THE ST. PAUL SHIPWRECK
CONTROVERSY
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SOURCE
MATERIAL

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The identity of the island of Melita on which, according to St. Luke (Acts xxviii, 1), St. Paul was shipwrecked, around 60 A.D., while on his way to Rome to face trial before Caesar (Acts xxv, 1-12), is a subject of debate among scholars but, since at least the Middle Ages, the Maltese have tenaciously maintained that it was Malta. The other chief contender to the honour is the Dalmatian island of Mljet, previously known as Meleda, off Dubrovnic, in the Adriatic, which was also called Melite (Melite Illyrica) in classical times.

The Journey and Shipwreck of St. Paul

The journey and shipwreck of St. Paul are vividly described in Acts xxvii. Around 58 A.D., the apostle was imprisoned in Jerusalem because of Jewish riots against his presence in the city (Acts xxi, 26-34) but the tribune Claudius Lysias, on learning that he was a Roman citizen (Acts xxii, 25-30), rescued him from his enemies and sent him under escort to Caesarea to be tried by Felix, the governor, (Acts xxiii, 11-30) who detained him hoping that he would offer him a bribe (Acts xxiv, 25-26). When Procius Festus, the next governor, again brought Paul to trial, the apostle appealed to Caesar and his request was granted (Acts xxv, 9-12). He was, therefore, sent to Rome even though it was clear that he was guilty of no fault that deserved death or imprisonment (Acts, xxvi, 31).

The account of the first part of the toilsome journey does not raise any geographical problems. Paul and some other prisoners were embarked on a boat from Adrumentum that was bound for the Asiatic ports (Acts xxvii, 2). A first

stop was made at Sidon and then the boat coasted under the lee of Cyprus, skirting Cilicia and Pamphylia until it reached Lystra in Lycia. Here the party changed ship boarding an Alexandrian boat that was bound for Italy (fig. 1).

There were 276 men on board. Paul was accompanied by Luke and Aristarchus the Macedonian, and the centurion, who was called Julius and belonged to the Augustan cohort, treated him with courtesy. For many days, the boat made a slow voyage following a SE. course and reaching Cnidus with difficulty. Winter was approaching and sailing became hazardous. The wind beat the boat back and forced her to sail under the lee of Crete by way of Salome until she put in at Fair Havens, close to the city of Thalassa or Lasea. Paul advised the centurion to winter there, but the helmsman and the master wanted to sail further and winter in Phoenice and their opinion prevailed. A gale carried the boat out of her course, buffeting her for fourteen days and finally wrecking her on Melite (Acts xxvii).

It has been suggested that this sea saga is plagiarised with modifications from a Hellenistic travel account, but even if allowances are made for literary accretions and possible textual alterations there is no valid reason to doubt the main points of the narrative.

The Shipwreck Controversy

The last leg of the voyage from Fair Havens to Melite has been the cause of controversy. St. Luke relates how the gale drove the boat under the lee of the island of Cauda and describes the fear of the sailors of being driven on to the Syrtis sands. The storm tossed them so violently that the boat was lightened and the spare tackle deliberately thrown overboard. They were driven off course and drifted about in the sea of Adria (Aπία). For several days they saw neither sun nor stars. They gave themselves up for lost, but Paul inspired them with confidence and assured them that none would be lost though they were to be cast on an island. On the fourteenth night they approached land and the sailors, who were afraid of being cast ashore on some rocky coast, let down four anchors and, to lighten the boat, threw the corn into the sea. When day broke they sighted

2. Several mss give Myra, which was a well known port, instead of Lystra which is otherwise unrecorded.
3. Now called Phoinikias.
a strange bay with a sloping beach and decided to run the ship ashore there. They cut away the anchors, unlashet the tiller and hoisting the main sail to the breeze, trust themselves to the mercy of the wind which drove the ship aground at a spot which is described as τοπος διθαλλσσος. Everyone on board escaped unharmed (Acts xxvii, 6-44). On landing they found that the island was called Melite (Acts xxviii, 1.)

One thing that is obvious from the narrative is that Melite was not on the Alexandrian boat’s route. It was only driven there by gale. The intention was presumably to reach the Sicilian coast by a more direct course. Three crucial objections which are used as arguments against its identification with Malta are a) the direction of the gale, b) the location of the Syrtis Sands, c) the presumed equivalence of Λδρτια with the Adriatic Sea of today.

a) The direction of the gale - This problem involves a textual choice between the reading ἔφρακτων (presumably SE. gale-wind) adopted by the Authorised Version and the variant ἐφρακτίλων (presumably NE. gale-wind) found in many of the early mss. Both are nautical compound words which raise philological difficulties but a recent study7 has built a strong case for ἐφρακτίλων which it approximates with ENE. The word seems to be a Greek transliteration of a nautical term that arose in Latin and was probably caught by Luke from a Latin-speaking seaman. That it is not a copyist error is proved by its appearance (Euraquilo) among the Latin wind names on a twelve-point windrose on a pavement at Thugga in proconsular Africa (CIL. viii. 26652) where it occupies the place of 30°N. of E.8 If the wind was off-shore (and therefore NE.) and if the Syrtis sands on which it threatened to drive the hoat (Acts xxvii, 17) are a reference to the Gulf of Syrtis, off Cyrenaica, there can be little reasonable doubt that Melite was Malta. The subject, however, remains one of academic debate and whether the wind actually blew off-shore or on-shore (and, therefore, S. of E.) is a philologically elusive matter which hinges on Luke’s use of the preposition Κατά (against).9

5. According to the Authorised and Revised Versions. The Knox Version prefers foresail. The word used by Luke can mean either.
8. Ibid., 103.

