated from the Public Library in 1903 and run by a Board of Management of distinguished men.³⁹ He was also the first archaeologist to work on sites all over the island, which he recorded with texts and sketches in his famous notebooks (kept today in the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta). Zammit excavated and recorded numerous Christian hypogea and also the main catacomb sites in the area of Rabat. However, he was not the only one to deal with these types of monuments: next to him was Paolo Francesco Bellanti, also a member of the Museum's Board of Management and deputy curator of the museum.⁴⁰ Bellanti, who approached archaeological studies at a late age, had a talent for drawing and a remarkable tirelessness: he poured these characteristics into his typological research, as we shall see, on Maltese rock-tombs of all chronologies. Although he lacked specific academic training, he was extensively familiar with contemporary publications on the archaeology of Rome and Carthage and had no problem in contacting foreign scholars to obtain information on comparisons and Mediterranean archaeological data useful for his reconstructions.⁴¹

32 Beaver, *Scholarly Pilgrims*.

33 Gatt Said, *Risposta*, Introduction.

34 Luttrell, *Approaches to Medieval Malta*.

35 Boldetti, *Osservazioni*.

36 Gatt Said, *La Grotta di San Paolo*, 32; Gatt Said, *Risposta*, 66–68.

37 Vella and Gilkes, *The lure of the antique*, 362.

38 Mayr, *Die Insel Malta*, Becker, *Malta Sotterranea*.

39 Buhagiar, *The Study*, 296; Delia, *National Museums*.

40 Buhagiar, *The Study*, 296.

41 Buhagiar, *The Study*, 297.

All the main features of Bellanti's way of working, and the role he played in the research of Christian archaeology in Malta, can be found in the second letter presented here. The letter was addressed to Father Alfred Louis Delattre, the first great scholar of ancient Carthage.⁴² He, too, was a pivotal figure in Mediterranean archaeology. Although mainly seen as the undisputed authority in the field of Phoenician-Punic archaeology,⁴³ Delattre was the discoverer of the main Christian monuments of Carthage, becoming the father of Christian archaeology in North Africa and the main connoisseur of the early African Church and its remains.⁴⁴ Bellanti evidently turned to Delattre by virtue of his erudition and diachronic knowledge of Tunis, which closely resembled the Maltese situation and became the main term of comparison for all new discoveries, including Christian ones.

Bellanti's correspondence with Delattre probably began in July 1909, as evidenced by the first letter in the file on Bellanti kept in the Roman archives of the White Fathers:

'Sir and very Reverend Father, I have had the audacity to seek an introduction to your Reverend Father's house, hoping that the kindness of a priest and the enthusiasm of an archaeologist will be able to provide me with the necessary information and no doubt will not be indiscreet. I have been studying the antiquities of Malta, my country, for a long time, and for some years I have been trying to classify our ancient tombs' (GAMAfr Rome, Y6. Corr. A-L, Bellanti, translation by C. Cecalupo).

In this letter, written to ask for opinions on the Maltese tombs, he stated that he had been working for a long time to classify the ancient tombs of the archipelago, and presented some results for the Punic period. Already, here in 1909, we see traces of the broader and more structured classification that Bellanti proposes in his 'The Rock-Tombs of Malta', never published and preserved in a manuscript version in the 'Melitensia' section of the University of Malta, to which extensive reference will be made later.

The letter presented in appendix (Doc. 2) is the second one in the dossier and is dedicated to Christian underground burials.

On the 25th of November 1920, Paul Bellanti wrote to Delattre about his studies of Christian archaeology. He indicates that the monuments of early Christianity in these islands have been heavily neglected, and little remained of them, apart from the rock-cut vaults and a collection of Christian lamps preserved in the Museum in Valletta. He used this letter to summarise and present to Delattre his typological study to establish the period of Maltese Christian burials. Bellanti starts by presenting the pagan tombs of the necropolis of Cghaki, their structures and finds, comparing them with isolated tombs in Gozo and other places. He believed that it was in the Christian era that the modification of the pagan type of tombs began, he also identified different phases and sketched them in the letter, adding many descriptive details of discoveries and structures.

