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Christianity in Malta under the Arabs [2]

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Professor Wettinger declared, that my opening remarks in my original article "Christianity in Malta under the Arabs" (*The Sunday Times*, February 11) in favour of the continued presence of a Christian tradition in these Islands during the period of Arab political predominance was an act of faith.

He conveniently forgot to mention that the rest of the article contained evidence and reasons supporting my belief in that statement. Of course his own blanket statement that it is likely that there were no indigenous Christians for the whole period 1000 to 1150 A.D., ("Malta under the Arabs," *The Sunday Times* February 18) was no such act of faith although the dates seem to have been picked out of a hat.

Semitic Christian words

Starting with what he refers to as the vexed question of the Christian vocabulary in Maltese. By tryin to find the most convoluted explanation for this, Professor Wettinger tries to persuade us that our Christian Semitic vocabulary was taught to us by our Musim conquerors.

The invasion of Sicily (and Malta) originally started as a holy war, a Jihad in order to recall Arab and Berber North Africans to their common Islamic faith and stop them quarreling with each other. The invasion started in 827 and was only complete by 902, Malta being taken c. 869-870 (Saunders, J.J. *A History of Medieval Islam*, Routledge, and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1965). Are we to believe that those fanatical soldiers started teaching us ancient Aramaic/Syriac derived Christian words? Even if one could imagine such an absurdity, why did these words then go on to survive 150 years after the supposed disappearance of Christianity in these Islands?

I am glad that Professor Wettinger now accepts that a Maltese indigenous population survived in these Islands and their decendants constituted the "slaves" who outnumbered the the Arabs in 1048 according to Al Qazwini (a secondary source). Previously he had cast doubt on this and postulated that the entire population might have been expelled (Wettinger G. *The Arabs in Malta*, in: *Malta, Studies of its Heritage and History* (Mid-Med Bank Ltd, 1986). Professor Wettinger himself accepts that the population still spoke a form of late Punic before the Arab invasion. This argument is strengthened by the almost total lack of Latin or Greek place names. The Coptic population in Egypt today still use the same Christian Semitic words that we use, as do the Christians over the entire Middle East. What did the North African Christians use colloquially? Certainly the explanation for our Christian Semitic words is more likely to be the direct transmission over the Arab period of Punic/Christian Semitic words, in widespread use all over the Middle East and North Africa prior to the Arab invasion. That as far as Malta is concerned at least is logical.

Referrals to a 16th century liturgical text from Granada, 500 years after the period in question complicates the issue unnecessarily for various reasons since by then the Renaissance was in full swing and among other things, the knowledge of Arabic books, thanks to the Jewish translators, and of the Arab Christian tradition, thanks largely to the

Maronites and other sects, was much more widespread (Ramsey J. *Spain. The Rise of the First World Power*. The University of Alabama Press, The University Alabama, 1973). Sicily at the time of the Norman conquest was a polyglot of ethnic groups and different religions, with many being bi- if not tri-lingual. The liturgical document from Sicily (1153) containing the three languages Greek, latin and Arabic is fascinating but one is left with two questions after noting it. So what? And, why not?

Ghajn Klieb

The cosmopolitan nature of Sicily made it imperative for the newly established Normans to prevent inter-religious strife at all costs, since this would have torn their kingdom apart. Professor Wettinger admits the severe penalty imposed on the Maltese and Gozitan Christian community for killing a Muslim during the time of King Roger II. This must have been some time around King Roger II's definitive taking of these islands in 1127 and his death in 1154. From official Imperial documents the Maltese were still paying this fine in 1198 (Schroth – Kohler C et al. *Zwei staufische Diplome für Malta aus den Jahren 1198 und 1212*, Deutsches Archiv, 33 (1977), pp. 519-20). Professor Wettinger refers to this as an inter-confessional feud. If a feud existed prior to 1150, it was the long-suffering Christians, now having the upper hand and trying to get their own back who had to be firmly dealt with by the Normans.

Professor Wettinger asked me to read *The Invention of Tradition* (a secondary source). Fine, but is this not the *Ghajn Klieb* legend rearing up its ugly head to plague him? According to a version of the legend that I have read, the *Ghajn Klieb* incident occurred just over 30 years after Count Roger came to Malta (1190), and as a result Roger II came to Malta with a fleet (Farini A. Fiabe, *Tradizioni, Leggende Maltesi* Vol. I Tipografia Casa di San Giuseppe, Hamrun, 1934).

Saracens

Bishop Burchard carried out his voyage in 1175. His chronicler referred to the Maltese as Saracens when for over 20 years at least the Maltese Christian community had been paying their annual fine for murdering a Muslim. My original contention that such chroniclers were unreliable when describing “foreigners” is thus borne out. Neither this chronicler nor such chroniclers as William of Machaut (1365 Cyprus Crusade) nor the Crusaders murdering and robbing all the “Saracens” of Alexandria (1365), Muslim and Christian alike, seem to have had the nicety to consult the meaning of the word ‘Saracens’ given several centuries later in N. Daniel in *The Arabs and Medieval Europe* (a secondary source), as Professor Wettinger did.

Malaterra

Turning to Malaterra, Professor Wettinger has in the past taken this account of Count Roger leaving Muslims in charge of the Island after the 1090 raid/unvasion as implying that there were no Maltese Christians present. History abounds with revolutions/invasions leaving the bureaucracy in the hands of the oppressors/conquered. This is because they tend to be the only ones capable of managing. Thus the Arabs left the Copts in Egypt and the Nestorians in Iraq. Even today, the Rumanians and the East Germans, to give but an example, have been forced to leave Communists in key positions because the revolutionaries, like the Maltese

Christians, would not have had the experience of running the country, they having been deprived of power for so long.

