

The Making of Christian Malta: From the Early Middle Ages to 1530

By ANTHONY LUTTRELL (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate Variorum, 2002), 352 pp. Price HB £57.50. ISBN 0-86078-849-0.

The national myth of Mediterranean islands grows in inverse proportion to their size—the smaller the island, the greater its myth of identity. A recent visit to Pantelleria (83 square kilometres) happened to coincide with the discovery of the remains of a Punic temple, which was being hailed so enthusiastically by the Pantescans as material proof of their Phoenician ancestry that I could elicit no interest in the Muslim remains I had come to examine. ‘Siamo punici puri, professore’, a member of the local ArcheoClub assured me, ‘non siamo mai stati turchi tunisini’. That all the inhabitants of Malta (243 square kilometres—not counting Gozo, 69 square kilometres, and the tiny islets of Comino, Cominotto, and Filfla) do not today believe their ancestors to be Phoenician may be due less to its greater size than to the recent revolution in the history of medieval Malta. Before the 1960s, the dominant myth of Maltese identity held that the indigenous inhabitants had indeed been Phoenician. After their conversion to Christianity by St Paul, they had retained their ancient Semitic language and their new Christian religion throughout the centuries of Muslim rule, until they were liberated by Roger I, the Norman count of Sicily, in 1091. This enduring myth owes much—but by no means all—to the classic history of Gian Francesco Abela (*Della Descrizione di Malta*, Malta, 1647), whose strong differentiation between the island’s rulers—a succession of foreign powers—and its people—a continuum of Maltese-speaking Christians—enabled him and his successors to argue that, long before the coming of the Knights of St John in 1530, Malta had been ordained by God as a bulwark of Christian, European civilization against the spread of Mediterranean Islam.

During the last thirty years, largely through the work of Tony Luttrell and the Maltese scholars Godfrey Wettinger and Mario Buhagiar, it has come to be accepted that Christianity disappeared from the Maltese archipelago during the centuries of Muslim occupation (869–1127). Latin Christianity was reintroduced from Sicily in the twelfth century, and became the religion of the majority only after the immigration of Italians and expulsion of Muslims during the thirteenth century. Whatever language was spoken on Malta before 869, medieval and modern Maltese represents a transformation of Arabic introduced in the ninth to eleventh centuries by a process of Latinization ongoing since the twelfth. Christian Malta, therefore, is now seen as having been made not by St Paul, but during the three centuries after the fall of Muslim Malta.

The Making of Christian Malta brings together twenty studies by Luttrell first published between 1975 and 1997. Luttrell’s introduction to the collection that began the revolution—*Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights* (London: British School at Rome, 1975)—is here reproduced as ‘Approaches to Medieval Malta’. This comprehensive historical and historiographical review, carefully built upon the soundest of foundations, has aged remarkably well. It is preceded by a new chapter, ‘Medieval Malta: Approaches

and Reproaches’, which discusses the most important bibliographical and historiographical developments in the interval between the two books. Few major revisions are made to the broad thesis set out thirty years earlier, and the most severe reproaches are reserved for archaeology (past and present) and for the current failure of the Maltese government to make proper provision for teaching and research in medieval archaeology and history. Together, these two elegant and highly readable studies offer the most accessible point of departure for the study of medieval Malta.

Many of the key destinations to which they lead will be found in this volume. Few British libraries keep the journals and periodicals that contain the most informative debates on the history of medieval Malta—not to mention the *Sunday Times of Malta*, ‘which actually carries learned contributions with footnotes’—and so it is particularly useful to have Luttrell’s most important studies for them (and for other journals and proceedings) reproduced in this convenient and accessible form. Rather than list the studies upon the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which lie well beyond my own competence, I prefer to concentrate upon the crux of the problem addressed by the volume as a whole: how, by the late thirteenth century, the Maltese came to have Arabic as their speech and Latin Christianity as their religion.