Bellanti highlighted the inattention afflicting the island's Christian antiquities, which had been set aside in the flourishing excavations of the great megalithic temples and the more enigmatic sites such as the Hypogeum. In this letter, Bellanti focused on Christian vestiges but presented his observations in the two directions that characterised his work: the analysis of the development of hypogea and the typology of finds, particularly the oil lamps. In doing so, he relied on the catalogues of lamps provided by Delattre⁴⁵ and, above all, by Maurice Besnier and Paul Blanchet,⁴⁶ but he also found Maltese pieces with problematic features, to which he could not assign a chronology for defining the contexts. It is interesting to note how the presentation of the types of Christian tombs and the succession of the phases of their development enabled Bellanti to support the problems of chronology encountered in the study of the oil lamps, of which he also sent Delattre photographs (*Figure 1a-c*: these are the only photographs by Bellanti found in GAMAfr). The entire letter is pervaded by one of the most conditioning problems of Maltese Christian archaeology, namely the difficulty in defining clear phases of development

42 Freed, *Louis-Alfred Delattre*.

43 Briffa, *Historical Introduction*, 8-9; Cecalupo, *Notes on letters*.

44 Freed, *Louis-Alfred Delattre*; Effros *Reviving Carthage*.

45 Delattre, *Les lampes antiques*.

46 Besnier, Blanchet, *Description*, 18-38.

of the hypogeal monumentality that had become standardised over the centuries,⁴⁷ and in clarifying with certainty the religious affiliation of individual hypogea. Bellanti recognises that pagan tombs often contained the same type of pottery as Christian tombs. He therefore considered it necessary to provide Delattre with some information on the Maltese Christian tombs in which the oil lamps he was interested in were found. He used the case of Christian tombs such as that of Nigret (between Rabat and Mtarfa), and the larger catacomb of tal-Liebru in Safi (*Figure 2*), known and highly studied since Caruana's time.⁴⁸ Bellanti also offered valuable sketches of the tombs he mentioned: this ability to draw plans and finds himself was linked to his family's artistic training (Paolo was the son of the well-known painter Michele Bellanti) and was one of the distinctive features of his archaeological fieldwork (*Figure 3*).

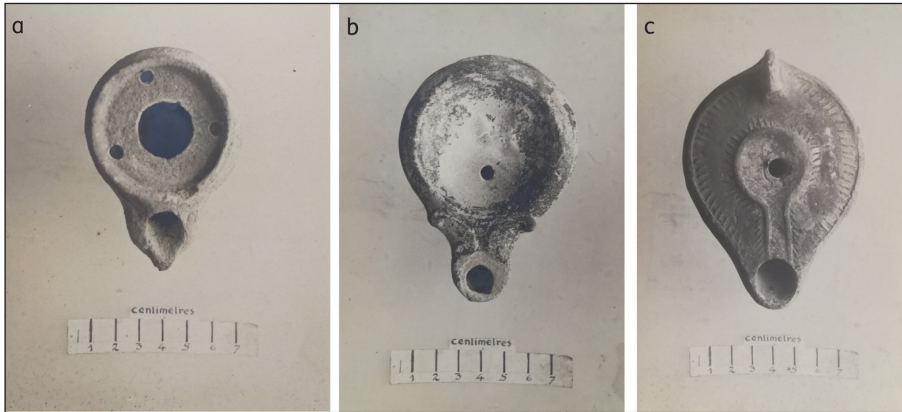


Figure 1a–c Three photographs of lamps from ta-Cghaki sent by Bellanti to Delattre. Edward Alf. Gouder Photographer – Reproduced with permission of GAMAfr Rome, Y6. Corr. A-L.

