

Article

Catacomb Rediscoveries in the Central Mediterranean (16th–20th Century): An Overview

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Abstract

This article focuses on the rediscovery of catacombs in the central Mediterranean and explores some of this historiographic heritage through different kinds of documents in order to present some interesting results regarding human and cultural connections among Tunisia, Malta and Italy. It presents an overview of the history of the rediscovery of the catacombs without focusing on the details of individual explorers or events but rather by identifying some key points that reveal a trend among scientific research, antiquarianism and confessionalism. These points are crucial elements in defining a broad international and interdisciplinary phenomenon, one that goes way beyond the rediscovery of every single catacomb. This article begins with an archaeological point of view to explain what was a catacomb between the 2nd and the 7th centuries and then offers a brief history of catacomb exploration through the centuries, from the late 16th to the early 20th century. The central part of the text is dedicated to the development of the main pillars that identify the process of catacomb rediscovery: the political frame, cultural circulation and the movement of people.

Keywords: early Christian catacombs; Mediterranean; rediscovery; politics; modern age

1. Introduction

The presence of large underground Christian cemeteries in various places in the Mediterranean has attracted the attention of many scholars, travellers, curious people and researchers for many centuries, from the modern age until today. The catacomb complexes of the central Mediterranean (i.e., Italy, Malta and North Africa) present archaeological and architectural features of great interest, with common elements as well as singular regional peculiarities.

Regardless of the specific archaeological features, however, the rediscovery and investigation of catacombs in Italy and Malta have always been strongly linked since their rediscovery in the mid-seventeenth century. The incredible interconnection between the rediscovery phenomena underlies a rich, common literary, scientific and graphic production that has been little studied as a unitary phenomenon and instead presents rich insights from historiographical and cultural points of view.

2. Materials and Methods

The essay examines the history of the discovery of Christian catacombs in the central Mediterranean (Italy, Malta and Tunisia) from the end of the 16th century (the period of the first real archaeological discoveries of the catacombs of Rome) to the beginning of the 20th century, when the catacombs of Sousse (Tunisia) were found and investigated. This is a



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cluster of cemeteries that can be considered as a single phenomenon, both because of their historical and archaeological interconnection and because of a certain common fate in the process of their rediscovery and study in the modern age.

This analysis is divided into several points, which are useful for obtaining a picture of the phenomenon of the rediscovery of catacombs as completely as possible. However, it is clear that the analysis is complex and multifaceted and, therefore, cannot be considered complete or exhaustive in the context of this essay. The points examined are, first, the sequence of events in the history of the discoveries themselves and then the networks of movement (of people, ideas and objects) generated by these discoveries and, at the same time, forming their basis. This comprehensive description of the phenomenon is based primarily on archival research (of materials produced between the late 16th and early 20th centuries) and on a bibliographic study of texts published in conjunction with the various discoveries (17th–20th centuries). In particular, it was possible to trace mainly published and unpublished materials by the scholars responsible for these discoveries, considered to be the main “official” and reliable sources, and those relating to the institutions or social groups involved in the process. There is a wide variety of document types: historical texts on the catacombs with their graphic apparatus and preparatory archival material, notarial deeds or official texts from the main governmental and ecclesiastical bodies involved, and private letters exchanged between scholars participating in these studies. Most of the sources used have been published individually in the past (particularly by the author of this study, but not exclusively), with the sole exception of the document in Appendix A, which has been recently re-examined and offers a new perspective on the relationship between Malta and the relics of the Roman catacombs in the early modern age. Although these sources have already been published, they are analysed here from a holistic and wide-ranging perspective, which aims to offer a new overview of the long-lasting phenomenon of the rediscovery of Christian catacombs in the Mediterranean during a period of great importance for the socio-cultural development of historical and archaeological sciences.

3. Catacombs and Their Rediscovery

Is it possible to define a catacomb as a community underground cemetery of the early Christian community, excavated and sometimes managed by or with a local Church body, which was intended to offer a relatively conspicuous group of Christian families a place to rest in eternal peace, surrounded by their brothers in the faith (Fiocchi Nicolai 2014, 2018)? The shape and size of catacombs usually differ according to their geographical location around the Mediterranean and their chronology. Generally speaking (and with the exception of the very extensive underground networks of some of the catacombs in Rome), they are sepulchres present in many of the areas around the Mediterranean Sea and dug into soft rock or tufa for various family groups, which expand over the decades as needed. This research focuses in particular on the catacombs of the so-called central Mediterranean route, i.e., those in Italy, particularly Rome, Naples and Sicily, and those in Malta and Tunisia (Fiocchi Nicolai et al. 2025; Sgarlata 2003; Buhagiar 2007; Leynaud 1937). These monuments share not only an interesting history of rediscovery but also archaeological, historical and artistic features that place them within a unique cultural temperament of enormous interest and, in some respects, are still little investigated.

In defining the meaning of a catacomb, the communitarian character of the catacombs is crucial. Starting from the assumption that one cannot define a catacomb as a cemetery that is merely family rather than community-based, it is necessary to emphasise the enormous difference between family hypogea and catacombs, which are outside the scope of private initiative and maintain a community character that is locally based and does not necessarily reflect family relations and that is linked to the action of a more or less large ecclesiastical

body. Accepting, therefore, the international definition of a catacomb as the cemetery of a more or less large Christian community makes us reflect on how necessary it is to leave out family hypogea or small nuclei from both archaeological analysis and the history of discoveries.