In the mid-1990s, the Maltese linguist Joseph Brincat first drew attention to the account of the island given in the *Rawḍ al-miʿtār fī khabar al-aqtār* (‘The Scented Garden of Information about Places’)—a geographical treatise containing much historical matter compiled, apparently, by several members of the al-Ḥimyarī family over a long period between the mid-thirteenth and early sixteenth centuries. (Ibn ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Ḥimyarī, *Kitāb Rawḍ al-miʿtār fī khabar al-aqtār*, ed. Iḥsan ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1975), 520; J. M. Brincat, *Malta 870–1054: Al-Ḥimyarī’s Account and its Linguistic Implications*, (Malta, 2nd rev. edn., 1995.) For its complex history of composition, see J. Johns, ‘Entella nelle fonte arabe’, in G. Nenci (ed.), *Alla Ricerca di Entella*, (Pisa, 1993) 85–8. For the Arab conquest of Malta in other sources, see G. Wettinger, ‘The Arabs in Malta’, in *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History*, (Malta, 2nd edn., 1986), 87–104.) According to this source, after the capture of Malta by the Aghlabids of Ifrīqīya in 255/869, the island remained waste and abandoned (‘fa-baqiyat ba‘da dhālika jazīrat Mālīṭa khariba [or khariba] ghayr āhila’), visited only for timber, fish, and honey. After the year 440/1048–9, it was settled by the Muslims, who rebuilt its capital, and then it became even better than it was before (‘fa-lammā kāna ba‘da 440 AH ‘amara-hā l-muslimūn wa-banaw madinata-hā thumma ‘ādat atamma mimma kānat ‘alay-hi’). The apparently independent report of Malta in the mid-970s by the Iraqī traveller Ibn Ḥawqal seems to support this claim that the island was abandoned for more than a century and a half (Ibn Ḥawqal, *Opus Geographicum (Sūrat Al-Ard)*, ed. J. H. Kramers, 2 vols., *Bibliotheca geographorum arabicorum*, 2nd ser. (Leiden, 1938–9) i. 204. See A. Luttrell, ‘Ibn Ḥawqal and Tenth-Century Malta’, *Hyphen*, 5/4 (1987), 157–160.)

From Luttrell’s discussion of al-Ḥimyarī, and of Brincat’s treatment of his report (‘V. Slaves and Captives on Malta: 1053/4 and 1091’, p. 99), it is

difficult to be sure whether or not he believes that the island was completely abandoned. I suspect that he is inclined to believe that it was, but prefers to wait and see what archaeology has to contribute—as he notes elsewhere (I, p. 6), a controversial essay has recently suggested that Malta was an emporium for international trade in the late tenth and eleventh centuries (A. Molinari and N. Cutajar, 'Of Greeks and Arabs and of Feudal Knights', *Malta Archaeological Review* 3 (1999)). In the meantime, Luttrell clearly wishes to nip in the bud Brincat's suggestion that, although Malta was completely abandoned, some Christian Maltese may have survived as refugees in the interior. The logic of Luttrell's objection to Brincat's hedging is unassailable; but al-Ḥimyarī and Ibn Ḥawqal may be wrong, or exaggerating the extent of depopulation, or may be ignoring (or ignorant of) a Christian rural population—neither report states categorically that the Maltese islands were utterly uninhabited. I believe it as unlikely that the Aghlabids would (or could) have systematically killed or enslaved the rural population, as it is improbable that the Byzantine 'authorities' (whoever they may have been on Malta in 869) would have evacuated the peasantry from the island. I also find it improbable that, given the natural resources of the island which the Muslims are said to have exploited, no Muslim settled there before 440 AH. Whether or not archaeology is eventually able to provide the evidence, my bet is that Malta was not completely abandoned throughout the tenth and early eleventh centuries.

Be that as it may, Luttrell is absolutely right to stress that there is no written evidence for continuous occupation by a Christian population. Brincat made much of the report by al-Ḥimyarī (echoed by al-Qazwīnī: see *Kitāb Athār al-bilād wa-akhbār al-ibād*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, 1848), 373–74) that, when the Muslim city was attacked by the Byzantines (*al-Rūm*) in 445/1053–4 (or in 440/1049), the assault was repulsed only with the loyal support of slaves (*abīd*), who were rewarded with their freedom. Could these have been the descendants of the Christian Maltese conquered in 869? And, after their manumission, could they have survived under Muslim rule until liberation by the Normans? Luttrell is rightly sceptical. The Arabic word *abīd*, in the context of an urban fortress, presumably means household slaves, not an indigenous Christian population living under the *dhimma*. These slaves could have come from anywhere—even from Malta, were that not logically inconsistent with al-Ḥimyarī's report that the island had previously been uninhabited. Moreover, the Muslims promised before the battle not just to free their slaves and to make them their equals, but also to give them their daughters in marriage ('inna-kum in nāṣaḥtumū-nā fī qitāl 'adūwi-nā... fa-antum aḥrār nulḥiqu-kum bi-anfusi-nā wa-nunkiḥu-kum banāta-nā'), and warned them that, were they to be taken by the Byzantines, they too would suffer captivity and slavery—all of which indicates that the slaves were not Christians. Again, Brincat was tempted to argue that there were Maltese among the Christian captives rescued from Malta by Count Roger in 1091; again, Luttrell is rightly sceptical. The only source—Roger's chaplain, Geoffrey Malaterra—states clearly that, once free, the captives all chose to return to

their native lands (Geoffrey Malaterra, *De rebus gestis Rogerii Calabriae et Siciliae comitis et Roberti Guiscardi ducis fratris eius*, ed. E. Pontieri, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 2nd ser., 5, (Bologna, 1927–8) 95–6). In short, neither the slaves of 1053–4, nor the Christian captives of 1091, can be used to demonstrate the continuity of a Christian population during the period of Muslim rule.