b) The Syrtis Sands - There does not seem to be any lexical justification for maintaining that Luke intended the words σφυρίς as a common noun for sand bank. In the first century A.D. it apparently meant an exact geographical location off the African coast, which was a notorious navigational hazard9. On the other hand the fact that the Acts (xxvii, 16-17) mention it immediately after the reference to island of Cauda makes its identification with the shallows of the Gulf of Syrtis, over 400 miles away, difficult.11 As a result, it has been suggested that what Luke had in mind was the sand bank that lay between the two entrances to the harbour of Phoenicia.12 There is, however, no real evidence for a shoal hazard there.13 The question of the Syrtis Sands therefore remains open.

c) Adria and the Adriatic Sea - The references to the sea of Λδρτια in ancient literature, are often ambivalent. To Heroditus and Strabo it was clearly the Adriatic. Ptolemy is more precise and distinguishes the ὁ Ἀδριατικὸς Κόλπος which presumably corresponds to the modern Adriatic, from the Λδρτια14 by which he apparently meant the central Mediterranean area14. Much would therefore seem to depend on Luke’s intention. If by Λδρτια he meant the sea S. and W. of Greece then the indications point to Malta, but if it can be proved that he had the Adriatic Gulf in mind, then Melita would appear more probable.

5. According to the Authorised and Revised Versions. The Knox Version prefers foresail. The word used by Luke can mean either.
8. Ibid., 103.

11. Though not impossible for a sailing-boat driven before a persistent gale blowing NE (Hemmer, 105).
12. A. Ackworth, op. cit., 192.
logical stop would have been Brundusium or some other port along the Adriatic coast.

**History of Malta - Meleda Controversy**

The shipwreck story was a popular topic in patristic commentaries which drew moral lessons from it but provided little useful information and are therefore of negligible value in the quest for the true identity of Melite. A typical example is St. John Chrysostom (c.347-407) who in Homily 53 on the *Acts of the Apostles* comments that the great honour which the natives showed Paul and his companions is indicative that many of them embraced Christianity.  

There is as yet no sure evidence for a Pauline cult in Malta before 1299 when the dedication of Mdina Cathedral to the apostle is first recorded. The suggestion that Konrad of Quernfurth's account of 1194 refers to Malta as the island of the shipwreck, must be treated with reserve since a careful reading of the text makes it apparent that the place indicated is in fact the island of Capri. The account, in typical late Medieval romance fashion, unscientifically mixes, together mythical and legendary lore with the Biblical story and is, therefore, of dubious scientific interest.  

It is significant that in the tenth century, the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (945-959) indicated the Dalmatian island of Meleda as the place of the shipwreck. This may hint at a long established Byzantine tradition.


19. The reference is made in the *De Administrando Impero* (*Corpus Scriptorum Byzantinorum*, xxxv, Born 1840, 163) in which the emperor speaks about the *pagan* who held possession of the Dalmatian islands among which was Meleda which was also called Malozezate.


Public opinion in Malta was alarmed and clerics and intellectuals, assisted by distinguished European authorities on ecclesiastical history produced a plethora of pseudo-scientific dissertazioni to refute Georgi's arguments. The most noteworthy were Guyot de Mearne 1731, Kirchmeyer 1731, Wandalinus 1737, De Rheor 1743, Regnaud 1749, San Floriano 1737, Pagnini-Lanfredini 1763, and Floder 1769. Typical of the emotionally charged content of some of these treatises is the passage in Wandalinus 1737 in which the Meleda theory is mocked as "a hypothesis born in the darkest of centuries and worthy of remaining buried in the darkness of the blackest night." The campaign to discredit Padre Georgi was well concerted and largely effective, but the Benedictine monk found the support of academics such as the Abbé Ladovac, librarian of the Sorbonne and the Dalmatian abbot S. Sciuliaga who both published works to uphold his thesis.

Unwittingly Georgi had achieved notoriety as an archenemy of Malta where he was regarded as nostro indefesso e pertinace antagonista, who tried to cheat the island of the greatest gloria del suo popolo, ed oggetto principale della nostra venerazione. His most tenacious and best prepared opponent was Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar. Ciantar was a scholar of considerable repute who studied in prestigious universities in Italy and specialised in law and Theology.

23. Their services were, probably, in part solicited by the Knights of St. John who had a vested interest in ensuring that the Malta theory would prevail: Mario Buhagiar, op. cit.


25. The 10th century. The reference is to Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. The passage is reproduced in O. Bres, Malta Antica Illustrata con Monumenti e dell’Istoria, Rome 1816. 374.


29. G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, Discorso apologetico contra la dissertazione storica e critica in lingua francese e descrittiva del Signor Abbate Ladovac, Venice 1758, iii.


32. G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, op. cit.

33. O. Bres, op. cit., 371-423.


35. R. C. Hore, A Classical Tour through Sicily and Malta, ii, London 1919, 270.


37. J. Smith, The Voyage and Shipwreck of St Paul with dissertations on the sources of the writings of S. Lucas and the ships and the navigation of the ancients, London 1848.

38. Dr D. E. Sultana kindly drew attention to this reference.
The Cephallenia Theory

A new theory about the island of the shipwreck was put forward in 1987 by Heinz Warnacke who, dismissing the claims of both Malta and Meleda, tried to prove that he could identify the Melite of the Acts with the promontory of Argostoli on the west Grecian island of Cephallenia. The study which won for the author a doctorate from the University of Bremen, was hailed in the non-academic press as "the theological event of the century" and "a masterpiece of historical research". Theological and Biblical scholars were, however, critical and Warnacke's thesis was dismissed as a regrettable exercise in academic sensationalism by Jügen Wehnert of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Tübingen who was particularly hard about its "terrible lack of methodical-argumentative insight" and flimsy historical and textual evidence.