This discourse might seem to be a secondary point, but it is in fact a crucial issue for historiography: a community catacomb implies a relationship with the local ecclesiastical structure, an organised effort by specific workers, and above all a common Christian theology—a brotherhood in the faith that unites the dead. While it is logical to see Christians as Romans of a non-pagan religion and therefore correct to say that not everything related to the Christian community necessarily carries Christian symbolism, it is absolutely reductive to read catacomb archaeology without the theological component. This theological component, which was very much alive in the early Christian communities, is deeply embedded and was sometimes forced by scholars of the past. In fact, it is no coincidence that many of the scholars of catacombs, especially in the Roman sphere, have always been accused, and not unfairly, of a certain extreme confessionalism (Gosselin 2009). This confessionalism has often been used as a weapon by centralised power, especially to promote a pro-papal view of history: from Gregory XIII to Pius IX, all popes made use of the art of the catacombs to prove the apostolic and martyrial roots of the Church of Rome irrefutably, with the help of archaeologists employed by the Holy See itself. This confessionalism was also strong during the Fascist era, when some of Rome's leading archaeologists were at the forefront of the regime's cultural propaganda (Gosselin 2009).

The global theological dimension was therefore not overlooked by the scholars of the past, who, at the same time, had clear ideas on this communitarian issue: the underworld was often presented as a mirror image of the official world on earth, and texts about the catacombs often refer to a *civitas subterranea*, a scholarly myth that described the underground galleries as interconnected, forming an extensive underground community associated with black and frightening legends, stories about the lives of Christians during persecution within the catacombs, and, from an archaeological point of view, to the peculiar and improbable belief that all catacombs in a city were connected into one great underground network. Given this idea of community, even the rediscovery of Christian cemeteries was a community matter. Clearly, Rome was the point of attraction from which trends in the discovery of Christian catacombs spread throughout the Mediterranean.

The catacombs of Rome can be dated from the last years of the second century until a gradual neglect beginning in the first decades of the fifth century (Fiocchi Nicolai 2018). Because the catacombs were used for a long time as pilgrimage sites, they gradually fell into disuse during the late Middle Ages, with the exception of a few catacombs directly connected to important suburban sanctuaries that remained open and known throughout the Middle Ages and early modern times (Cecalupo 2020). Despite being known as pilgrimage sites, the process of investigating Roman catacombs began with the accidental discovery of the anonymous catacomb on Via Anapo in 1578, which led to a growing interest among ecclesiastical scholars and local people and thus to a rush to find catacombs in the suburbs of Rome. The discovery in 1578 marked a radical change in the geography of Christian archaeology in Rome. The impact of what was seen at Via Anapo prompted the Roman population at all social levels, as well as scholars and figures linked in various ways to the Church, to investigate the suburbs in search of Christian cemeteries. This led to a strong interest in early Christian topography and art, which resulted in some important manuscript collections of paintings and artefacts (as visible especially in the Vatican Apostolic Library, Vat. lat. 5409 and 10545) and many scholarly studies (e.g., Baronio 1588–1607, 1609) that ushered in a flourishing season of research throughout the late 16th century. Many scholars flocked to Rome at that time, and it was the Maltese Antonio Bosio who wrote the first

major work on the Roman catacombs, *Roma Sotterranea*, in 1632 (Bosio 1632). This book was a true cornerstone: all the sixteenth-century historical and literary enthusiasm culminated in the early decades of the following one with the extensive research campaigns carried out by Bosio, who, together with his learned colleagues, discovered almost all the Roman catacombs, visited them on several occasions, and recorded and described them in his famous *Roma Sotterranea*. The volume had a troubled publishing history (Cecalupo 2020), but it was a real turning point for archaeological research on the catacombs.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were periods of attention and frequent investigation in the Roman catacombs, especially in search of relics to be sent all over Europe and beyond—a systematic despoliation that enabled the excavation of many underground cemeteries (Ferretto 1942). A great change took place with the scientific and archaeological turning point in the second half of the nineteenth century, when, starting with the pontificates of Pius IX and Pius XI, the Holy See invested a great deal of money in the excavation of the catacombs, leading to well-known studies and publications such as those by Giovanni Battista de Rossi (Ghilardi 2006). The founding of protection and training bodies such as the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology paved the way for twentieth-century catacomb archaeology and for the discovery of many more underground cemeteries throughout the city (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra 2002).