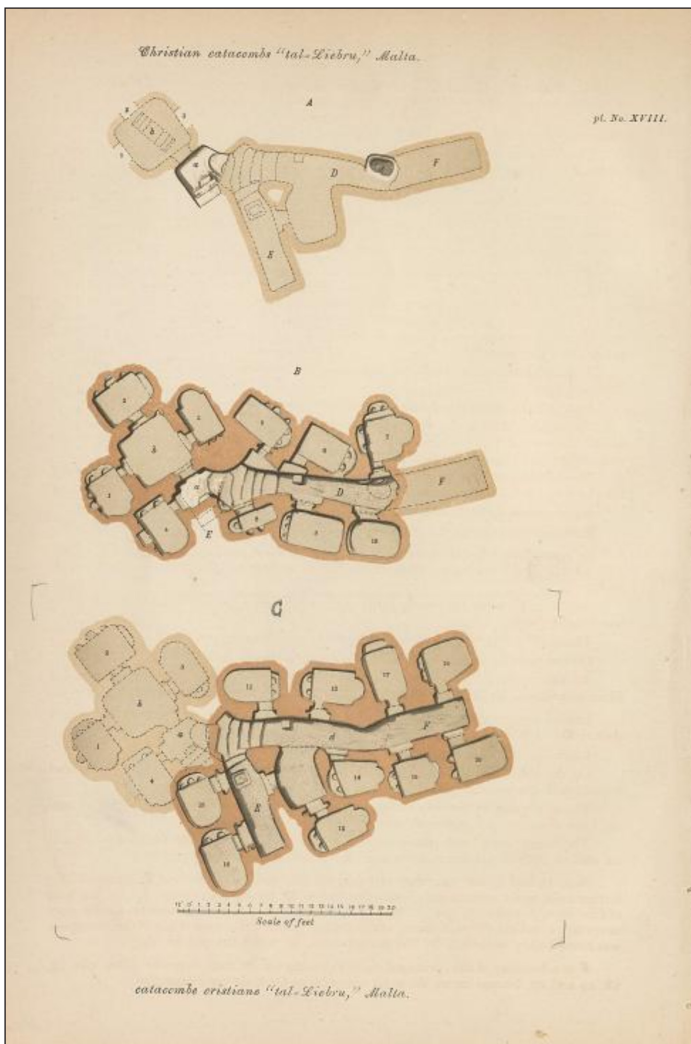


Figure 2 Plan of the catacomb of tal-Liebru in Safi from Caruana 1898.

⁴⁷ Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*.

⁴⁸ Caruana, *Ancient pagan tombs*, 79–80; Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine*, 350–356; Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*.