Warnacke's thesis hinges around the argument that Phoinice for which Paul's ship set course after leaving Fair Havens cannot justifiably be identified with a port on the south coast of Crete. Had this been the case the very short distance between the two ports would surely not have caused any disagreements between Paul and the sailors (Acts xxvii, 9-12). Phoinice must therefore have been a more distant port necessitating several days of shipping. Warnacke locates it in the SW of the Peloponese where a harbour named Phoinikus is mentioned by Pausanias, the second century A.D. traveller and geographer, in his Periegesis of Greece (iv, 34, 12). To substantiate his point, Warnacke translates the crucial phrase limen tes Krêtès (Acts xxvii, 12) as a harbour to and from Crete instead of the standard a harbour in Crete, maintaining that the Greek phrase is a thoroughly regular partitive genitive. More arbitrary is Warnacke's corruption of the New Testament toponym Phoenix to Phoinikus and his emphatic denial of the existence of a Cretan port called Phoenix in the first century A.D. The existence of such a port is attested to, among others, by Strabo (x, 4, 3) and Ptolemy (iii, 17, 3) though archaeological soundings in 1950 produced entirely negative results.

The storm therefore, according to Warnacke, took place in the Peloponese, which he maintains would more or less correspond to the sea of Adria as understood by Luke, and it drove the ship to the island of Cephallenia south of Corfù, as could be proved by a discussion of the winds. The island which was called Melaina (lat. Melaeina) in classical times (Pliny NH, iv, 54) was the Corcyra nigra of the Argonautica (iv, 569-571). Topographical considerations and a 30m deep extended sea with dangerous shoals indicated the promontory of Argostoli as the most likely site of the shipwreck, and the problem of the name Melite could be solved by equating the site with the Melite of the Argonautica. Warnacke overlooks the important fact that the islands listed in the Argonautica, (iv, 564-565) are called Liburnian (Dalmatian) and that the Argonautica (iv, 572) clearly refers to the Dalmatian Melite.

40. J.M. Neale, Notes, Ecclesiological and Picturesque, on Dalmatia, Croatia, Istria, etc., London 1861.
41. L'Ordine [Malta], 27. xii. 1861.
42. V. Palunko, Melite nel naufragio di San Paolo e l'Isola Meleda in Dalmatia - Studio di Geografia Biblica, Spalato 1910.
48. Ibid.
49. Warnacke takes the negative archaeological results, as reprinted in Paulys Real Enzyklopädie der Classischen, xx (1950), 431-435, as definite proof for the non-existence of a Cretan Phoinice.
The Cephallenia theory is quite obviously indebted to the Meleda hypothesis but lacks a sound academic basis. Warnacke simply transfers the shipwreck site from the Dalmatian island, which he considers to be situated too far north, to Cephallenia, a few hundred kilometres away to the south. He however retains all the Meledan arguments against Malta, but does not contribute a single new reason beyond the classic ones of the eighteenth century. Perhaps the greatest merit of the author is his knowledge of Homeric and ancient literature. Gerd Hagenah has shown that a considerable portion of the thesis is concerned “with extensive Homeric parallels (and) with an equally extensive ground work of learned references in the footnotes, which have nothing to do with the actual topic.” Warnacke’s fascination with Homer and Cephallenia have led him in a subsequent study, to claim an added honour for that island by identifying it also with Odysseus’s island home of Ithaca. One gets the impression that the Pauline perspective of the thesis sometimes becomes a matter of secondary importance. Warnacke moreover betrays an unscholarly tendency to gloss over difficulties. For example, he solves the difficult interpretation of topos dithalassos (τοπος διθαλασσός) by claiming that it is synonymous with nēsos Melite and that both should be interpreted as a promontory or peninsula. His bibliography, finally, reveals an ignorance of Malta and he is certainly unfamiliar with Maltese Pauline claims and traditions. His sources for Malta are, in fact, restricted to two guide books intended for the popular tourist market. Not a single serious work on the island appears to have been consulted. In spite of the interest which the publication of the thesis provoked, the claims for Cephallenia do not seem to merit serious consideration. The real debate remains between Malta and Meleda.

St. Paul on Melite

Compared to the exciting detail of the description of the journey and shipwreck, the account of Paul’s stay on Melite (Acts xxviii, 1-12) is unsatisfactorily brief. The shipwrecked men were welcomed by the βαπτιστής, or non-Greek speaking natives, who showed them great kindness and lit them a fire because it was cold.

50. G. Hagenah, New Aspects on the Discussion of the Shipwreck (Cyclostyled pamphlet), Faculty of Theology, Malta 1991, 1.

Paul threw a bundle of faggots into the fire whereupon a poisonous reptile (ἐχθρόνος = snake or viper) leapt out of the flames and fastened itself to his hands. The superstitious natives considered this a sign of Divine vengeance against an accursed man who could not be allowed to live; they expected to see him swell up or fall down dead. When Paul indifferently shook the snake back into the fire, they changed their mind and declared that he must be a god. In the neighbourhood were the estates of Publius, the πρωτος of the island, who entertained the party for three days. Paul healed the father of Publius who was bed-ridden with fever and dysentery. The sick of the island were subsequently brought to him and they found a cure. After wintering on the island for three months the party embarked on another Alexandrian boat, called the Castor and Pollux, and taking their leave of the natives, who loaded them with all the supplies they needed, they sailed for Syracuse.

The Question of the Viper

The title of πρωτος which is recorded in a Maltese inscription of the Age of Tiberius (IG. xiv. 601) but is otherwise seemingly unknown, is a valuable argument in favour of Malta. The incident of the viper raises, on the other hand, a serious objection. Of the four species of snake now extant on Malta only the Telescopus fallax (cat snake) is poisonous but its venom is generally harmless to men. On Meleda poisonous snakes were, on the other hand, numerous until the early years of the twentieth century when they were reportedly eliminated by mongooses imported from India for the purpose.