Antonio Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea* stimulated a general hunger for research into the catacombs in Europe. It remained the only monographic study on the catacombs, at least until the late nineteenth century. However, in other areas of the Mediterranean, many local scholars, who were often highly skilled in probing the history of their own cities, explored, studied and published news on Christian catacombs. The earliest case is Vincenzo Mirabella in Sicily, who in 1612 published his volume on ancient Syracuse, introducing an extraordinary chapter on Christianity with an interesting plan of the catacombs of San Giovanni, which remains unsurpassed to this day and is perhaps still the most noteworthy modern-day plan of the Christian catacombs of Syracuse (Mirabella 1612). Mirabella's direct correspondent and friend was Giovanni Francesco Abela, who in Malta published in his *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano* the first detailed information on Malta's Christian cemeteries (Abela 1647). In fact, before Abela, during the sixteenth century, the Maltese catacombs had not yet undergone the general process of rediscovery, which came only with the following century and Abela's impetus. With the establishment of the Knights' government, there was instead a revival of the Pauline tradition: starting in the mid-sixteenth century, the promotion of St Paul's Grotto as the underground place where Paul had lived, with its direct connection to nearby underground burial sites, served to cement an initial interest in early Christian heritage (Buhagiar 1990). Abela remained unsurpassed for many centuries. Giovanni Antonio Ciantar's re-edition in the late eighteenth century did not merely republish Abela's work but also offered new information on the sites. As is often the case with many re-editions, it offers interesting information on the contemporary state of antiquities that otherwise would have been lost (Ciantar 1772–1780). In Malta, beginning in the nineteenth century, something similar to what happened in Rome occurred. An exponential development of underground research was led by famous personalities, including Themistocles Zammit and Antonio Annetto Caruana. Caruana published many volumes consisting of extensive reports, high-level drawing apparatus, and limited scientific reflections (Caruana 1896, 1898, 1899).

An even more fragmentary situation is to be found in Naples, whose catacombs, particularly those of San Gaudioso and San Gennaro, had been known and visited since the late Middle Ages: one example is St Bridget, who visited the catacombs with her daughter during her journey to Italy in 1350 (Ferretto 1942). A first description of these catacombs, however, appeared only in the seventeenth century. An amusing explorer and connoisseur

of Neapolitan antiquities and arts, Carlo Celano, wrote a descriptive guide to the city of Naples in ten days, also introducing the two great underground complexes in detail (Celano 1692). Little was done later outside of mere local history. In fact, only at the end of the nineteenth century were the first scientific studies carried out and a commission established for the protection and excavation of the catacombs (Amodio 2004). A real, extensive research campaign, however, did not start until the twentieth century.

We now take a little step across the sea: in this panorama, research on the catacombs of Tunisia and Algeria began during the nineteenth century in conjunction with two factors. The first was the arrival in these areas of the missionary order of the White Fathers, whose most famous exponent was Father Alfred Louis Delattre in Carthage (Freed 2012). The White Fathers, founded by Pius IX and set up in Tunisia and Algeria with the intention of re-Christianising Africa, used archaeological rediscovery to enhance the rich early Christian past of North Africa and the well-known Fathers of the Church in the area. This was, of course, contemporary with the beginning of the French protectorate, which placed the North African discoveries within a totally Roman-centric, imperialistic and colonial horizon (Effros 2018; Oulebsir 2011), as explained below. French archaeologists, soldiers and missionaries worked together in the final decades of the nineteenth century to recover what they could of the area's Christian past, including, of course, the catacombs.

4. Catacombs as Nodal Points of Mediterranean Movements

Much has been written, in general, on the role of Christianity in fostering collective memories and identities (Cassar 2005), and it is indeed a topic well investigated in the Maltese case. As noted in past publications that dealt with Maltese Christian heritage, the promotion of a Latin and Christian Malta served not only to “erase” the Islamic and Arab presence in a land that prides itself on having an apostolic Church but also to provide a solid foundation for the new political, social, administrative and cultural period represented by the Order of Malta. Promoting Malta as an ancient centre of Christianity, an episcopal see, and a centre of political importance for the ecclesiastical hierarchies of the early centuries was a priority for the Knights because it also meant bringing prestige to their present (Luttrell 1975, 1977).

It is impossible not to see a connection between the sixteenth-century Counter-Reformation and catacomb rediscoveries. This novel attention to ancient Christian art is extremely interesting for the political and propagandistic use of Paleochristian images because Christian art appears to have great appeal to common people everywhere and could be used to convey Catholic messages in Italy and beyond. Yet, in a cultural context generally dominated by the new Tridentine requirements for developing a new, unique artistic discourse controlled and directed by the Catholic Church, some links between a genuine interest in Christian antiquities and the Counter-Reformation, and between sacred antiquarianism and apologetics in support of Catholic historiography, cannot be entirely dismissed. In fact, Roman and other European scholars of the second half of the sixteenth century were interested in serving the Catholic Church. The findings, and, in particular, the paintings of the catacombs, certainly could corroborate knowledge derived from literary and historical sources, and both could be harnessed to legitimise a Catholic position against Protestantism.

The sight of such unknown, mysterious and yet so well-preserved Christian paintings also gave a sense of belonging to scriptural episodes narrated during the early times of the new religion, which were well known to contemporary Catholics and Protestants. These ancient paintings conveyed familiar religious stories and concepts in an easily understood visual language. Early Christian art was presented as incorrupt, pure, severe and spiritual, and thus as the perfect vehicle for a process of artistic and figurative renewal of Catholicism

to serve in countering Protestant criticism. Moreover, it is precisely the discovery of early Christian art and its clear message that served to convey and promote the unbroken continuity of the Roman Church from apostolic times to the present. The catacomb images were very old, but they were reinterpreted as living images, models to be imitated, and sources of artistic inspiration (Di Croce 2018; Cecalupo 2025, p. 181).

