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Christians in Muslim Malta?

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In spite of the spurt of reading which Dr. Brincat (*The Sunday Times*, March 18) seems to be doing, he still seems unable to understand the purport of the arguments he valiantly tries to put forward.

The argument from the alleged pre-Arabic existence in Malta of a Christian vocabulary implies that the latter could not have originated otherwise than from a necessarily pre-Arabic source. No pre-Arabic documentation of it in Malta exists. Its very existence then is merely an assumption; perhaps a reasonable one if the population spoke some form of Punic – itself an assumption.

I have shown some years ago that the vocabulary in question can be found elsewhere throughout the High and later Middle Ages, not only in Spain but also in Sicily. Therefore, why should it be more logical, as Dr. Brincat puts it, that Malta preserved this vocabulary by direct transmission when its pre-Arabic existence in Malta is still itself in question? After all, even if the inhabitants of Malta still spoke some form of Punic, the ecclesiastical vocabulary could have been of Latin or Greek origin.

The claim that the Christian vocabulary in Malta goes back necessarily and without a break to pre-Arabic times has already been examined and been found wanting by none other than Professor G.B. Pellegrini in his recent *Ricerche sugli Arabismi Italiani con particolare riguardo alla Sicilia*, Palermo 1989, p. 66: “*Si tratta solo di una supposizione, secondo la quale codesti Cristiani (Maroniti) avrebbero introdotto (in Malta) alcune voci affini alla loro terminologia originaria siriana, ancora conservati nella liturgia... A tali argomenti si potrebbero peraltro opporre per lo meno alcune riserve.*” and also “*Le voci menzionate... sono in realtà molto diffuse in varie aree di arabofoni cristianizzati.*”

In other words, therefore, the Christian vocabulary could have been introduced or re-introduced into Malta at the time of the island's re-Christianisation in sub-Islamic times, not by Muslim *jihad* warriors, as Dr. Brincat drolly puts it, but by Christian clergymen who came over from Sicily or elsewhere and who made it their practice to be cognizant with the proper Arabic Christian vocabulary, as they could easily do.

On the origin of the feud between Muslims and Christians in Malta, a feud which is merely presumed by the two of us to have existed, Dr. Brincat still thinks that it must have started ages before 1154. He is welcome to his opinion, but should concede that feuds do occasionally (at least) arise of a sudden – the result of an assassination, for example, or a carry-over from events abroad and that his certainty on the point needs qualification. After all, the assassination itself could have been the beginning of an inter-communal feud rather than its result.

Population change or continuity

I do not think one can completely ignore the possibility of a complete change of population in 870. After all, that is what happened at Syracuse in 878. On the whole, however,

the existing evidence does not suggest that the most catastrophic reading of the events of 870 is necessarily the correct one. If, however, the *ghabida* of 1048 were anything like their contemporaries in Tunisia, i.e. Negro slave-soldiers and not Muslim descendants of the survivors of 870, then one would have to re-examine the matter.

However, that interpretation would involve having to account for the eventual complete disappearance of a sizable Negro population. The survival of the original ethnic strain as a separate Christian community under the normal *dhimmi* status completely separate from the Negro *ghabida* would itself run into the problem that it is completely ignored by Malaterra's account of the events of 1091, accounted for, this time, only by resort to the catastrophic interpretation of 870.

On the whole, therefore, a better idea is that of a substantial continuity of population, and a long period of adjustment during which the descendants of the survivors of 870 were reduced to the status of *ghabida* as a result of the series of obscure but complicated and devastating events of 869-70, only to obtain equality and eventual complete assimilation with the ruling elite in 1048, by which date they had been Muslim for some considerable time.

This explanation, however, which I still prefer, renders it difficult to postulate the existence of any separate Indigenous Christians under a *dhimmi* status, but it avoids all other difficulties and, so far, the archaeological, place name and linguistic strands of evidence are themselves all neutral. However, it unavoidably runs foul of the mythologisers still rampant among us.

I asked Dr. Brincat to read *The Invention of Tradition* because it is a good collection of studies by a number of prominent historians of how "traditions" have been consciously invented and manipulated in other countries. I could also have recommended A.T. Luttrell's "Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: tradition and invention in Maltese historiography," *Melita Historica*, vol. VII, 2 (1977), for further elaboration of the point in a Maltese context.

It would have been wrong of me not to have had the "nicety," as Dr. Brincat prefers to put it, to consult N. Daniel, *The Arabs and medieval Europe*, on the meaning of the word "Saracen," just as it is unwise of him to ridicule the idea. We others could have had greater faith in his historical reconstructions if we knew that he had consulted and relied on such studies.

Incidentally, Daniel praises the "exact description of Malta as Muslim Arab, i.e. *Saracen*" (p. 216), by Burchard's chronicler in 1175. Dr. Brincat's remark that Burchard and the other chroniclers of the later Middle Ages did not have the same "nicety" to consult Daniel's study (published in 1975 and 1979) is, I suppose, meant as a joke or a bit of flippancy hardly calculated to engender trust in his own methodology.