Whether poisonous snakes existed in Malta at the time of the shipwreck there is no way of telling. No fossil remains of any species of snake have been found in Maltese deposits and the herpetological evidence as it now stands is too ambiguous to help in the shipwreck debate. The Maltese tradition takes their existence for granted and Captain Smith has suggested that they may have been eliminated as a result of drastic environmental change for which there is,

53. In its Latin translation primas, the title also features in CIL, x 749.
55. A. Ackworth, op. cit., 193.
57. J. Smith, op. cit., 147-149.
A recent study tries to find evidence for them in Roman Malta's cult of Heracles and argues unconvincingly that the island must have been snake infested because these reptiles were sacred to the deity. It therefore proposes that the natives saw in the viper an instrument of divine retribution sent by Heracles to punish the shipwrecked stranger. Such a hypothesis seems to stem from the suggestion by M. Cagiano de Azevedo that the snake as an evil omen had a long history in Malta being first associated with the mother goddess of the prehistoric temples and then with Juno who, according to her myth, sent serpents to suffocate the infant Heracles.

If the Acts narrative is to be taken literally, the reaction of the natives to the miracle implies a familiarity with poisonous snakes. It does not seem realistic to maintain as done, among others, by Mgr. Knox that the snake was an accidental visitor which "may have come over in, and escaped from, one of the African grain-ships." There remains the possibility that the story is an allegory of the triumph of the apostle over the devil or of the new faith over the old one. The biblical abhorrence of the snake is well known and the classical world held it in superstitious fear. The idea that it is an agent of vengeance (Acts xvi, 4) finds an echo in Virgil (Aen., ii, 44-56) and in Pliny (NH, viii, 35-36) who believed all snakes were poisonous. The allegorical potential of the story was not missed by Maltese Churchmen who used it in pious literature and in panegyrics in honour of St. Paul. One prominent prelate was, for example, reported to have pictured the fire by the natives to the flames of hell and the viper to Satan who is vanquished by the apostle.

Pauline Traditions in Malta and Meleda

Neither Meleda nor Malta have a Pauline tradition which can be traced close to apostolic times. The Maltese tradition can be documented only from the thirteenth century while on Meleda, the Byzantine tenth century tradition apart (supra), there is no secure evidence for Pauline associations before the publication of Ignazio Georgi's treatise in 1730, and the tradition there apparently only became well established around 1788 when a presumed landing site was being shown to visitors. There was then (and for a long time afterwards) neither church nor statue of St. Paul and this worried apologists for that island.

Porto Coma, a small harbour at the E. end of the island, is one of Meleda's three "traditional" shipwreck sites, the others being Porto Camera and Spalumara Cove (fig. 2). Near the small island of Kosmac, below the village of Maranovici, there is, moreover, a small rock about one metre in the sea which is known as St. Paul's Rock. The place which seems to fit best Luke's account of τοῦτος ἄρημας (Acts xxvii, 4) is the E. of Spalumara Cove where navigation is made difficult by the convergence of two strong currents.

The lack of an established tradition on Meleda was obviously exploited as an argument in favour of Malta. G.F. Abela writing nearly three quarters of a century before Giorgi, felt he was treading on safe ground when he expressed triumphantly:

...in quella Meleda... non vi è mai stato ne pur vestigio, a memoria di San Paolo, non che di Tempio ad honor di lui fabricato, ne di chiesa consagrato,

64. T. Watkins, Travels through Switzerland, Italy, Sicily, the Greek Islands, to Constantinople, through part of Greece, Ragusa and the Dalmatian Isles, i. 1787. 1788. 1789. ii. London 1792.
66. A church of St. Paul was only built in 1935. It stands on the main road of Babino Polje, the capital of the island, and was provided with a statue of St. Paul in 1968. (O.F.A. Meinardus, St. Paul Shipwrecked, 146.)
67. V. Palunko, op. cit.
68. O.F.A. Meinardus. St Paul Shipwrecked, 146
69. Ibid., 146
70. Ibid., 147.
ma si bene per l'opposto in questa nostra Malta, non si trova luogo, in cui non si celebri, onori e innalzi il glorioso nome di Paolo.\textsuperscript{71}

The tradition in Malta was, on the other hand, so strong that in 1536 Jean Quentin gave testimony that "the people... believe as firmly and with certainty that St. Paul has been in Malta just as much as they believe that St. Peter has been in Rome."\textsuperscript{72}

The Maltese Shipwreck Site

In Malta, the site most commonly associated with the Shipwreck is St. Paul's Bay in the N. of the island. The tradition which is first recorded by the Sicilian Tommaso Fazello is of unknown antiquity, but the bay may have become so called only in the course of the fifteenth century when a church of St. Paul was built there.\textsuperscript{73} Its association with the shipwreck was well established in 1536,\textsuperscript{74} and in 1575 the church stood prope littus quo divus Paulus post eius naufragium primo pervenit.\textsuperscript{75}

There is very little secure information about the church until 1610 when it was refounded by Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt.\textsuperscript{76} Manduca maintained that it had stood there from ancient times and had been restored several hundred years previously by noble families whose armorial shields, including those of the Mazzara and the Casanova, it carried.\textsuperscript{77} Abela, who was presumably better