We are therefore faced with the continuous propaganda of a tangible consistency between the Church of Rome and the dogmas and principles of the original primitive Christianity materialised in the catacombs. These readings forced the archaeological data into a Catholic identity ideology, which was certainly not limited to the Counter-Reformation period. Under the pontificate of Pius IX (1846–1878), in particular, the promotion of the excavation and study of Roman catacombs became extensive and more explicitly political. The Roman Republic (1849), the papal exile in Gaeta in the Bourbonic Kingdom and the return to Rome were the beginning of a pontificate characterised by perennial conflicts with the emerging kingdom of Italy, which culminated in the end of the Papal States and thus the popes' political power in 1870.

Given such political turmoil, unique in the history of the papacy, Pius IX was called upon to promote the papacy's temporal power and Catholic Christianity with self-assertive policies at both the local and international levels. Until the end of his pontificate, Pius IX insisted on the self-exaltation of Christian culture and the centrality of Rome in an international culture with ancient apostolic roots. Christian antiquity, therefore, assumed a key role in the cultural policy of Pius IX, who financed important initiatives for the development of the discipline of Christian archaeology. At the centre of these discursive intellectual manoeuvres were the Roman catacombs, a symbol of the times of persecution and thus a material embodiment of the martyrial narrative with which his pontificate was cloaked (Cecalupo 2025).

This strong need to recover Christian roots as the main instrument for emphasising the importance of a city's apostolic past appears not to be central in the cases of Naples and Sicily. There, the connection between catacombs and Church authorities was present and heavily sponsored by the local ecclesiastical bodies, but from a cultural and antiquarian point of view, Neapolitan and Sicilian historiography appears to be much more focused on the ennobling Greek past of the two regions, recalling a past of freedom and power to be promoted as much as possible. The union of catacombs, Christianity and identity politics is obviously present in the Maltese narrative during the centuries of the Order. As the only true vestiges of early Maltese Christianity, the catacombs are useful to historiography primarily to prove the truth of the foundation of the Maltese Church by Paul, its antiquity, and the presence (which we know is problematic) of martyrs and persecuted Christians, but also to establish the continuity of the presence of Christians on the island despite Arab rule (Buhagiar 1983).

It was Pius IX himself, as anticipated, who promoted the birth of the missionaries of Africa known as the White Fathers. In 1868, Charles-Martial-Allemand Lavigerie, Archbishop of Alger, founded the order of *Missionarii Africae*, a missionary society of apostolic life for the evangelisation of Africa and the Maghreb. One of the instruments used by the White Fathers was archaeology, which was instrumental to North Africa becoming a fundamental focus in the research of Christian archaeology in the final decades of the nineteenth century (Ferretto 1942; Cecalupo and Alt 2025). Research on Christian archaeology in North Africa led to the rediscovery of the places where some of the most important Fathers of the Church from the first centuries were active, and it shed light on ancient Christian communities well-known from written sources.

The White Fathers started, in particular, with the great basilicas of Carthage and then reached the catacomb complexes of Sousse and Hadrumantum, which have not been

systematically investigated since the excavations of the White Fathers in the early twentieth century. The case of the catacombs of Sousse is emblematic: the first underground complex was accidentally discovered by a French lieutenant in 1882, and then the White Father Leynaud managed to start his explorations only in 1903. From that year on, he uncovered several catacombs and fostered the development of the Sousse Archaeological Society. In addition, the room in the Sousse Archaeological Museum where catacomb objects were stored and displayed was dedicated to the French battalion in Sousse (Leynaud 1937).

The Tunisian issue is the absolute proof of how religious ideology was an important engine for the rediscovery of the catacombs, even outside of Rome. In addition to Catholic, missionary, and at times anti-Islamic fervour, we must remember the invasive presence of French archaeologists and military personnel who explored Tunisia and with whom archaeological missionaries also travelled. This was all part of a broader framework of French colonialism in which Roman and Late Antique pre-Islamic archaeology were also used in a celebratory manner to bring the French Empire closer to the Roman Empire, of which it felt it was the true heir (Oulebsir 2011).

In addition, the impressive phenomenon of the spread of relics contributed to this definition of martyrial Christianity of the early centuries, of which the catacombs are the perfect embodiment, as proof of a Christianity that started in Rome and reached all parts of the Mediterranean. It is outside the scope of this text to describe in detail how relics were created from bodies in the catacombs to make papier-mâché statues or reliquaries produced in Rome and then sent all over the world for private use or for the foundation of churches (Ghilardi 2019a). It is quite common to find reliquaries or bodies marked as containing relics from the Roman catacombs inside modern-day churches, at least in every Catholic country. This is part of a larger movement of objects (in this case, anthropological objects) that started in the catacombs and reached the entire Catholic world of the time. We can say, in a certain sense, that relics were the first catacomb property sought after, sold and collected on a large scale, as much for their antiquity as for their religious power. It was not only a matter of relics: it was common to send, together with body parts, the epigraphic slab that originally closed the tombs, at least until the late nineteenth century (Ghilardi 2022). This allowed the dissemination of catacomb inscriptions, which became a constant presence in private collections and Church treasuries worldwide (De Maria 2006).