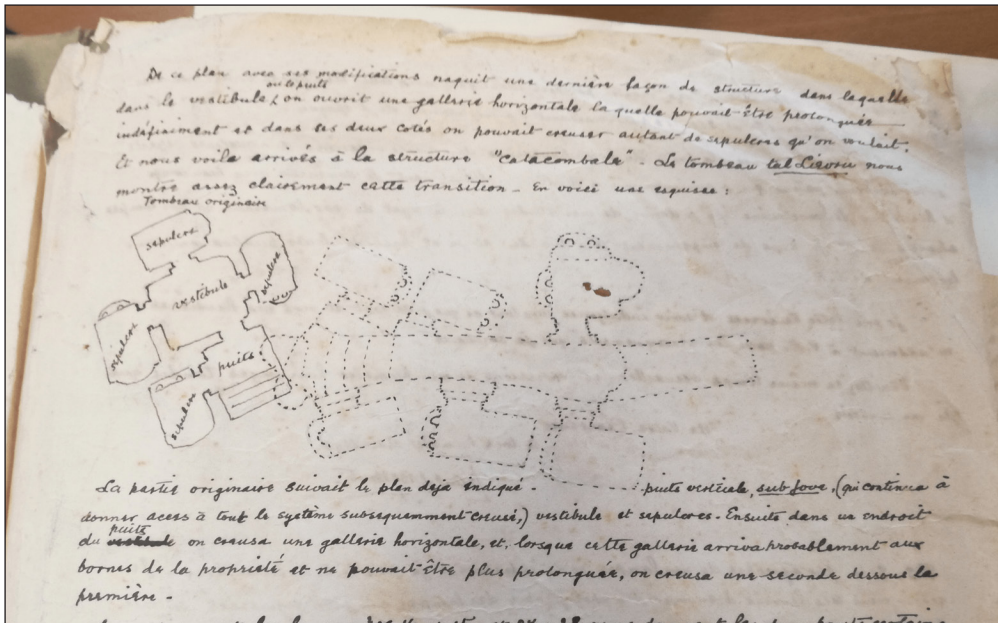


Figure 3 Sketch plan of the catacomb of tal-Liebru in Safi by Bellanti. Reproduced with permission of GAMAfr Rome, Y6. Corr. A-L.

It is interesting to note that everything we find mentioned in this letter has its counterpart in Bellanti's manuscript 'The Rock-Tombs of Malta.' When reading this long account on the development and cataloguing of rock-tombs one finds many references to the help received from Delattre and to his publications.⁴⁹ The text also deals extensively with the necropolis of ta-Cgħaki⁵⁰ and the graves of Nigret.⁵¹ There is also a lengthy discussion of lamps, including Christian ones. Here Bellanti⁵² re-proposed the problem exposed to Delattre, when reporting on roundly made, one-nozzled oil lamps without ornaments, often found in the catacombs, but which could not be dated to a precise period of the Christian era.

All the architectural themes set out in the letters to Delattre are also reflected in this manuscript, which at this point can be dated to the years around 1920. It is worth dwelling briefly on the section of the text concerning the Christian catacombs,⁵³ which completed what was said in the letter. Bellanti did not want to go into the details of the matter but defined⁵⁴ the catacombs as an evolution of the pagan tomb type.⁵⁵ He emphasised the collective nature of the catacombs, which on a structural level is expressed in the union between the corridors and passages of several individual tombs built in an older style. Similarly, Bellanti pointed out that there was a lack of studies on ceramic deposits of the catacombs, but what was preserved in the museum repeated patterns of first- and second-century pottery from various hypogea. In this sense, he also affirmed the coexistence of pagans and Christians in the first three centuries AD.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By comparing the works and interests of Gatt Said and Bellanti as representative of their time, we can understand the development of Christian archaeology in Malta between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gatt Said's texts, ideas and objectives are those that have characterised archaeological research on the island since the seventeenth century. He certainly understood the need to anchor the statements in the monuments, but his main concern was always religious, and always exclusively focused on the origins of the Maltese Christian community. Bellanti's texts, on the other hand, were different, because they were influenced by the more scientific, practical, and methodical approach adopted since the beginning of the

49 Bellanti, *The Rock-Tombs*, 131-132, 185, 241.

50 Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine*, 174-192.

51 Caruana, *Ancient pagan tombs*, 61; Buhagiar, *The Christianisation*.

52 Bellanti, *The Rock-Tombs*, 192-194.

53 Bellanti, *The Rock-Tombs*, 251-255.

54 In Bellanti, *The Rock-Tombs*, 153.

55 Which he called Libyan as also mentioned in his first letter to Delattre of 10 July 1909.

twentieth century by European archaeologists in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Bellanti's method was still anchored to the idea of a linear typological development of hypogeal monuments, but it was affected by a climate of more advanced methodologies on the study of local antiquities promoted by Themistocle Zammit. The first decades of the century, in fact, saw changes in Maltese archaeology: the protection of antiquities, the use of photography, and the collaborations of various professionals. This resulted in a different focus in the comparison of monuments and the archaeological finds and, above all, in an attention towards Christian antiquity that goes beyond the apostolic stories, including the Christian community in its development and in the material traces of its centuries-old life on the island, before the arrival of the Arabs in the ninth century.