\textsuperscript{71} G.F. Abela, Della Descrittione di Malta. Malta 1647, 235.
\textsuperscript{72} H.C.R. Vella, The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536) by Jean Quentin d'Autun: Translation and Notes, Malta 1980, 42-44.
\textsuperscript{73} The earliest known reference to the name is a 1485 document (Dominican Priory Archives, Rabat [Malta], ms. Giuliana antica, i, ff. 58 rv-59) quoted in G. Weltinger, The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages, Malta 1985, 79, which also refers (256, doc. 82) to a slightly later deed of 1496 (Notarial Archives, Valletta, R. 404/1, f. 35v), which mentions the contrada sancti Pauli di la marina.
\textsuperscript{74} H.C.R. Vella, op. cit., 44.
\textsuperscript{75} Valletta Museum of Archaeology, Visitaudio Dusina - Report of the Apostolic Visitation of the Island of Malta in 1575 [eighteenth century copy], f. 229.
\textsuperscript{76} G. F. Abela, op. cit., 22, 354.
\textsuperscript{77} G. Manduca, Relazione o sia tradizione avute e trassesse dalli antichi circa le cose dell' Isola di Malta e di quanto s'è potuto cavare da scrittura antiche degne di fede [National Library, Malta, ms. 25], 189.
informed, did not record the arms but claimed instead that it had been built by the Bordino and Inguanez families. The fact that the families referred to in the two accounts were influential in the fifteenth century gives us a reasonable guess about the date of the church.

In spite of serious modern objections, St. Paul’s Bay still finds its apologists who try to prove that it meets the conditions of the biblical account and explain the τοῦτος διόθελον as being in effect two currents formed by the Tal-Ghasselin reef when the gregale, or NE. gale winds, blow across the harbour. The name Tal-Ghasselin is unconvincingly explained as the Semitic corruption of διόθελον. Burridge agreed that a meeting place of two currents was one of the possible meanings of διόθελον but his investigations, based on sea soundings and a study of old maps rather than on philological arguments, led him away from St. Paul’s Bay to Mellieha Bay at the N. end of the island where there was a relatively large lake (L-Ghadira) on the land side of the bay. (figs 3-4) The resultant “two masses or bodies of water” were, according to his estimates, the real τοῦτος διόθελον.

In the nineteenth century, the shipwreck site was shifted to the Isolletta di Salmone, or Islet of Selmunet, subsequently christened St. Paul’s Island. This is a 1180m long, wedge-like rock which forms the outer end of the W. side of St. Paul’s Bay and is “so orientated to the gregale’s rollers that it cleaves each roller in two parts”. A large limestone statue of St. Paul, the work of the sculptors Sigismondo Dimech and Salvatore Dimech, which was set up on the islet in 1845 by Salvatore Borg, has since become an important Pauline landmark. From Luke’s account it is, however, obvious that the ship could not have run aground on the islet itself because the survivors would have had to be rescued up. up. up. up. up.

78. G. F. Abela, op. cit. 26
from the island! Capt. Smith, who produced a chart indicating the depth of the sea, argued that the boat anchored off Qawra Point, was wrecked off Selmunet, and the survivors swam ashore at Mistra where the landslide formed a little inlet. For him the quest for a suitable beach was more important than locating a τόπος διθαλασσός. His conclusions have been contested by Musgrave who replaces Mistra by Salini Bay (fig. 5).  

All theories siting the shipwreck in or around St. Paul’s Bay share a common indebtedness to a tradition which can be shown to be of late medieval origins. Smith’s arguments on wind directions seem, however, to suggest a place on the NE coast. The τόπος διθαλασσός does not offer any real help because it can have several meanings and the way it is used in Acts xxvii, 41, does not facilitate an interpretation. A place where two seas meet (Authorised and Revised versions) and a cross sea (Knox Version) are the normally accepted translations but any beach off a headland (Liddell and Scott) or an isthmus whose extremity is covered by the waves (Grimms and Thayler), as indeed most water channels, can qualify as the place where the boat grounded. The truth is that the Acts do not give us sufficient clues to help in the identification of the site.

Traditions on the Founding of a Christian Community

Two inscriptions, one above the main door of Mdina Cathedral (DIVO PAVLO MELITENSIVM PROTORPARENTE) and the other on the wall above the baptismal font inside Gozo Cathedral (ACCEPTA VIX A PAVLO PROTOPARENTE CHRISTI FIDE) proudly proclaim the firm belief of the Maltese that they owe their Christian faith to St. Paul. This is one of Malta’s most deeply rooted traditions and involves one of the chief matters of national sentiment. The Acts do not, however, mention the founding of a Christian community and there is as yet no evidence to support a Christian presence in Malta before the late fourth century.

The history of Malta before the late Middle Ages is seriously handicapped by an overwhelming poverty of sources. The little available material is largely unreliable and legends may sometimes have been deliberately fabricated to sustain “those beliefs… according to which Malta was essentially European and Christian rather than African and Muslim”. The man largely responsible for perpetuating

85. M. Buhagiar, op. cit.
these myths many of which can be traced back to the late Middle Ages, was Giovanni Francesco Abela who published his *Descrizione di Malta* in 1647.\(^97\) This is a work of extraordinary prestige which has until recently been regarded as a quasi infallible reference work.\(^98\) Abela (1582-1655) belonged to a patrician Maltese family and he was uncompromisingly patriotic. He was furthermore a priest and vice-chancellor of the Crusading Order of St. John which, together with the church, encouraged "traditions" that enhanced the fame of its island-convent as a bulwark of Christendom since apostolic times. Abela was an accomplished scholar with an interest in a multiplicity of fields and it would probably be unfair to accuse him of twisting evidence. None the less in his urge to defend Malta's claim to being *fortunatissima vie più d'ogni altra terra*,\(^99\) he was often unscientifically tolerant of fantastic legends that had been reportedly handed down by the ancients (approvate tradizioni havate da nostri Maggiori).\(^100\)