In all catacombs throughout the Mediterranean, martyrs and persecuted Christians have been looked for, but it is the catacombs of Rome that obviously lead the way because many popes and martyrs of the early Church are indeed found within them, as testified to by both sources and archaeology. Therefore, the first relics disseminated throughout the world always came from Rome, and especially those from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were disseminated in areas that had their own catacombs but were decidedly poor in martyrs. For example, a text in the Book of Bulls of the Chancery of the Order recounts the history of the relics preserved in the cave of St Paul in Rabat. Among these relics from the cemeteries of Rome, brought by the Prior of Venice, Don Fabrizio Sforza Colonna, with the Galera Capitana in 1609, with an authentication signed by Scipione Cobelluzzi, a very important Roman Cardinal known precisely for his closeness to the Jesuits and for his frequenting of the Roman catacombs to extract relics (National Library of Malta, Treasury B, 305, see Appendix A below).

However, the presence of all this bone material from the catacombs raises questions about its authenticity, which is not only a contemporary issue, as it involves various facets that have often influenced the cult of martyrs and the veneration of their remains. Scepticism about the authenticity of certain relics has been a constant throughout the modern age. Since the sixteenth century, in fact, the provenance of bone relics from the catacombs (of Rome in particular) was not automatically synonymous with authenticity

and certainty of worship, considering that at least since 1604 the popes had tried to place the extraction of relics under their direct control in order to avoid abuse and the spread of fakes (Ghilardi 2005b), which was evidently already widespread and extremely dangerous to the credibility of cults. Some letters in Antonio Bosio's correspondence in the early seventeenth century (Cecalupo 2020) address precisely the doubt regarding the authenticity of the sacredness (and certainly not the antiquity) of certain ex ossibus relics (Ghilardi 2012). The story of Toccafondo also points in this direction. As the principal copyist of the paintings in the catacombs between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he was also imprisoned for illegal trafficking of alleged relics of martyrs from the catacombs (Ghilardi 2005a). The attention paid to the authenticity of these objects of worship, given the extreme ease with which they could be (and often were) counterfeited or created ad hoc, with the consequent damage to the Church's image and strong criticism from Protestant circles, prompted the popes to establish supervisory bodies from the end of the seventeenth century onwards (in particular the Custodian of Relics and Cemeteries in 1672 and then, of course, the Commission for Sacred Archaeology in 1852). Consequently, at a cultural level, there were marked expressions of scepticism and rejection of the practice of extracting and venerating relics, especially among Protestants. Anglicans, in particular, also viewed the catacombs as places of moral perdition with generally negative connotations, where the cult of relics became a dirty and contaminated matter, often driven by the interests of Catholic propaganda (Gaston 1983; Janes and Stow 2012).

In recent years, this tendency has become a historiographical trend that helps to critically re-examine the processes of dissemination of catacomb archaeology. In fact, recent studies (above all Ghilardi 2019b, and then Robinson et al. 2014; van Strydonck et al. 2018; Cavicchioli and Provero 2020; and Herrero 2023) have carried out in-depth analyses directly on the relics that still exist today, confirming their falsity and manipulation, often of considerable importance. This trend aligns with a growing tendency to focus on bioarchaeological bone research (Salesse et al. 2014; Giuliani et al. 2023).

The issue of the circulation of relics, which reached the entire Catholic and Christian world from the catacombs, introduces a fundamental point, namely, the cultural circulation of works related to the discovery and archaeological investigation of the catacombs. We see this movement of ideas and people embodied in two major phenomena: first, foreign scholars travelling to the catacombs to study and investigate them, and second, the dissemination and translation of the main works on the archaeology of the catacombs.

To begin with foreign scholars, it is well known that until the last decades of the sixteenth century, the catacombs of Rome were visited by scholars from other nations. It is indicative that the first graphic records of the first catacombs discovered in 1578 came from two foreign scholars: Alfonso Chacón (Barrado 2004) and Philips van Winghe (Schuddeboom 1996). Chacón was an Andalusian, and van Winghe was Flemish, and they both are recognised as the first true explorers of the Roman catacombs. The fact that Chacón, for example, decided to move to Rome at the end of the sixteenth century is no coincidence, given the great processes of recovery of the early Christian past that Andalusian scholars were carrying out during the sixteenth century, often through the invention of relics created ad hoc (Olds 2019; Ditchfield 2012; Cecalupo 2023).

Another interesting case is that of the German Walter Gualterius, who in 1620 visited the Sicilian and then the Maltese catacombs, led there by Abela to record their inscriptions (Gualtherius 1624). It is of great interest that French travellers, in particular Jean Houel and Richard de Saint Non, saw not only the great prehistoric monuments of the Mediterranean but also the catacombs of Syracuse (recording them with interesting drawings) and probably also those of Malta (De Saint Non 1786; Houel 1782–1787; Freller 2013). In the following century, there was a great wave of interest, as evidenced by the number of German scholars

who came to analyse the Sicilian and Maltese catacombs at the end of the nineteenth century, an archaeological and scientific interest linked inseparably to a theological vision of research on Christian antiquity as a source of ecclesiastical history (Cecalupo 2022).