What the two letters and approaches have in common is the need to look to foreign contexts and scholars for comparisons and opinions. This represents a constant in Maltese Christian archaeology, which since the seventeenth-century has never been conceived as a subject in itself, but always in connection with foreign situations, particularly Sicilian and Roman. Gatt Said in fact turned to de Rossi and looked to Rome precisely to seek support in reconstructing the apostolicity of the Maltese church. He looked to de Rossi, an archaeologist at the court of Pope Pius IX, for scientific and orthodox assurance for his research. Bellanti, on the other hand, turned to North Africa and Delattre's excavations. The change started from a slow scientific detachment of the Maltese archaeological situation from that of Rome, which began with the studies of Albert Mayr and Erich Becker, who were the first to explicitly propose the filiation of Maltese archaeological expressions from North African and Middle Eastern Christianity.⁵⁶ Moreover, the excavations of the great prehistoric sites and the innumerable Punic necropolises since the early twentieth century had offered Maltese scholars a chronological complexity not found in Rome, but fully traceable in Carthage. The multi-layered Carthage brought to light by Father Delattre in those years is the perfect comparison for Malta: not only was there a wealth of impressive Phoenician-Punic monuments, but above all, a rich Christianity of very ancient origin, that left great archaeological traces and ended with the Arab occupation.

From this perspective, the two letters presented here can certainly contribute to the history of Christian archaeology in Malta at a time of great change for the discipline. Looking at these texts in a broader cultural perspective helps to better define the incredible network of contacts between scholars who, through exchanges of ideas, have contributed to making archaeology an international subject that provides the basis of our shared Mediterranean identity.

APPENDIX

I am offering an exact transcription of the letters; therefore, I chose not to correct any of the original mistakes of the writers.

Doc. n. 1

Vatican Library (BAV), Vat. lat. 14246, f. 390r

Illmo Sig. Cavaliere

Pieno di quella fiducia che mi ispira la sua ben nota e tanto decantata condiscendenza nel far copia dei suoi chiarissimi lumi a chiunque desidera approfittarsene, mi presento ardentissimo a V.S. Illma per pregarla col cuore sulle mani a volersi compiacere di esaminare lo scritto che le accludo con quella confidenza che ha nel suo maestro lo scolaro voglioso davvero di essere istruito. Privo di libri e di memorie che sono di aiuto indispensabile in questi studi; mancante di monumenti certi che potrebbero somministrarmi i confronti, non vorrei cadere un più di uno di quegli errori che l'odierna critica tanto severa non soffrirebbe pazientemente.

Io mi son sforzato, com'Ella ben vede, di provare il martirio di Eutichia. Ho esaurito tutti gli argomenti, secondo me, conducenti allo scopo. Dubito ch'io vada illuso.

Perciò mi rivolgo a Vossignoria nella piena fiducia di essere coadiuvato, domandandole non solo un giudizio, che io l'avrò per sentenza perentoria ma una correzione ancora la più castigata. Desidero ch'ella mi facesse delle aggiunte, che mi

⁵⁶ Mayr, *Die altchristlichen*; Mayr, *Die Insel Malta*; Becker, *Malta Sotterranea*.

suggerisca argomenti più validi da comprovare il mio assunto, nel caso che potrebbe essere sostenuto.

(390v) Scemi, aggiunga, riformi lo scritto come crederà meglio. Quanto Ella più avrà postillato, e castigato il rozzo mio lavoro, tanto più mi confermo dell'impegno che Ella avrà preso per mio riguardo, pronto di rassegnarmi in tutto ai suoi dettati.

Io non vanto né potrò mai vantare nessun merito da pretendere tanto. La sua bontà, l'amor suo a questi studi, e più la sua compiacenza a me nota dagli scritti altrui mi colmano di fiducia, e mi incoraggiano ad essere così ardito e molesto.

Se V.S. Illma crede nella sua saviezia (sic) che lo scritto sia meritevole di pubblicità, dopo le correzioni, le rimarche, le postille che si compiacerà farne, avrà reso un beneficio sommo non solo a me ma eziandio alla Chiesa di Malta.