In 1566 Quentin had discussed the legends in a light vein but his incredulity was not shared by most subsequent authors who included the Order's historian Giacomo Bosio, the Apostolic Visitor Mgr. Pietro Dusina, the German geographer Philipp Cluver,\(^101\) the Sicilian ecclesiastical apologists and chroniclers Tommaso Fazello, Octavio Caetano, Rocco Pirri\(^102\) and Tommaso Masucci.\(^103\) Caetano and Masucci were Jesuits and there is reason to believe that Jesuit schools and scholars were instrumental in fanning up enthusiasm for the cult of St. Paul which characterised the early seventeenth century. That this fascination with the early ecclesiastical history of Malta was not confined to Sicilian or Italian Jesuits is shown by the Dutch academic Cornelius van den Steen, better known as Corenlio a Lapide, who, without ever visiting Malta, seems to have been very well informed on the traditions of the island which he discusses in his biblical commentaries.\(^104\)

The society of Jesus had been interested in Malta since the 1570s and it established itself on the island in 1592.\(^105\) Girolamo Manduca (1573-1643) was one of the first Maltese to join the Society and a key figure in the diffusion of the Pauline myths of his island. Like Abela he belonged to a distinguished Maltese family, but his committed attachment to the uncontaminated faith of his forefathers might have been coloured by the unfortunate story of three close relatives who had Lutheran sympathies and had been denounced before the Inquisition tribunal.\(^106\) Manduca joined the Jesuits in 1590 and spent most of his life in Sicily and Rome, paying occasional visits to Malta on family business. Cornelio a Lapide and Octavio Caetano belonged to his circle of friends and he fed them with information about Malta.\(^107\) Rocco Pirri, who had visited Malta in 1611, might also have been indebted to him as in fact were all subsequent authors, foremost among them Gian Francesco Abela.\(^108\)

Manduca left two manuscript treatises which are central to the Maltese Pauline mythology. The first, composed around 1606, possibly at the request of Octavio Caetano\(^109\), is a *Relazione o sien tradizioni avute e trasmesse dalle antichi...* which was probably not meant for publication.\(^110\) It provided the ground work for the more ambitious *De Sancto Pablio martyrre Melitie principe...* which was finished before 1635 when it was sent to Rome for approval receiving damaging remarks from the Jesuits' board of censors.\(^111\) As a matter of fact it was never published.\(^112\)

87. G. F. Abela, *op. cit.*
88. For a critical assessment of Abela's major work and of the myths and legends which have misled generations of Maltese historians: A. T. Lutrell, 'Girolamo Manduca and Giovanni Francesco Abela', *op. cit.*
89. G. F. Abela, *op. cit.*, 221.
91. T. Fazello, *De Rebus Siculis Decades Due* (1st ed.), 1558, 10-12.
92. O. Caetano, *Isagoge ad Historiam Sacram Siculiam* (1st [posthumous] ed.), Palermo 1707, 152-156. Caetano died in 1620, but his work was only published in 1707. It must, however, have been available in manuscript because both Rocco Pirri and Corenlio a Lapide refer to it: Lutrell, 'Manduca and Abela', *op. cit.*, 118.
97. *Ibid.*, 237, 248. His uncle, Antonio Manduca, was formally condemned in 1580 but managed to escape from the island, possibly to Huguenot France.
98. A. T. Lutrell, 'Girolamo Manduca and Giovanni Francesco Abela'. *op. cit.*, 122-123.
100. V. Borg, 'Girolamo Manduca', *op. cit.*, 242-243.
101. The original copy which was preserved in Palermo, is at present unaccounted for, but several transcriptions survive in Malta. The one used here is NLM ms. 25.
102. V. Borg, 'Girolamo Manduca', *op. cit.*, 245.
103. A copy of the ms (possibly the original) survives in the Bibliotheca Comunale of Palermo. The transcript used here is NLM ms. 25 (ff. 4-157).
The two treatises are a mixture of historiography and popular lore. Manduca did have access to archives but his main source were the "traditions" of the elders and he seeks to justify such fables by reference to the Biblical texts and to ancient and medieval authors such as Arator and the Venerable Bede. He noted that the church at St. Paul's Bay marked the approximate site of the shipwreck because it was built on a tongue of land which was surely a τόπος διαθλοκοτος. He could not, however, say in which village the miracle of the viper took place though he suggested somewhere in the neighbourhood of Benuarrat where there was the most fertile land on the island and the Prince of Melite had his estates. Publius' villa could, on archaeological evidence, be located on the slopes of Wardija Hill overlooking St. Paul's Bay where the church of S. Giovanni ta Cherb was built on the ruins of a Roman Villa. On his way there, Paul quenched the thirst of his companions by striking water out of a rock. The spring was still there and pilgrims on their way to St. Paul's church were expected to drink of its sweet water. Publius and his household embraced Christianity and their example was followed by all the Maltese, including the natives of Gozo who miraculously heard the voice of the Apostle while he was preaching outside the walls of Melite where a cross on a tall column commemorated the event. Nearby was the man-made cave where the apostle resided. The ship's company had also received baptism and near ta Cherb church was a stone baptismal font, discovered in 1600, which was probably the one used on the occasion. Before taking his leave of the Maltese, Paul consecrated Publius as their first bishop and promised them that their island would never be captured by infidels.

To Luke and Aristarchus the Macedonian (Acts, xxvii, 2), who were Paul's travelling companions, Manduca added Trophimus who is mentioned in Timothy ii (iv, 20) where it is stated that he had been taken ill at a place which was obviously Miletus but which the Maltese tradition firmly believed to be Malta.

104. Archaeological finds made in the area in the 19th century were thought to be the palace of Publius (P.P. Castagna, Lia Storia ta' Malta bil Giegger talhu (2nd ed.), i: Malta 188, 68.

105. The place is known as Ghajn Rusu ("The Apostle's Fountain"); see J. Cassar-Pullicino, Pauline Traditions in Malta", Scientia, x, [Malta 1944], 21.