The panorama, therefore, of the history of research into catacombs in the Mediterranean offers countless cases of travellers and scholars interested in the catacombs after they left their homeland. A fundamental role in spreading the news about underground cemetery complexes and drawing the attention of the international community has been played by the main publications that have come to light over the centuries and also by their translations. The most striking case, of course, is that of Antonio Bosio's *Roma sotterranea*, which was first published in Italian in 1630 but was not translated into Latin until the work of the Oratorian Father Paolo Aringhi in 1651 (Bosio 1632; Aringhi 1651). Despite the fame the Italian version already enjoyed, this Latin version spread more widely internationally, and it was so successful that in some eighteenth-century inventories we find Aringhi's name as the original author of the work. Other versions were then printed in abbreviated forms and other languages throughout Northern Europe during the eighteenth century. If we look at the Maltese case after Abela's death, only in the 1770s did Giovanni Antonio Ciantar provide a new edition of the *Descrittione di Malta*. What is known from Ciantar's preface is that Abela's work was the subject of eighteenth-century translations "for the benefit of men of letters of foreign languages", in particular Seiner's one in Latin in 1725 (Ciantar 1772–1780).

In order to get an idea of the importance of the circulation of these works in Europe during the eighteenth century, there is an extremely interesting chapter in a book published in 1720, the *Osservazioni sopra i cimiteri dei Santi Martiri ed antichi cristiani di Roma*, written by the then custodian of the Vatican relics, Marco Antonio Boldetti. Chapter 20 of Book II is dedicated to Christian cemeteries outside Italy and is an interesting collection of bibliographic material on all Christian cemeteries and catacombs known in the Mediterranean at the time (Boldetti 1720, pp. 617–50, currently under study). Boldetti lists Malta and Sicily among the regions of Africa, a significant and revealing choice. Boldetti quotes Abela completely and even re-proposes the plan of the Abbazia tad-Deir cemetery. However, this paragraph, which tends to be a compilation of other work and offers few innovative ideas, is of extreme importance for this research history: it is perhaps the first manual on Christian catacombs in the Mediterranean and is also indicative of how information on these monuments travelled during the eighteenth century.

Latin, the universal language par excellence, was completely overtaken in the nineteenth century by national ones (Grafton 2012). One example is the work of Giovanni Battista de Rossi, the Vatican archaeologist responsible for the great season of scientific research in the Roman catacombs financed by Pius IX. He is perhaps the most prolific author of scientific studies on the Roman catacombs, always at the centre of an impressive international network (Giuliani et al. 2022). His international role is proven mainly by the systematic translation of his works through a network of acquaintances and collaborators. This was especially the case for the *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana* (Bulletin of Christian Archaeology), a journal comprising several fascicles written almost entirely by de Rossi and used to offer scientific news about excavations in Rome. Over time, it also served to disseminate discoveries from all other European and Mediterranean areas, featuring articles written by correspondents and notes composed on the basis of information obtained from letters by de Rossi's colleagues. The Bulletin of Christian Archaeology was the real medium for the dissemination of Christian archaeology in Europe. Its issues were systematically reworked and translated mainly (but not only) into French and English. That is the case with the well-known translation carried out for years by his friend and correspondent, the English Catholic priest J. Spencer Northcote, who grew up under the influence of the now

saintly John Henry Newman and was therefore close to the cultural issues of the papacy and Rome (Gaston 1983).

Part of de Rossi's work of internationalisation is undoubtedly his correspondence, which proves the seminal importance of letters between scholars in understanding the rediscovery of archaeology. De Rossi, for example, as the author of an enormous number of archaeological and historical discoveries, remained in contact throughout his life with scholars from all over the world, who wrote to him continuously for advice and opinions on matters of Christian archaeology (among others). All of the impressive number of letters he received are preserved in the de Rossi Bequest at the Vatican Library (Buonocore 2020). It consists of sixty-five folders of letters and three indexes in the Vatican Latin collection. They are arranged chronologically; each year of letters is contained in one or two volumes, and the index is very useful because it is organised alphabetically by author. These letters, representing almost his entire correspondence, offer precise information on some important events in Christian archaeology: excavations in the Mediterranean, the discovery of relics and sepulchres in various cities, and the advancement of many studies on early Christianity. It is clear that de Rossi's collection of letters can be studied today as an important source for reconstructing relations between scholars of the time, and it has become an incredible mine for the history of the discipline.

Among these, there are almost no references to the catacombs of Malta and Tunisia. On the contrary, a lot of archaeological information lies within the epistolary collection of Alfred Louis Delattre, an important French archaeologist in Carthage, whom I already mentioned for his central role in the White Fathers and to whom we owe the discovery not only of Punic Carthage but also of the splendid phase of Christian Carthage (Effros 2019). Delattre also served as a point of reference for all archaeologists active in the field between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, much material has been found within his rich correspondence relating to some studies of catacombs carried out by Paolo Bellanti, who consulted Delattre precisely because of his extensive knowledge of North African Christianity, to which Maltese Christianity is necessarily linked (Cecalupo 2022). He was also the main consultant to Leynaud during the process of excavating the catacombs of Sousse.

What is clear so far is a dense network of circulation of scholars and texts, as well as relics and objects. The obvious consequence is the circulation of visitors and travellers.