Alexander of Teleso reports that Roger II of Sicily conquered Malta in 1127 (*Alexandri Telesini abbatis ystoria Rogerii regis Siciliae Calabriae atque Apulie*, ed. L. De Nava, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia*, 112 (Rome, 1991), 8, 97), but almost nothing is known of the island during the twelfth century. Luttrell suggests that it 'was almost exclusively Muslim' (IX, p. 4), and he may well be right. Until the very end of the Norman kingdom, Malta was retained within the royal demesne. In this respect, it resembles the Muslim reservation of western Sicily, in which it was royal policy, until the mid-1170s, to limit the influence of the Latin church and Latin barons. There is a hint that Malta, too, may have been farmed by the crown as a Muslim reservation, for Roger II imposed an annual fine upon the Christians of Malta and Gozo as punishment for their having killed a Muslim (VII, pp. 53–4; IX, p. 5). But King Tancred, it would seem, alienated Malta from his demesne and granted it to the adventurer Margarito of Brindisi, who was given the title Count of Malta. Henry VI imprisoned Margarito and appointed in his place William Grasso, a Genoese, who seems to have both offended Queen Constance and provoked the Maltese. In 1198, Constance promised 'all the men of Malta and Gozo, both Christians and Saracens, our loyal subjects, that we shall keep them and the whole islands of Malta and Gozo in our demesne forever, and that they shall never hereafter be given as a barony or county to any man', as a reward for their loyal support against 'our enemy', William Grasso. The same privilege exempted the Christians from the annual fine imposed upon them by King Roger. Evidently, the Christian community on Malta had grown large enough for Constance to be concerned to retain its loyalty. The process of Christianization was well under way, and the crown now found it politic to favour the Christians over the Muslims. The original of this privilege, which was previously known only from copies, has recently been rediscovered in a private Sicilian archive; the well-known Latin text is accompanied by a version in Arabic, hitherto known only as a *deperditum*. (For the Latin text, see T. Kölzer (ed.), *Constantiae imperatricis et reginae Siciliae diplomata (1195–1198)*, *Codex diplomaticus Regni Siciliae*, 2nd ser., *Diplomata regum et gente Suevorum*, I. 2 (Cologne and Vienna, 1983), doc. no. 66, pp. 237–40. The original will be published in the near future, together with the rest of the archive, by Enrico Mazzaresse Fardella. The Arabic text will be edited by the present author, who will also publish a separate study of the document.) Interesting as this is, it tells us nothing about language in contemporary Malta, for the Arabic text was composed in Palermo, in the royal *diwān* which, more often than not, with that taste for the absurd cultivated by all bureaucracies, issued documents in Arabic to recipients who had little or no knowledge of that language. (J. Johns, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Diwān* (Cambridge, 2002),

207–11. For another perspective, see A. Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in 'Norman' Sicily: Arabic-Speakers and the End of Islam* (London, 2002), *passim*.)

Luttrell argues, with growing persuasiveness, that Frederick II began to expel the Muslims from Malta in 1224 (II, pp. 37–8; VII, p. 55; IX, pp. 9–13). Ibn Khaldūn, the only source for this expulsion, places it after the death of the Hāfsid sultan of Tunis, Abū Zakariyā' Yaḥyā I (625/1228–647/1249), but explicitly links it to the expulsion of Muslim rebels from Sicily to Lucera in Apulia that followed the death of the rebel leader Muḥammad ibn 'Abbād, in about 1222. William Grasso's son-in-law, Henry, Count of Malta, was involved in this mass transportation of defeated Muslim rebels from Sicily, and may also have been involved in the transportation of Italian rebels from Celano in the Abruzzi, first to Sicily and then to Malta. While this amounts to a strong argument in favour of dating the Maltese expulsion to 1224, I am not persuaded of the case for further expulsions in about 1245 and thereafter.