106. Probably a reference to an olive-piper which is possibly the one outside the modern church of St John at Wardija. The text is reproduced in A. T. Luttrell, "Girolamo Manduca and Giovanni Francesco Abela", 131-132.

107. L'Apostola aver promesso che non aveva più lassato per avvenire che quest'isola sii presa dall'imfidel; Manduca, Relazione..., 191.

108. Arguments in favour of Malta were supported by references to Cardinal Baronio (C. Baronius, Martyrologium Romanum, Venice 1611) and other biblical exegetists: Abela, op. cit., 238-239.

Paul did not cure Trophimus because it was necessary to leave him behind in Malta to help Publius organise the new church. When Trophimus eventually left the island he went to Arles where he became first bishop of that city.

The most fantastic element of this golden legend, elaborated by Manduca and his circle, concerned Paul's presumed return visits to the island. It was argued that while he was wintering in Malta, after the shipwreck, the apostle realised the time saving facilities that the island offered as a port of call. He therefore stopped again at Malta on his journey back to Jerusalem after he had obtained his freedom in Rome. Subsequently he included the island in his itinerary when together with several of his disciples he undertook the evangelisation of Spain; and he was back again in Malta when, towards the end of his life, he retraced his steps to Rome where he suffered martyrdom. "Old men" told Manduca that they had learnt from their forefathers that on his last visit the apostle was so worn down by illness and so emaciated by self inflicted penance that he was not recognised by the Maltese. Abela admitted the possibility of just one other visit to Malta which he thought could be proved by a Greek codex in the monastic library of S. Maria di Trapsamen in the diocese of Reggio. Sensibly he rejected the more improbable fables retaining, however, other naiveties such as the story of how the inhabitants of Naxxar were the first Maltese to receive baptism because their village was nearest to the shipwreck site; the toponym Naxxar was a corruption of Naxos which meant Christians.

Manduca recorded several things which bore witness to Paul's stay in Malta. These included three icons of the Virgin painted by St. Luke, and a stone table on which the apostle had slept but which had been stolen by foreigners on one particular night! As regards Publius, it was retained that he was eventually transferred to the see of Athens to succeed Dionysus the Areopagite, where he suffered a martyr's death. Ignazio Georgi (supra) was familiar with most of the
these myths and, in fact, exploited their absurdity to support his arguments for Meleda, provoking lengthy replies in Ciantar 1763 and Ciantar 1772.

Finally no discussion of the Maltese traditions can afford to ignore the galley surgeon Marcantonio Axiak, who, around 1610, composed a Relazione della nuova e grandissima divizione introdotta nella santa Grotta di San Paolo... which survives in several transcriptions in Maltese collections. This work was inspired by the activities of Juan de Venagwas of Cordoba who in 1607 installed himself as a hermit in St. Paul’s Grotto at Rabat where he remained until 1620, securing the enthusiastic patronage of Grand Master Alophius de Wignacourt through whose munificence the Pauline cult was injected with unprecedented religious fervour.

St. Paul’s Grotto

The cave at Rabat which according to the golden legend was Paul’s Maltese home, was cut into the ditch of the city of Melite, and A.A. Caruana arbitrarily identified it with a presumed Roman dungeon by drawing flimsy analogies with the Tulliano prison in Rome. At an unknown period the cave was transformed into a shrine and there were a church and a cemetery round it by 1366.

The cave which in 1536 had two altars, was, in 1575, visited daily by pilgrims who carried away chippings of the rock which if pounded into dust and diluted in wine or water were said to be an effective medicine against all disease. It was, however, as an antidote against snake bites and poison that the rock (variously called terra melitensis, terra sigillata melitensis, pietra di Malta, gratiam sancti Pauli) achieved fame outside Malta. Large quantities were shipped to the continent since at least the fifteenth century. Its therapeutic properties were publicised in two treaties published respectively in Rome and Venice, and discussed in seventeenth and eighteenth century medical literature. It consequently found an honoured place in pharmacopea, and handbills extolling its virtues and containing instructions on its proper use were circulated in Malta and abroad. Terra melitensis pills as well as poison cups to protect users from toxic drinks were meanwhile in popular demand, and the rock was also worked to make medallions, statuettes and yases with the effigy of St. Paul which were likewise credited with talismanic powers such as protecting mariners from dangers of shipwreck.

George Zammit-Maempel has shown how “the indigestion from the powdered objects or the drinking from cups made of terra sigillata melitensis” might, in fact, have had a protective as well as a curative effect on poisoning. This happened as a result of “a natural chemical reaction whereby the arsenic contained in the drink reacts with the calcium carbonate of the rock from St. Paul’s Cave and gels sort of covered up or mopped up and consequently rendered temporarily inactive, often allowing it to travel through the guts harmlessly.”


121. F. Ponzetti, Libelli de Venenis, ii/5, Rome 1521.


124. B. Montinaro, “S. Paolo a Malta”, 36-57.


127. G. Att Siad, La Grotta di S. Paolo a Malta, Considerazioni Archeologiche-Critiche, Malta 1863, 65.

128. C. Shaw, Malta Sixty Years Ago, London 1875, 46.

There was obviously nothing miraculous in all this but the faith factor must have been a psychologically important predisposition on the part of the person receiving the treatment. As a medicine against fever and smallpox,\(^1\) or as a heart stimulant,\(^1\) the rock was, on the other hand, quite probably worthless.