Until the early nineteenth century, catacombs were visited by two types of people: pilgrims heading to churches and connected catacombs, and the elite who could afford to go underground to experience (expensive) exclusivity near the martyrs' burials. "Normal" pilgrimages to the catacombs were monopolised by the ecclesiastical hierarchy (the Custodian of the Relics and the Sacrist), who only allowed a few visits to limited areas of the cemeteries at a time when tourists seeking hypogeal experiences were few and only spiritually motivated. In general, during the early nineteenth century, the attraction of classical, pagan ruins was still strong, and stories about the dangers of the catacombs and the bad reputation of the monks who acted as guides within the catacombs were not uncommon (Ghilardi 2020). The catacombs themselves also often had a bad reputation and were seen as dangerous places, where one could get lost or even be attacked by the Brigantes. In Malta, for example, there is an eighteenth-century legend of a class of students who entered St Paul's catacombs and never emerged again.

The real change came when praying in holy places and following in the footsteps of martyrs became a more widespread practice under Pope Pius IX, who revived visits to the martyrs buried in the catacombs at a popular level, as well as financing new archaeological discoveries in Rome's Christian cemeteries (Ghilardi 2020). The direct interest of the popes and ecclesiastical hierarchies in promoting the catacombs remained strong at least until

the period between the two World Wars, and it was not long before both numerous travel guides and important historical novels on the subject flourished. Consequently, these places became new destinations for pilgrims wishing to pray in the catacombs' holy places. To this, of course, must be added the general increase in the movement of tourists, travellers and pilgrims in the second half of the nineteenth century, facilitated by new, faster means of communication, which greatly helped the development of middle-class tourism (Hall and Zeppel 1990).

All these experiences, therefore, have always been strongly anchored in the pilgrimage experience. Trips to religious sites are among the oldest forms of tourism, and catacomb tourism can still be categorised as heritage tourism as well (Cecalupo 2023). We see this union between travel and pilgrimage nowadays as well (Seaton 1996; Stone 2006; Mazzei 2015), and it was well embodied by the first souvenirs created for a catacomb, in particular the catacomb of San Callisto in Rome, run since the mid-nineteenth century by Trappist Fathers. They created various sets of postcards and booklets with images of the paintings preserved in the catacomb, to be sold to pilgrims to spread both historical-artistic and spiritual messages.

5. Conclusions

The overview presented so far, therefore, draws on a large amount of material and a wealth of stories that contribute to the overall historical definition of the rediscovery of the Christian catacombs. This panorama has shown how the discovery of the Roman catacombs has always been strongly linked to and driven by the papacy according to its agenda (during the Catholic Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and subsequently to define Rome's cultural and spiritual primacy at the end of its temporal reign in the nineteenth century). In Malta, on the other hand, the theocracy of the Knights and the local Church had made it a bastion of Catholic tradition in order to provide irrefutable material proof of the antiquity of a Christian community founded by the Apostle Paul that had remained essentially uncorrupted. In Tunisia, a more modern and brief history of discoveries was charged with colonial meanings in the service of France, which wanted to establish itself as the definitive heir to imperial Rome. This connotation was therefore always extremely political but enriched by religious nuances (such as the devotional aspect of the cult of martyrs, which spread widely on a large scale through the dissemination of relics), as well as with museological and archaeological contributions, since objects from the catacombs populated collections throughout the Mediterranean. It also extended to cultural and academic realms, thanks to the network of scholars, educated men, amateurs, and all their works, which were always made known at an international level.

The history of the rediscovery of the Christian catacombs goes beyond simple antiquarianism and touches on political and cultural issues at the European level. The approach of this essay is based above all on the idea that the rediscovery of Christian catacombs in the modern age is a phenomenon that has generated a network of contacts and movements of ideas and objects of primary importance in the definition of a shared international culture. Such a network certainly operated in a strongly confessional sphere, but it is often difficult in the modern age to separate this religious context from secular culture, especially in regions where the Pope retained civil power or strong moral influence until the end of the nineteenth century.

The choice of specific areas of analysis in this essay is limited, but it certainly demonstrates the possibility of analysing the theme of the rediscovery of Christian catacombs from various angles. It is therefore a multifaceted theme suitable for multiple interpretations in the future and contributes to the definition of how a shared Euro-Mediterranean culture emerged in the modern age.

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Appendix A

National Library of Malta, Treasury B, 305:

Cabreum hoc Foundationis bonorum, ac Sacrarum dotius Divi Pauli Apostoli Criptae, & Sancti Publii Ecclesiae, ac Collegij [1705]

[f. 11r] Dal libro delle bolle conservato nella Cancelleria di nostra Religione negli anni 1607. 8. 9: fol: 311

