

## History

## The 12th century:

## Muslim Malta and Christian Gozo?

Joseph M. Brincat

A few decades ago the pendulum swung dramatically from the traditional and rhetorical declaration of staunch continuation of Christianity among all the "Maltese" from St Paul's shipwreck throughout the ages to the iconoclastic denial of the presence of any Christians at all under Arab rule. In the latest contribution to this debate, Joseph Busuttil, Stanley Fiorini and Horatio Vella have come to the conclusion that Christianity survived on Gozo on the basis of a Greek poem written by an unknown author who was imprisoned in Gozo between 1135 and 1151

**"Christianity survived on Gozo on the basis of a Greek poem written by an unknown author who was imprisoned..."**

The book (*Tristia ex Melitogaudos*, Farsons Foundation, 2010) is confidently dedicated to "the memory of the Bishop and his community found by Roger II surviving on Gozo", but in actual fact the interpretation expressed in the book's introduction is not very convincing on some important points. First of all, the Greek manuscript calls Malta and/or Gozo *Melitogaudos*/*Melitegaudos*, *Melite* and *Malta*. The three terms are used in different parts of the narrative, which refer to three different episodes in the history of our islands. *Melite* is used when the text narrates St Paul's shipwreck, *Melitogaudos* is used when describing Roger II's conquest and *Malta* is only used in the notes to denote the poet's place of confinement.

What is the exact meaning of *Melitogaudos*? According to three specialists on ancient languages that I have consulted, the compound may mean Malta and Gozo or Gozo of Malta. Mr Busuttil, Mr Fiorini and Mr Vella have opted for the second alternative, but one cannot rule out the first one, Malta and Gozo. The exact meaning can only be seen in the context. A note in the manuscript explains: "How he healed the father of Publius, the governor of Melitegaudos" (page 169). We all know that, according to the Acts, Publius was governor of Malta, not of Gozo, therefore the writer of the note here surely meant Malta and Gozo. In fact, when narrating St Paul's shipwreck, the poet only uses *Melite*.

Again, the poet does not distinguish between Malta and Gozo when describing Roger II's reconquest. On page 167 he writes "the most resplendent of all the leaders... sailed to Melitogaudos, the country of Hagar, and he subdued them". Here, too, *Melitogaudos* means both Malta and Gozo, since both were reconquered by Roger II. It is



Roger II of Sicily. From the *Liber ad honorem Augusti* of Petrus of Ebulo, 1196.



significant that the name for Gozo, *Gaudos*, is never used by itself, neither in the poem nor in the notes.

### The place of confinement

References to the poet's prison are vague and mention neither Malta nor Gozo. In the passage on page 69 the poet only says that he is in a place inhabited by Muslim Arabic speakers: "I, wretched man, confined as a captive, prisoner, tarrying in the lands of Barbary". Barbary is a vast area and could be misleading, and therefore a note in the margin explains "That is, at Malta". The poet mentions his place of exile again on page 107, lamenting his fate: "to what end have I been flung in the midst of trackless seas where the children of Godless Hagar live". This vague reference too is explained

in a note saying "This concerns Malta, an island in the direction of Barbary, where he lives in the country of the Agarenes".

Here again there is no mention of Gozo. Mr Busuttil, Mr Fiorini and Mr Vella attribute the marginal notes to the poet himself, but in the notes the poet is only referred to by pronouns and remains anonymous.

All the references to the poet in the margins are in the third person ("The poet here speaks about himself") or in the impersonal ("Here it says that..."), with two exceptions on page 41 and on page 215: "Here it says how that which I desire is subject to the King's will" and "Here I say that I have been taken in custody for nine years".

But, even if the poet wrote the notes himself, the above-mentioned references to Malta rule out the hypothesis that the poet was imprisoned in Gozo. Arguments supporting the Gozo hypothesis

from the text's hints are even less convincing. Sicily is understandably more visible from Gozo than from Malta, but I myself

**"The presence of Christians in Malta and Gozo under Arab rule should move to a more moderate central position. Both extreme views were founded on the dearth of evidence..."**

have seen it from Santa Maria estate, almost at sea level in Meliha Bay; given the right condi-

tions it is also visible from Madliena and from Mdina, where the prison tower would have plausibly been situated. As to geographical features, Malta has more cliffs and headlands than Gozo, but their mention on page 23 is simply a long-established metaphor that associates "the rise and fall of the waves" with the difficult phases of life and "headlands" with stability. A literal interpretation of the phrase "lazing about on headlands" would contradict the description of the poet "captured in chains", which is probably metaphorical too, or hyperbolic, like the reference to pests in the tower.

### Christians

The presence of Christians is not clear in the text. The poet repeatedly laments that he is surrounded by Muslims (*Agarenes*) who maltreat him in *Melitogaudos*, the country of Hagar (p. 167) and in Malta (notes on pages 69 and 107). However, he was exiled to Malta between 1135 and 1151, after Roger II's reconquest and, since the Christians of Malta and Gozo enjoyed the King's protection by then, he should not have been so badly treated by the Muslims.

If the poet were imprisoned in Gozo, and Gozo's Christians were free to practice their religion since 1127, the poet should not have felt threatened at all by the Muslims, who would have been in a minority. It seems safer to conclude that in the mid-12th century there were still more Muslims than Christians in both Malta and Gozo.

The co-existence of the two religious communities is attested by Queen Constance's diploma of 1198 addressed to "all the people of Malta and Gozo, both Christians and Saracens".

That document revoked a tax imposed on the Christians of Malta by Roger II in 1154. In this light, the poet's laments about being maltreated by the "Agarenes" for nine years (1135-1144?, 1140-1149?, 1142-1151?) contrast with the fact that Roger II felt obliged to protect the Muslims by punishing all the Christians of Malta for murdering a Muslim in 1154.

The presence of Christians in Malta and Gozo under Arab rule should move to a more moderate central position. Both extreme views were founded on the dearth of evidence, but the new hypothesis of a Christian Gozo and a Muslim Malta is weak.

The little documentation that has become available since 1990 can allow us to "join the dots" and trace a picture inferring some form of Christian continuity under Moslem rule in Malta and Gozo, whatever the significance one chooses to give it.

The coronation mantle of Roger II King of Sicily, made in Palermo 1133-34, showing the tree of life and a lion killing a camel on either side. A Kufic inscription on the border gives the date as Hegira 528 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).