Io sono sul punto di pubblicare, è già sotto torchio, la -Risposta- alla Dissertazione Anticritica che si era stampata costà -Tipografia Forense- contro le mie -Considerazioni sulla Grotta di San Paolo a Malta- di cui le avea presentato copia per mezzo del Revdo Pre Guardiano dei Minori Conventuali maltese della Notabile (Dalla lettura di questi due già pubblicati scritti avrà Ella conosciuto a fondo (391r) quanto siamo indietro in siffatti studi e quanto abbisogniamo d'istruzioni e di lumi). Sicchè avuto il suo Oracolo sarà un'-Appendice- come porta in fronte.

Vossignoria da uomo grande e generoso perdonerà, e ne vado sicuro, la mia temerità. Quest'istessa valga almeno a significarle la somma fiducia che nutro di sua bontà, e la convinzione che porto del suo ottimo cuore.

Gradisca i miei sinceri e profondi ossequi, e mi comandi ove creda poterle esser utile in qualche modo mentre con tutta verità mi protesto e mi raffermo

Di V. Sig.ria Illma Sig.re Cavre G.B. Derossi

Malta 23 Novembre 1867

Umo ed Obmo Servo

Giovanni Gatt Said Rettore della Santa Grotta di San Paolo.

Doc. 2

General Archive of the White Fathers in Rome (GAMAfr Rome), Y6. Corr. A-L

243, Strada St. Torri, Sliema

Malta, 25 Novembre, 1920

Monsieur et très Révérend Père,

Je prends la hardiesse de m'adresser à Votre Révérence touchant quelques études d'archéologie chrétienne dont je me suis longtemps occupé.

Le monument de la Chrétienté primitive dans ces îles ont été assez lourdement négligés, de sorte que, au présent, il en reste peu de chose, au dehors des caveaux creusés dans le roc dont il y a pleureurs.

Heureusement une collection de lampes chrétiennes est préservée dans notre Musée, la plupart héritées de l'ancien Musée autrefois attaché à la Bibliothèque Publique. C'est sur ce sujet des lampes que je cherche de la bonté de Votre Révérence des éclaircissements.

Au bût d'être aussi bref que possible, j'ai esquissé les lampes les plus remarquables les accompagnant d'un Répertoire explicatif. En essayant une classification de ce lampes j'ai cherché de suivre les principes établis par V.R. dans "Les lampes du Musée de S.t Luis de Carthage", et, pareillement, le classification donnée par Messieurs Maurice Besnier et Paul Blanchat dans "Musées de l'Algérie et de la Tunisie". Cependant nos lampes présentant des différences qui me causant beaucoup d'hésitation touchent l'exactitude de mes conclusions. Voila ce que me pousse à chercher l'assistance de V.R.

L'étude est bien utile pour établir l'époque de nos sépultures chrétiennes.

Les tombes païennes dont nous prouvons connaître l'âge nous aident aussi à fixer cette époque. En particulière la nécropole païenne du Cgħaki, explorée en 1906 -y, nous donne à ce bût des renseignements précieux. Cette nécropole, par les monnaies et les poteries y déposées, peut dater du dernier siècle avant J.C. au troisième siècle de notre ère. Et il y a d'autres tombeaux païens isolés, en cette île et in Gozo, appartenant à la même époque. Or ces tombeaux païens offrent les mêmes types

de lampes et de poteries que les lampes et les poteries longtemps préservées dans notre Musée, comme d'objets retrouvés dans des tombeaux chrétiens; et les tombeaux chrétiens explorés dans les dernières années, offrent aux aussi les mêmes types de lampes et de poteries.//

Les tombeaux païens dont je parle montrent que nos païens continuèrent, jusqu'à la fin du paganisme dans ces îles, à creuser leurs repaires à la façon séculaire adoptée des temps les plus séculiers – puits rectangulaire, donnant accès à une ou deux chambres sépulcrales rectangulaires, creusées dans les petites parois du puits. Toutes autres structures, et en particulier les tombeaux d'aspect catacombale, n'ont jamais révélé le moindre signe d'avoir été des sépultures païennes.

Une étude soignée des structures m'a convaincu que ce fut à l'époque chrétienne que commença la modification du type séculaire de nos tombeaux.

