

Arab-Christian 'pact' in medieval Malta

Ugo Mifsud Bonnici (*The Sunday Times*, March 14) recognises that "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".

The 13th century Greek poem does mention a pact which was being abrogated in 1127. But this raises my perplexity. What was its original date and terms? Was it reached with the Arab invaders in 870 AD, when we are told expressly by Himyari in pretty few words that the Arab victors left Malta bereft of people except for a few who came over to collect honey, timber for shipbuilding and fish from the island's shores?

Stanley Fiorini thinks that the Malta mentioned in 870 did not include Gozo and that the people of Gozo were granted the status of *dhimmi* (p. lxvi). In fact, in 870 there was no room for such a pact.

The *dhimmi* type pact would have allowed them to have their own churches in which to practise their religion. They would not have had to wait several hundred years for the arrival of Count (soon to be King) Roger in 1127 to confiscate a number of mosques for conversion into churches.

Himyari also writes that in the year of the Hegira 440/1048 AD, Malta was populated by the faithful, and that five years later they made a pact with the *ghabida*, or slaves, by which the latter achieved equality with the free if they joined them in repelling an invasion by the Byzantines, and the free, or *hurra*, would share their belongings with them and give them their daughters for wives (never done by Muslims except to fellow Muslims).

The Byzantines were repulsed and the pact came into force, the only known pact between the free and unfree in Malta in Muslim times. Here again there is no reason for the name Malta not to be applicable to Gozo.

The transaction is mentioned both by Himyari and al-Qazwini, the latter of whom we have known for more than a century. No conjectures are involved, though historians shall continue to speculate on the precise significance of this particular pact.

The status of *ghabida* itself previously 'enjoyed' by the unfree was not exactly the one conferred by the *dhimmi* type of pact. And the status of equality then granted to them was far more than that normally given by the *dhimmi* type of pact.

It should also be remembered that in 1091 Count Roger invaded both Malta and Gozo, and though he freed numerous foreign Christian captives in Malta, local Christians here are not referred to at all with regard to toleration or political rights in the new pact which the local Muslim administration reached with him. In fact, it is conceded in this book, that Malta was completely Muslim in 1091.

The newly published poem in Byzantine Greek here published in the original Greek and English translation, clearly refers to a pact which the 'Christians' in Gozo could now disavow. But which pact was this, the never existing and conjectural one of 870, or the other recorded by Himyari and al-Qazwini which gave them equality?

Had it been the normal pact granting them the right to practise their Christian religion, why did they have to renounce it just when Gozo was being conquered by Count Roger's men? Malaterra expressly records that during his return to Sicily

Count Roger landed his men on Gozo which they harried and plundered but there is no mention of Christians on Gozo, whether local men or foreign captives.

Could no one have informed them of their existence when they were ashore on Gozo itself enabling him to increase his renown by freeing them or taking them abroad as he had just done on Malta? Was it not Malaterra's particular task to write of his noble achievements? Instead they had to wait another 36 years for deliverance to come at the hands of his son.

The pact they had to renounce was obviously the one of ca. 1048 which had granted the *ghabida* political and social equality but apparently not the religious toleration associated with the normal *dhimmi* type of pact. This explains why the ex-*ghabida* were told they could marry the daughters of the previous free people who were undoubtedly Muslim.

It all now falls into place. The events of 1127 reveal that at least since ca. 1048 the people of Malta (and Gozo) had ceased to practise Christianity if they were in fact at all still Christians at that date.

They seem to have been satisfied with the pact reached with the *hurra* or free people in the middle of the 11th century. Equality was enough for them. Perhaps the individuals mentioned in 1127 were merely still being hustled into another change of religion. In all probability, several of them could have belonged to families relatively recently converted to Islam?

Curiously enough I could not find any reference to Himyari and Al-Qazwini in the whole massive book. I'll have another look. **Godfrey Wettinger**
St Julian's

Solution to St Paul's Bay parking problem

One of the biggest problems in St Paul's Bay and its surroundings is that in winter it's a pleasant and quiet place to live in, but it's a completely different story in summer, when huge amounts of people invade the village.

Furthermore, there are the boat owners who come to St Paul's Bay, especially at weekends. This creates a huge parking problem, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that you end up wasting a half an hour trying to find a parking space, apart from having to walk another 10 minutes to get to your house.

The council never seemed to have addressed the problem, although I understand its budget is very limited. Transport Malta never did anything either. To add insult to injury, the Malta Maritime Authority (MMA) has proposed a temporary marina for the Xemxija area, which will increase boat capacity in the bay, thus increasing the numbers of cars.

To be fair, this will lead to the boat moorings becoming more organised, which is necessary, but what about the increase in traffic and parking? Did MMA even consider this problem? Now that we have the new Transport Malta, can they coordinate such issues and think about the traffic problems before issuing such tenders?