Geoffrey Malaterra had no compunction in mentioning surviving Christian communities in Sicily when they were freed by the Normans, but the only Christians he mentions in Malta were foreigners. I have always said that negative evidence is generally weak evidence, but I may add here that using negative evidence for what it is worth, and doing so openly and with caution, is far better than shoring up a legend on no evidence at all and concealing it under a deluge of words, sarcastic asides and obscure innuendos (e.g. repeated references to "secondary sources," even naively mistaking Al Qazwini for a

secondary source when he is really one of our few primary sources for the period, though he lived some considerable time after 1048 and must have relied on other sources).

Incidentally, it has always been my practice to evaluate evidence fairly and to do so in public even when I have to make embarrassing admissions. Dr. Brincat is welcome to what comfort he can find in such passages.

Place-name evidence

One notes that he is here limiting his claims to the survival of Maltese Christians on farms away from the centre of activities. Is there any supporting evidence for this interpretation? Place-name evidence is, perhaps, the only possibility here, but it can only provide the vaguest of indications.

Taking place-names by class-type – *raħal*, *wied*, *dar*, *dejr*, *ġnien*, *għajn*, etc. – it may be possible to distinguish the class-type where the Semitic/Romance/Byzantine Greek mix is different from the normal. I only did it privately once when I was preparing a paper on “The Place-names and the Personal Nomenclature of Gozo, 1372-1600” some time before 1980, and I remember the result was pretty inconclusive, ‘*għar*’ names being predominantly Semitic, i.e. Arabic, even in their anthroponymic elements, instead of being of Romance or Byzantine Greek origin.

One could mention other interesting examples like *Raħal Perkopu*, Procopio’s Farmstead, *Wied Inċita*, Niceta’s Valley, *Ta’ Kireki*, at Msida Valley, possibly an older form of *Tal Qroqq*, Ciriaco’s land, and *Ta’ Xbiex*, Sabas’s land.

Further work may be more productive, but names were sometimes carried over across cultural and chronological divisions and are therefore of doubtful significance in this regard. In the meantime, may I appeal to all, especially the *nouveaux riches* and the *parvenus* among us, to preserve such place-names, however strange and plebeian they may seem to Philistine eyes.

On the Greek rite, Dr. Brincat’s alienation from the historical realities of the time is total. I shall not further weary the reader by repeating what I have said before. It is curious, however,. That he finds it difficult to understand what a newly appointed bishop could be doing for a population of Muslims and a few newly converted Byzantine rite Christians.

The bishop was obviously keeping away in Sicily, where his name appears once or twice in public documents. In Malta the bishop’s presence was, apparently not even required, so much so that it became an inveterate habit for him to stay in Sicily, a “tradition” only broken with the arrival of the Order of St. John in 1530.

Dr. Brincat claims that he obtains his conclusions, like I do mine, by dovetailing all the scraps of information that exists. No doubt. But he achieves this by first subjecting the latter to a rigorous translation process guided solely by his prior conviction that Christianity survived right through, and misled by his misunderstanding of the Christian vocabulary argument and the evidence of the archeological continuity: at least some of the slaves of 1048 were Christians, there were Christians on farms in 1091, Bishop Burchard was not precise when he called the Maltese inhabitants Saracens (it is agreed there were Christians responsible for the killing of a Muslim, but were they indigenous?).

No doubt, he would add that the Sicilian Byzantine Greek exile who referred to Maltese Agarenes and Godless people around 1133 also forgot about the Maltese Christians who were already carefully tending their pious traditions, but so far Dr. Brincat has pointedly ignored that matter. In these assumptions it is impossible to prove him wrong, but he is not justified in making the assumptions in the first place, because he is led to them by his preconceptions and misconceptions, not by the literary or documentary evidence itself.

Medieval archaeology

I agree about the theoretical possibilities of archaeology. It is high time medieval archaeology got cracking in Malta and Gozo, but on these aspects extra security and other precautions would no doubt have to be taken. And it cannot be excluded at all that much remains to be discovered in the literature of the period, both European and Arabic.

For me, however, in the light of the information available as of now, the possibility for the survival of Christianity in Malta during the eleventh century among the indigenous Maltese is pretty remote. This does not mean that I shall not change my opinion if evidence to that effect is produced. Dogma does not come into the picture, as far as I am concerned. It is Dr. Brincat who is certain – *certain* that during what he calls the period of Arab political predominance, at least two religious communities, Muslim and Christian, are indicated by the evidence to have cohabited in these Islands (again carefully or carelessly – I am not sure which – avoiding the issue whether the Christians were indigenous or not).

Finally, I have decided to deny myself the pleasure of dealing in detail with what Dr. Brincat casually calls folk memories establishing a continuity between pre-Arabic and post-Arabic Christianity on archaeological sites in Malta. Identity of site, however, does not imply continuity of occupation or even of cultural tradition, especially considering the small size of the island and the innumerable Punic and Roman burial places and post-Arabic chapels and churches.

Why should it matter if some coincide, especially as topographical considerations also played a part in determining the use of land? I have already dealt before with the more prominent of the sites – insofar as I, a historian and not an archaeologist, can – and therefore I, for one, shall take pity on the bemused reader and close here.

[Godfrey Wettinger]