Et voici l'évolution de structure que j'ai observée :

[Type séculaire

Drawing: Chambre sépulcrale – puits – chambre sépulcrale]

[première modification

Drawing: Chambre sépulcrale – chambre sépulcrale – puits – chambre sépulcrale]

Dans un tombeau à trois chambres à «Meyeran tan-Nigret», dans le débris, j'ai recueilli un fragment de poterie rouge claire avec une croix gravée à la pointe, ce que ma fit conjecturer que c'était une sépulture chrétienne.

La coupure de trois chambres au lieu de deux autour d'un puits plus spacieux était peut-être un des premiers efforts pour augmenter le nombre des sépultures occurring dans un même puits. Mais je ne fis pas trop d'insister [sic] sur ce point-là, c'est une pure conjecture.

Cependant la deuxième modification de structure est fondée sur des données plus certains. Ce sont des tombeaux assurément chrétiens par les symboles gravés sur leurs parois et par les lampes y déposées.

2^{me} modification

[Drawing: sépulcre puits – vestibule – sépulcre – sépulcre]

On peut s'imaginer les difficultés rencontrées par les premiers chrétiens en cherchant d'accomplir leurs rites funéraires sub Jove, dans le puits, ou sur le bord du puits, selon l'usage de leurs aïeux païens. (Dans beaucoup de puits des tombeaux païens nous rencontrons les vestiges des rites funéraires que les païens accomplissaient dans le puits ou sur le bord du même. Nous avons même trouvés des puits autels et de restes des sacrifices.) Les premiers chrétiens, entourés des païens qui leurs étaient peut être hostiles, sentaient le besoin d'avoir un lieu à l'abri ou accomplir les rites funéraires de leurs défunts. Voici dans cette modification un effort à voir ce lieu dans la chambre que j'appelle «vestibule».

Une troisième modification maintenait le même plan approfondissant le sol du vestibule pour permettre la coupure de deux étages superposés de sépultures doublant ainsi leur nombre. Ces tombeaux étaient vraisemblablement des tombeaux de famille dans lesquels les premiers chrétiens donnaient hospitalité à leurs fratres défunts.

3^{me} modification (coups)

[Drawing: puits]

Le tombeau découvert à Zeytun (lampes n.ux 23, 24, 25) était de ce type.

Une quatrième modification a le même plan de la troisième avec un sépulcre additionnel creusé dans le sol du vestibule. //

De ce plan avec ses modifications naquit une dernière façon de structure dans laquelle dans le vestibule ou le puits on ouvrit une galerie horizontale la quelle pouvait être prolonger indéfiniment et dans les deux cotés on pouvait creuser autant de sépultures qu'on voulait. Et nous voilà arrivés à la structure «catacombale».

Le tombeau tal Lievru [sic] nous montre assez clairement cette transition. En voici une esquissée :

[Tombeau originaire

Drawing: puits – sépulcre – vestibule – sépulcre – sépulcre – sépulcre]

La partie originaire suivait le plan déjà indiqué. Puits verticale, sub Jove, (qui continua à donner accès à tout le système subséquent creusé,) vestibule et sépulcres. Ensuite dans un endroit du puits on creusa une galerie horizontale, et, lorsque cette galerie arriva probablement aux bornes de la propriété et ne pouvait être plus prolongée, on creusa une seconde dessous la première.

Jusqu'à présent les lampes n.ux 14 et 15, et 27 et 28 nous donnent les deux bouts certains de l'époque dans la quelle on enterrait cadavres dans les catacombes. Il est possible que les lampes 26, 29, 30, avec poigné solide, et quelques unes de celles photographies, étaient elles aussi sépulcrales. Plus probablement elles étudient seulement du lampes d'illumination dans les périodes suivants quand les chrétiens fréquentaient les catacombes pour la célébration des mystères.

La classification des lampes dans «Les lampes du Musée de S.t Luis» et celle donnée par Besnier et Blanchat, supposent des périodes différents du temps en succession. A-t-on défini ces périodes avec quelque exactitude ? Et les lampes de notre Musée que j'ai cherché de classer sont-elles bien classifiés ?