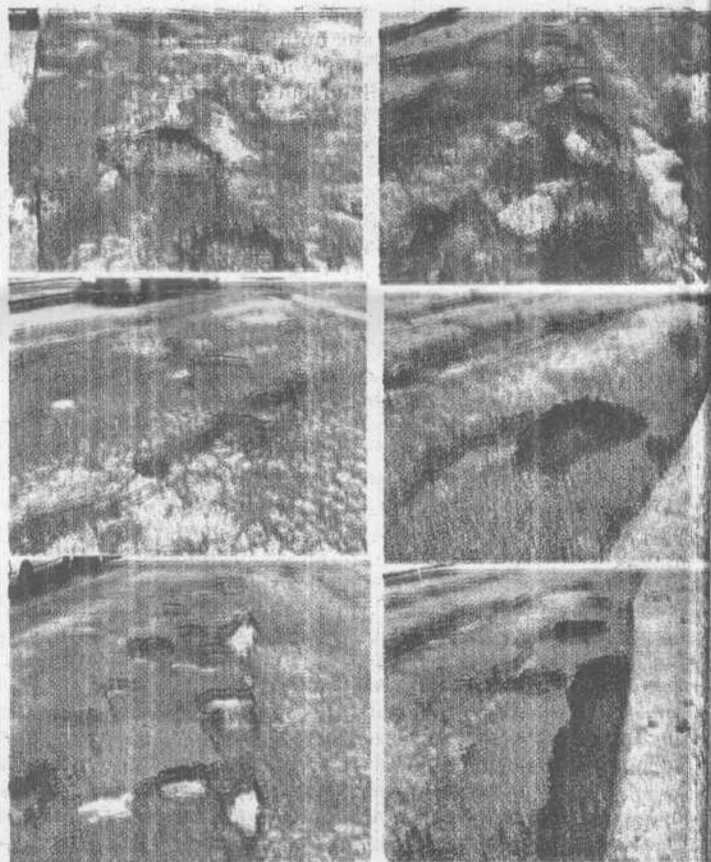
The contractor, rightly so, was forced by the transport authority to repair part of the St Paul's Bay bypass, after it was damaged due to excavation works in a building site just beneath this same road in Xemxija. I'm assuming the contractor spent huge amounts of money on doing this repair work, but it was their fault, and so be it.

In order to make the road safe enough, the contractor built a retaining structure that resembles large pigeon holes. When one looks at these large square structures from up close, it is evident they resemble car spaces or garages.

I'm not sure what's happening, but after building this structure to fix the road, works seem to have stopped; they have been like that for quite a while now. I think the contractors must be out of their mind to leave them as they are, especially since by selling them or renting them, one will be helping to solve the massive parking problem in the area.

I urge the contractor or the authorities to check if it is possible to use these spaces as garages or parking spaces. It would indeed bring much relief to the residents of the area.

Aidan Xuereb
St Paul's Bay



Senglea potholes

These pictures were not taken on the lunar surface but at Senglea waterfront. They show only some of the potholes - to show all the craters found in this stretch of road, one would require a double-page spread.

Unfortunately the Pope will not be passing through Senglea, therefore there doesn't seem to be much hope for improvement.

Victor Pulis
Tarxien

Restore the Opera House

Europe's as yet unrestored opera houses are the Teatro Garibaldi of Trapani in Sicily, bombed during World War II, and Valletta's Royal Opera House, similarly bombed during April 1942, when Malta was facing a disastrous scenario of starvation, lack of supplies and surrender.

These opera houses have remained in ruins ever since. And new venues have had to be sought for conducting stage performances of music and art. These cities have undoubtedly lost much in the process.

On the other hand, Dresden's *Semper Oper* in Germany was restored in 1985, no mean feat due to its mixed architectural styles. Venice's *Teatro La Fenice* was totally rebuilt in the early 2000s after having been deliberately set on fire. And Bari's *Teatro Petruzzelli* was rebuilt and reopened for operatic performances only last year, after having been the victim of suspected arson.

The government needs to choose whether to join the watchers or the doers - and become the restorer of our cherished opera house.

The Manoel Theatre is small, and totally inadequate for grand performances, though suitable for orchestral concerts. The

Mediterranean Conference Centre's theatre is part of an original hospital complex, whose yard has been inadequately adapted as a theatre - the architecture there is not right. The St James' Cavalier theatre is too small for anything but lectures and small performances.

This leaves us with the option of restoring our Royal Opera House to how it was before the explosion gutted and destroyed it in 1942. To start with, its derelict site at the gateway to Valletta is a shame, a disappointing welcome to Maltese and visiting city-goers. I feel that playing bizarre games with its remaining shell won't help a bit, and won't last more than 20 years.

Great men can make big mistakes. Witness the great statesman Winston Churchill planning and overseeing the battle of the Dardanelles in 1915 as First Lord of the Admiralty. It was a disaster, with great loss of life, especially of British, Australians and New Zealanders, and the cause of a full official enquiry. Churchill managed to rehabilitate himself and his reputation in later years, and saved Britain and Malta from surrender in 1940-1942.

The Nationalist government led by George Borg Olivier went ahead to approve an Italian

architect's plan for the rehashing of Kingsgate in the late 1960s-early 1970s. The result was a disaster and, as a citizen of Valletta, I am ashamed to enter our city through such an architecturally messy entrance.

Let us hope that Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi's gateway will be a marked improvement, not a similar degrading experiment, care of Renzo Piano. How successive governments have managed to mess up Valletta's main gateway to such an extent, through action or inaction is beyond belief. Valletta at present would deserve a medal for having the worst entrance in Europe.

It is time to salvage our honour as a people, and our opera house as a symbol of majestic architecture and artistic creativity.

The Italians have a saying: *L'ottimo è il nemico del bene*. If you shirk from doing what is best, you may even miss out on doing what is good.

The Americans have another saying: 'Give us something difficult, and we shall do it straight away; give us something impossible, and it will take us just a bit longer'. Brave and compelling words, which we should emulate or copy.

Bernard Vassallo
Swieqi

A generous thanks

I would like to thank all those who kindly helped to make such a success of the fundraising recital by Michelangelo Carbonara, the virtuoso pianist, in aid of The Friends of the Sick and the Elderly in Gozo and Happy Moments Kenya, at the Kempinski Hotel, San Lawrenz on March 6.

We are indebted to the sponsors and friends and

acquaintances who sent donations, as well as all the people who came to the concert.

Their generosity made it possible for me to hand the net amount of €2,640 to the two charities.

I hope everybody enjoyed the evening as much as I did.

Sonja Sinclair Stevenson-Lindblad
Gharb

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