Between these two dates, in 1241, Giliberto Abbate, governor of Malta under Frederick II, wrote his report on the island; a unique source that offers a glimpse of the process of Christianization in the generation after the Muslim community had slipped into the minority ('Giliberto Abbate's Report on Malta: Circa 1241'). It is, however, an extremely difficult source to interpret with confidence. There are palaeographic difficulties and ambiguous readings, but the main problem is that, although the report can only be understood by analogy with Sicily, Giliberto states plainly that 'the men of these islands live according to different customs and laws than do the men of our kingdom of Sicily', and does not explain how Malta differed. Luttrell takes great pains to point out the difficulties, to expound the alternatives fairly, and to make clear the basis of his preferences. To summarize his conclusions in a few words is to do violent injustice to his balanced scholarship—so here goes:

The two islands of Malta and Gozo were inhabited by 2,119 families, of which 1,250 (59 per cent) were Christians, 836 (39.5 per cent) Muslims, and 33 (1.5 per cent) Jews. Most of the Muslims were *villani curie*, 'villeins of the royal court', and paid as tax not only the *gisā*—a poll tax on the model of the Islamic *jizya*—but also one fourth of their produce in kind. (For a discussion of the similar regime in Norman Sicily, see Johns, *Arabic Administration*, 34–39, 145–51, and 'The Boys from Mezzoiuso: Muslim *Jizya*-Payers in Christian Sicily', in R. Hoyland and P. Kennedy (eds.), *Islamic Reflections, Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Professor Alan Jones* (Warminster, Wilts., forthcoming 2004).) There were no Christian *villani curie*; no Christian family paid the fourth or the *gisā*, and many Christian families paid no direct tax whatsoever. If, as seems likely, the Muslims had been a protected majority under Roger II, they had become a persecuted minority under Frederick II, reduced to semi-servile status and subject to a penal level of taxation. This socio-economic imbalance between the Christian and Muslim communities was what caused Arabic-speaking Muslims to convert *en masse* to Latin Christianity.

Behind Luttrell's argument seems to be the conviction that only conversion from Islam can explain the Maltese phenomenon of Arabic-speaking Latin

Christians. This may be right, but it is pure hypothesis—the sources do not mention conversion. If mass conversion really did occur, then Malta constitutes a rare exception to the resistance of Muslim communities to convert under pressure. Why did the Muslims of Malta convert to escape punitive taxation, when the Muslims of Sicily and Spain (and, for that matter, the Christians of *Bilād al-Shām* and Egypt, not to mention the Jews throughout the Islamic world) did not? The taxes levied upon the Maltese were not significantly higher than those paid by the Muslims of Norman Sicily or by the *dhimmi*s of contemporary Islam. On the Sicilian model (J. Johns, 'The Greek Church and the Conversion of Muslims in Norman Sicily?', *Byzantinische Forschungen* 21 (1995), 133–57), to which Luttrell several times refers, I should be inclined to wonder how many of the Saracens of Malta were in fact Christians who had become profoundly Arabized and, to the extent of practice, Islamized under Muslim rule, and who, after the Sicilian conquest, reverted rather than converted to Christianity—but such speculation leads inevitably back to the old myth of Maltese identity and to a conclusion contradicted by the written record: that a population of Christian Maltese persisted throughout the period of Muslim rule. Luttrell has too much respect for the historical evidence to entertain such a possibility and, given the particular obstacles to archaeological excavation and field survey on Malta, he may well be right to doubt whether material evidence will ever decide the question.

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The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century

By RENE J. BARENDSE (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 604 pp. Price PB £28.95. ISBN 0-7656-0729-8.

Ever since Fernand Braudel made the Mediterranean the centrepiece of a pioneering historical study, other seas have been candidates for a similar treatment. Anthony Reid devoted two volumes to Southeast Asia and its maritime trade from 1450 to 1680, and now R. J. Barendse introduces the reader to the vast panorama of the Arabian Seas. His ample use of Dutch and Portuguese sources helps him to provide a colourful picture full of interesting details. The entire east coast of Africa, Yemen and the Persian Gulf as well as the west coast of India are covered by this magnificent text.

Barendse does not claim that this region is a 'world economy' of its own (*economie monde* in Braudel's terminology) but rather refers to a 'network of trade' connected with an emerging global economy. He is particularly good at tracing the Western connections of this region, the route around the Cape of Good Hope as well as the overland routes through Persia and the Ottoman empire. He is less interested in tracing the connections with the East, though he refers to the Indian Ocean in the subtitle of his book. Perhaps he was afraid that this mighty ocean would overwhelm the niche he has carved out for