Je crois qu'il est bien possible que plusieurs de nos lampes soient de manufacture locale. Nous avons argile aussi blanche que rouge et il n'y a pas de doute que notre poterie païenne était la plupart de manufacture locale. Jugeant par d'autres ouvrages locales des dernier siècles païens et des premiers siècles chrétiens on peut comprendre qu'il u avait à Malte dans ces temps-là des ouvriers et des artistes très capables, de sorte que il est fort probable que nos potiers alors imitaient à perfection les types des lampes adoptés dans autres régions.

Je suppose que ce sont les lampes du premier période qui appartiennent à l'époque plus seculér [sic] du christianisme. Si ma supposition est valide, notre lampe n.° 7 n'appartiendrait-elle a cette époque-la ?

Et que pense V.R. à l'égard du symbole représenté sur la même lampe ? Autres points d'interrogation sont 1) les marques sur les revers de nos lampes 2) si les types des lampes non-classifiées soient connus 3) l'époque la plus seculér dans la quelle le symbole du poisson apparut.

Confrontant les lampes des sépulcres chrétiens avec celles des sépulcres païens dont nous pouvons préciser l'époque il résulte une identité parfaite. Il n'y a pas de doute quant à l'époque de ces tombeaux païens. Nous avons une nécropole entière (Cghaki) dans un tombeau de la quelle on retrouve une monnaie frappée en Malta avec la légende MEΛITAIΩN nous donnant l'époque dernier siècle avant J.C. au 1^{re} siècle de l'ère chrétienne et poteries, lampes, tailler toutes montrent la même époque. Cependant // un tombeau païen découvert à Gozo montre poteries identiques avec celles de Cghaki et des monnaies romaines (Trebonianus Gallus 251-53 A.D.) marquant l'autre extrême de l'époque.

J'ai déjà epteriorè [sic] la bonté de Votre Révérence dans autres occasions sur quelques aspect de nos tombeaux païens que j'avais soumis à V.R. Maintenant je soumette avec beaucoup d'hésitation des conclusions que je derior de mes études sur le sujet de nos tombeaux et nos lampes chrétienne. Je suis de tempérament très timide et je ne hasard leur publication sans le conseil de V.R.

Je pris Votre Révérence d'avoir indulgence vers tout ce que j'ai écrit et vers me hardiesse en m'adressant a V.R. pour les renseignements [sic] que je souhaite. Veuillez en même temps accueillis les expressions de mes humbles hommages tandis que je me souscris

De Votre Révérence le très humble serviteur

Paul F. Bellanti

P.S. Si les photographes de nos lampes vous intéressent je prie V.R. de les retenir. Je serais même très heureux d'envoyer une photographie des lampes que j'ai esquisser si cela est du plaisir a V.R.

J'ajoute - photo, face et profil, d'une tête, sculptée en pierre, grandeur demi-naturelle, récemment trouvée par le Professeur Them : Zammit dans ses fouilles, et qu'il me prie de vous envoyer avec ses hommages. Le Professeur et moi-même nous serions tes empresses d'apprendre en que Votre Révérence pense sur le style de cette tête.

Chiara Cecalupo acknowledges support from the CONEX-Plus programme funded by Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 801538. The author wishes to thank Matthias Ebejer for his help in deciphering Maltese names in the letters, and to Dr. Valeria Vanesio who provided with the access to Bellanti's bibliography. Appreciation is also due to fr. Dominique Arnauld, Archivist of the GAMAFr in Rome (Via Aurelia 269) for his support during many visits to the archive from 2018 to 2021.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Cecalupo
Bulletin of the History of Archaeology
 DOI: 10.5334/bha-661

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Cecalupo, C. 2022. Christian Archaeology in Malta between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries from Two Unknown Letters. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 32(1): 1, pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-661>

Submitted: 03 August 2021

Accepted: 01 February 2022

Published: 12 April 2022

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