In Nomine Domini Amen. Sia noto, e manifesto a chiunque legerà la presente nota come per ordine espresso di Mons.r Ill.o Gran Maestro frà Alosio de Wignacourt degnissimo prencipe di Malta, e Gozzo ad onore di Nostro Sig.re Giesù Christo, e della sua SS.ma Croce, e delli gloriosi Santi, le cui reliquie sono qui sotto nominate, si sono da me frà Giovanni Ottho Bosio Vicecancell.re qui in Cancelleria fatte registrare. L'infrascritte sacre autentiche, le quali d'esse Sante Reliquie, e ella loro traslatione rendono fede degna, et indubitata testimonianza, e richiesta del devoto, et umil eremita fra Giovanni di San Paolo castigliano cultore, e restauratore della Santa Grotta nella quale qui in Malta stettero li gloriosi S. Paolo Apostolo, et il B. Evangelista Santo Luca, il quale eremita (primo edificatore della prima Chiesa qui in Malta dedicata a S. Publio Prencipe dell'Isola, e primo Vescovo di Malta consacrato, e lasciato qui da S. Paolo) essendo stato alli piedi della S.ta di Nostro Sig.re Papa Paolo V ottenne la S.ta Croce con una particula del vero legno nel quale per salute dell'umana generatione fu conflitto il figliolo di Dio Giesù Christo nostro Sig.re salvator del mondo, et al.tre reliquie da Mons.re Scipione Cobellutio segretario delli Brevi di sua Beat.ne mentionate nella qui sotto registrata Lettera: e dall'Ecc.za del Sig.re Duca d'Ascalona Vicerè di Sicilia ottenne ancora l'altre sante Reliquie che S.a Ecc.za nelle sue lettere patenti similmente qui sotto registrate ha specificate, e nominate. Le quali Sante Reliquie per adornare et arricchire la sudetta Santa Grotta furono portate dal detto eremita qui in Malta, com'appare similmente per fede autentica dell'Illus.o Sig.r Prior di Venetia Don Fabritio Sforza Colonna Capitan generale delle Galere di Nostra Sacra Religione, che le portò con la Galera Capitana, e poi le medesime sante reliquie con due statue di S. Paolo e S. Luca alquanto maggiori del naturale indorate, et ornate di colori finissimi con altre statuette delli santi de' quali sono esse reliquie, furono poste in deposito dell'oratorio di San Giovanni Decollato del cimitero della nostra maggior Chiesa Conv.le dal qual oratorio sabato alli 17. del mese d'ott.re del presente anno 1609 furono dal Sig.r Prior della Chiesa frà Pietro Carnerasa vestito pontificalmente, e dalli Sig.ri Cappellani, e Diaconi dell'Assemblea di nostra Sacra Religione, e con solenne processione accompagnata da Mons.re Ill.mo Gran Maestro sudetto, e da tutti li Signori, del Cons.o, e Sacro Convento nostro, e dà tutte le Croci, e frati mendicanti delli Conventi di questa humilis.a Città Valletta, che le salutò con molto delle sue artiglierie. Furono trasportate nella Chiesa di Santa Croce del Convento dei PP. Cappuccini dalla qual Chiesa, e Convento Domenica alli 18. del medesimo mese d'ott.re 1609 festa del glorioso Evangelista S. Luca del medesimo mese d'ott.re furono levate, trasferite, e collocate nella sudetta Chiesa della Grotta di San Paolo situata nel Rabatto della Città Notabile di Malta dal Cap.lo delli

Sig.ri Canonici della Chiesa Cathedrale d’essa Città, con universal processione di tutte le parrocchie dell’Isola [f. 11v] intervento dell’Illus.o Gran Maestro e frequenza grandissima di quasi tutto il popolo, avendo Sua Santità concessa indulgenza plenaria, com’appare per il suo breve, il quale si può dire che capitò miracolosamente qui in Malta apunto il giorno precedente, che cessorono li mali tempi, e quel dì si convertì in serenissimo giorno rinovandosi così pienamente la ben aventurata memoria della venuta qui in Malta delli sudetti gloriosi Santi Apostolo, et Evangelista. La quale indulgenza plenaria concessa per il sudetto giorno alla sudetta Santa Grotta è del tenor che parimente qui sotto si è registrato con l’altre infrascritte scritture che sono del tenor seguente.

[. . .] Dilecte fili Nobilis vir salutem, et apostolicam benedictionem. Tuam in Deum pietas, et Religio ac singularis, quem erga nos, et sedem apostolicam gens devotionis affectus promerentur, ut pijs votis tuis quantum cum Domino possum libenter annuamus (?) Supplicationibus igitur tuo nomine nobis humiliter porrectis inclinati, Tibi ut sactorum, et sanctorum Sacras Reliquias ex quibuscumque ecclesijs, monasterijs, Cemeterijs, et locis pijs, non tum muro clausas existentibus, nec non etiam civitatum, terrarum, et locorum ubi se adesse contigerit asponte dantibus recipere, et receptas extrahere, et rever. re apud te retinere, etsi tibi placuerit illas, et quascumque illarum partes ecclesijs, monasterijs, et al.ijs locis nec non etiam personis pijs, et devotis utriusque sexus arbitrio tuo elargiri liberae, et licitae sine aliquo conscientiae scrupolo, aut [f. 12r] censuram ecclesiarum in cursus possis, et valeas auctoritate apostolica tenorer presentium facultatem concedimus, et impartimur non obstantibus constitutionibus, et ordinationibus apostolicis, caeterisque contrarijs quibuscumque. Datum Romae apud Sanctum Marcum sub annulo Piscatoris die v. Septemb. 1606 Pontificatus nostri Anno secundo

Scipio Cobellutius [. . .]

[f. 13r] [. . .] e dette reliquie sono l’infrascritte cioè un pezzo d’osso di S. Paolo, un pezzo d’osso di S. Pietro, un pezzo d’osso di San Gio: Batta, un pezzo d’osso di S. Andrea, pezzi di carne di S. Biagio, un pezzo d’osso di San Bartolomeo, un pezzo d’osso di San Matteo, un pezzo d’osso di San Basilio Magno, un pezzo d’osso di S.ta Cecilia vergine, e martire, un pezzo d’osso di S. Agata vergine, e martire [. . .]

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