Malaterra's account simply provides negative evidence and as Professor Wettinger admits elsewhere, "negative evidence does not carry much weight." Malaterra describes how Count Roger was greeted by Christian captives flocking out of the town after the surrender. He also describes how the foreign Christians were transported to their homeland. Does this, however, exclude the possibility that there were Maltese Christians also present? How can one take this account to conclude that there were no Maltese Christians? Perhaps the Maltese Christians were on farms, away from the centre of activities. This is not that unlikely since elsewhere, for example in Sicily, most of the remaining Christians were in rural areas and not in the towns.

Need I recall that prior to arriving in Sicily the Normans had been fighting and defeating Christians in Southern Sicily, specifically Greek Orthodox ones? Need I recall that some 40 years earlier the Maltese "slaves" together with the Arabs had fought against the Byzantines, having been frightened by their Arab masters that the Byzantines would not discriminate between them? Is it therefore surprising that if there were Maltese Christians around they would be treating what they perceived as this latest, ruthless invader with some degree of apprehension?

Folk memories

On the subject of folk memories, Professor Wettinger failed to comment on the continuing Christian at the catacombs of Abbatija tad-Dejr and St. Agatha, chose once again to brush over San Pawl Milqi and Tas-Silg with their Roman and Byzantine remains and contrasted on the more dubious ones of Hal Millieri and Bir Miftuh. These two medieval churches still need proper archaeological excavations but have Roman remains strewn all around. We are still awaiting the report of the archaeological dig carried out at Hal Millieri in 1977. The old troglodytic church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception at Msida had catacombs that are now lost behind it. (Buhagiar M. *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial places in the Maltese Islands*. BAR International Series 302, 1986). Most of the troglodytic churches have origins that are obscure and go back into the mists of time (Borg V. *Malta and its Paleochristian Heritage : A new approach*, in: *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History* (1986). Certainly they seem to represent, according to some authors a transition from catacombs to the partly underground medieval chapels like Hal Millieri to finally, as the Maltese became better builders in the later parts of the 15th century, free standing buildings (Mahoney L. *History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1810*. Veritas Press, 1988). To the list can be added others like St. Paul's at Rabat, built over St. Paul's Catacombs and Il-Madonna tal-Ghar in the Dominican monastery at Rabat built over the lost catacombs, somewhere under St. Dominic's square (Buhagiar M. *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and related Burial places in the Maltese Islands*).

At Mosta, in the church of the Immaculate Conception, the altar stood exactly above a Roman tomb (Buhagiar M. *Medieval Maltese Church Architecture*, in: *Hal Millieri, A Maltese Casale, its churches and paintings*, Luttrell Anthony Ed. Pub. Midsea Books Ltd., Malta 1976). The significance of this it seems, needs to be spelt out. The altar of Paleo-Christian churches, as in St. Peter's in Rome, was often erected on the tombs of Christian martyrs and saints. Therefore the fact that a post-Arab church was built on the exact site of a Roman tomb must be given serious consideration. In these instances Roman is taken to refer

to pre-Arab, that is Christian in the folk memory of the locals. So strong is this in the native consciousness that one is reminded of the persistent legend still around to haunt the likes of Professor Wettinger: that is, that the Cathedral is built on the exact site of the house of St. Publius, the reputed first Bishop of Malta.

Mr. Buhagiar states that other Christian churches in Malta may have been built on pre-Arab burial sites (Buhagiar M. *Medieval Maltese Church Architecture*).

The list could be endless with succession of churches being replaced and newer ones built every so often, with changing fashions a particular Maltese predisposition. An interesting statistic is that, despite the much lower population, the total number of churches in 1450 was around 400, roughly the same number as it is today (Mahoney, L. *A History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1800*).

Byzantine rite

Professor Wettinger resorts to yet more obtuse reasoning when trying to explain the presence of the Byzantine rite in post-Arab Malta, namely that Maltese Muslims found it easier to convert to what was becoming a minority rite rather than take up the Latin rite, the rite in the ascendant. I still hold that it is much more logical to maintain that at least a portion of Punic speaking Christians observing the Greek Orthodox rite survived the Arab period and kept their Byzantine traditions just as their Sicilian brethren did. The possibility that some Muslims chose to convert to that particular rite would be another matter altogether but it is strange to suppose that Maltese Muslims would convert to a form of Christianity that was, according to Professor Wettinger, extinct from the Maltese Islands for 150 years. Surely Professor Wettinger is not suggesting that the Byzantine rite was reintroduced into these Islands *de novo* in the 1150's right under the nose of the newly appointed Latin rule bishop. And while we are at it, who was this bishop supposed to be ministering to? A population of Muslims and a few newly converted Byzantine rite Christians? Even though he was based in Sicily, he and his clergy resident in Malta must have felt pretty lonely.

At least Professor Wettinger admits that he has tried to dovetail the scraps of information that exist. Using those same scraps it is possible to obtain different conclusions to the ones Professor Wettinger arrives at. An open mind needs to be kept and the whole object of the original article and this article is to cast doubt on Professor Wettinger's assertion that no indigenous Maltese Christians survived the Arab occupation. I am not for a moment suggesting that none of the original Maltese converted to Islam or that all the "slaves" mentioned by Al-Qazwini were Christian. We simply do not know and more information both from archeological digs, which now seem the most likely source of data on this period, or some miraculous find of some hitherto long lost documentation is needed.

It is neither academic nor honest to stubbornly stick to a onesided explanation when dealing with a period of time characterised by lack of information. We might never know the truth and at present there is no room for dogma. Certainly, however, there is a sufficient body of evidence to indicate that during the period of Arab political predominance, at least two religious communities, Muslim and Christian, cohabited in these islands.

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