

Books

# Maths logic for history

Ugo Mifsud Bonnici

JOSEPH BUSUTTIL, STANLEY FIORINI AND HORATIO CAESAR ROGER VELLA (Eds): *Tristia ex Melitogaudio. Lament in Greek Verse of a XIIth-century Exile on Gozo*, The Farsons Foundation, 2010. 612pp. €40

This book is an important event in our islands' scholarly publishing in recent years.

The text is translated from the literary Greek used in Sicily in the 12th century into modern English. This alone makes it a document of immense historical importance besides its merits as literature and as evidence of a human drama in the Norman Kingdom's court circles.

For obvious reasons I have always preferred Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to his *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*. Judging from the continuing stream of translations, such as one of the most recent, the excellent version by Ted Hughes (*Talés from Ovid* 1997), my preferences are widely shared.

However, in addition to the pathos of Exile, the *Tristia* and the *Epistulae* sent by the poet of Sulmona from Pontus after his banishment by the emperor, ostensibly for his licentious poetry, contain much more detail of historical and socio-anthropological interest, than the wonderful surrealist transformations in the *Metamorphoses*.

The lament of the unknown poet writing in Greek from Gozo is also important on the purely literary plane. But the light it sheds on a particular period of Maltese and Gozitan history, which is poor not only in documentary sources but also in

archaeological traces, transcends its aesthetic interest.

It may be unfair to compare this unknown poet with the work of one of the most elegant elegiac poets of antiquity, but there are similarities which justify the editors' choice of labelling the poem as *Tristia*.

The poem has the same kind of questioning of the real reason behind the fall from favour, which is reminiscent of the search in Kafka's *Prozess* for a proper explanation of the undefined accusation.

It sounds familiar and very Mediterranean in the suspicion of Court clique intrigue and sheer ghawi. It shows, however, that the author was a man of great culture

**"This book proves professors of mathematics can be conscious and scrupulous historians"**

and Christian faith, replete as the verses are with classical and biblical allusion.

Stanley Fiorini's efforts at scouring the archives and libraries of Sicily, Naples, the Vatican, Spain, as also our own, in search of documentary sources of Maltese mediaeval history, have brought to the surface this precious piece of evidence.

The notes with which the pages are riddled provide a compendium of all sorts of classical, biblical and scholarly references, together with ancient and modern figures of speech, scansion and prosody.

The 20 years that it took to compile the material show in the thoroughness and clarity.

Fiorini has provided the historical contextualisation. There is a thorough discussion of the problems presented by the poem: first of all the identity of the 'anonymous' author, ferreted out, it seems, through skilful detective investigations as an Eugenius, a Palermitan Admiral.

Secondly, of the indications the poem now provides for the continuity of Christianity in these islands (definitely in Gozo, but by strong inference also in the larger island), as well as that of the Pauline cult and tradition.

There is also a lot of corroborating evidence for the general outline of the popular story of Roger the Norman's *Reconquista*.

The publication of this book is quite timely. We will shortly be welcoming Benedict XVI and asserting our nation's steadfast loyalty to the faith as *Semper Fideles*.

It is salutary that we should have this additional buttress to a tradition which had been questioned on the basis of by no means unequivocal indications of a total submission to Islam.

The evidence here of the 'pact' by which our ancestors were guaranteed the freedom to hold on to their Christianity by paying the *gizya*, is a much more historically convincing way of explaining this continuity during the Arab occupation.

Poets are not self-consciously historians. Their works may at times be more authentic, than those of 'interested' historians or biographers.

In this case, the poet is so evenly balanced in his perceptions and so critical of the rulers that one is convinced of his sincerity. In craving for reprieve from an unsurmised failing, he does not falsify the facts.



A 12th century mosaic of Roger being crowned by Christ.

The book has a complete scholarly apparatus to help specialists and exhaustive explanations to assist laymen. The arguments from strict textual analysis are scientifically cogent. One expects however some scholarly discussion and reactions from some of the specialists in Mediterranean medieval history, Maltese and foreign.

The whole intellectual exercise in reading through the poem with its panoply of annotations and probable interpretations, is extremely gratifying.

The book is technically well-produced and printed, with beautiful

illustrations introducing the reader into the world of the Siculo-Norman kingdom with its three languages (Latin, Greek and Arabic) and their cultures, its connections with the Papacy as well as with the receding yet still present Byzantine *polis*.

This book proves professors of mathematics can be conscious and scrupulous historians, and can bring mathematical logic to bear on historical interpretation.

We can be justly proud of two scholars, Joseph Busuttill and Horatio Vella who have managed to maintain against many odds, another continuity: that of classical studies in our country.

# Opening up to the EU and irregular immigration

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice has published *Opening up: A path beyond fear*, a series of lectures which help to place the fears of foreigners which people have in Malta today in a wider context.

Malta is the smallest state in the European Union. Two recent events have had an impact on Malta in the past few years.

These have been our joining the EU and the recent large influx of irregular immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa in precarious boats.

Both these events have provoked fears: fears of losing our identity as Maltese; fears of losing our religion and traditions. In the case of our joining the union most of these fears were 'counterbalanced' by the prospects of greater economic stability.

The process leading up to joining the EU has been quite a delicate and difficult process since it polarised the country. However after the referendum and election of 2003 there has been a very positive outcome:

Malta went beyond its fears and joined the union and the main political parties became united in accepting the will of the majority. They are now both bickering over which one



is most able to make the best out of European membership.

However, with regards to the issue of irregular immigration our fears have grown beyond proportion. We are witnessing the development of a mainstream discourse which pictures sub-Saharan Africans as the epitome of all our ills and problems, a discourse that is pervading the public sphere, from party politics to newspapers to blogs.

Whether we like it or not we must

accept that we are no longer a remote island, shielded by the white foam of the waves that batter our shores. These lectures challenge us to go beyond our fears and reflect on the tenets of the discourse which is pervading the way we are thinking.

What does it mean to be Maltese? What does it mean to be Christian and Catholic? How can we reconcile our fears with our Christian, or at least, humanistic values?

Are we really experiencing a cataclysmic invasion by Africans in Malta today? Or is it rather a wakeup call to make the leap from a post-colonial mentality marked by fear and isolation towards a neo-European mentality infused by a sense of self-confidence and solidarity?

These are some of the questions that are addressed in the lectures in this publication. Cardinal Martino, Prof. Andrea Riccardi and Fr Fernando Franco were the guest speakers at the annual lecture organised by the Centre for Faith and Justice in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

The lecture has become an annual occasion that offers the opportunity to delve deeper into crucial themes that lie at the core of the centre's work.

TRISTIA EX MELITOGAUDIO  
Lament in Greek Verse of a XIIth-century Exile on Gozo

Edited by Joseph Busuttill, Stanley Fiorini and Horatio Caesar Roger Vella

A publication sponsored by THE FARSONS FOUNDATION

Available from leading stationers and booksellers.