Chippings were distributed free to whoever requested them and they were generally accompanied by written certificates,\(^2\) presumably to put an end to the trafficking of bogus rock. On 26 May 1571, a certain Tommaso di Bastiano da Cremona petitioned the Magna Curia Castellania to issue letters patent testifying to the genuine origin of the rocks he had acquired from the cave.\(^3\) A pick axe was kept handy and the custodian encouraged visitors to cut splinters of the rock.\(^4\) Large amounts of stone must have been quarried and boxes filled with chips were sent annually not only to Sicily and Italy but also to the Levant and the East Indies.\(^5\) Marcantonio Axiak estimated, exaggerately, that the amount of rock carried away on the galleys of the Knights and other ships was so huge that it was as though a mountain had been torn to pieces. Yet the size of the cave miraculously remained unaltered!\(^6\)

The myth of the immutable dimensions of the cave was further elaborated in Buonamici 1667,\(^7\) and is commemorated by a Latin inscription set up above the entrance in 1743. The cave was measured at regular intervals and a careful record kept,\(^8\) but though belief in the miracle was widespread there were also sceptics such as the Biblical and Oriental lecturer John Gadshby, who visited the cave around 1850 and remarked on the gullibility of the simple people who believed the tricks of the priests.\(^9\)

### The Grotto Complex

The popularity of the St. Paul’s grotto complex fluctuated from time to time. In 1549 the Rev. Matteo Surdu complained that it had been neglected for over a century. In the old days its fame had been such that it was visited by pilgrims from distant lands who desired nothing better than to die in Malta so that they might earn the privilege of being laid to rest in its sacred cemetery.\(^10\) Evidence concerning the grotto and the cemetery was produced in 1608 when four of Malta’s senior clerics recalled the traditions of the antichi Maltesi.\(^11\) At about the same time, Manduca wrote of several small chapels carrying the armorial shields of noble Maltese families and described how the dead who, were mostly foreigners, were buried beneath stone arches decorated with family crests.\(^12\) A cripta sotterranea piena d’un quasi infinità e innumerabile quantità d’ossa de morti was dug up in the early seventeenth century and converted into a church of St. Mary Magdalene.\(^13\)

During the first two decades of the seventeenth century, the site became the centre of a vigorous cult as a result of the activities there of Juan de Veneguas (supra); and in 1617 the Knights of St. John were invested with rights over the grotto.\(^14\) Soon the place was entirely transformed. Drastic alterations gave a sumptuously dignified approach to the cave and walls and ceiling were concealed behind marble trappings. An oratory of St. Publius was also built above the entrance steps and an underground chapel, next to the grotto, was recut and provided with three altars.

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131. S. F. Geoffrey, Tractatus de Materie Medicse sive de Medicamentorum simplicium historia, defectu et usu, i, Venice 1772, 45.
134. C. Shaw, op. cit., 46.
137. F. G. Buonamici, Relazione della Grazia, f. 134v.
140. Mdina Cathedral Archives. CEA, Acta Originaria 464. f. 103.
143. G. F. Abela, op. cit., 346.
Early Christian hypogea were disturbed while these works were in progress but no record was unfortunately kept, and with the exception of a miniature catacomb at the back of the grotto very little has survived. This fourth/fifth century hypogeum (fig. 6 a-b), was broken into and partially destroyed as a result of quarrying. It is certainly older than the grotto and seems to prove that the Pauline association of the site is a subsequent fabrication.

The Sanpaolari and Malta’s Freedom from Venomous Creatures

The fame of the terra sigillata melitensis was intimately related to the myth of how St. Paul, after having vanquished the viper freed Malta of venomous creatures. This tradition must already have been well established in 1536 when Quentin remarked that:

...no harmful serpent is born in Malta, and those brought from elsewhere become harmless,... scorpions, fearful animals elsewhere, are seen innoculous in the hands of boys playing with them; I myself saw one eating them...

In 1575 Mgr. Pietro Dusina reaffirmed this belief. St. Paul was not, of course, the only saint associated with deliverance from venomous creatures, but he was probably the most famous. An apparently late medieval brass-medal of Romanesque inspiration, in a Maltese private collection, carries a hieratic figure of the saint flanked on either side by a wriggling serpent and might have belonged to a type which was mass-produced for suspension around the neck. The iconography recalls that of a limestone medallion in the collection of the Wignacourt Collegiate Museum in Rabat which is presumably sixteenth century but probably reproduces an earlier well known prototype.

146. Ibid.
147. H.C.R. Vella, op. cit., 44-45
148. Dusina, op. cit., f. 182
149. F.G. Buonamici, Relazione della Grazia..., ff. 135, 138; V. Caruana-Gatto, La Vipera Maltese, op. cit., 55-56.
150. J. Galea, 'The Earliest Medal Commemorating St Paul’s Shipwreck', in G. Azzopardi, op. cit.
The terra melitensis was not the only antidote administered to counteract poison. Equally efficacious were the fossil sharks’ teeth which abound in the Miocene rocks of Malta. The Maltese called them ilien San Pawl (‘St. Paul’s tongue’) and believed them to be the venomous tongues of the unfortunate snakes which were cursed by St. Paul after his encounter with the viper.\(^\text{152}\) In medical circles they were variously known as Glossopetra, Linguae Melitensis and Linguae S. Pauli.\(^\text{153}\) Abela and Bounamici thought they were spontaneously generated by the Maltese rock.\(^\text{154}\) The fossils were worn as amulets and they remained popular until the nineteenth century. In the late Middle Ages they were in demand in European courts and noble households as talismans to detect poisoned food and drink.\(^\text{155}\) Niels Steensen\(^\text{156}\) and Leith Adams both marvelled at the large quantities which were exported from Malta.\(^\text{157}\)

Snake bites could also be cured by the saliva of persons born on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul,\(^\text{158}\) while, outside Malta, charlatans known as Uomini di San Paolo, or Sanpaolari, made the rounds of Italian cities administering cures against poison.\(^\text{159}\) Information on their activities can be gleaned from the Speculum Cerretanorum of Teseo Pini, composed around 1485, where they are denounced for their deceit. They claimed direct descent from St. Paul and to prove it they cast away serpents and ate and drank poisonous food without suffering harm. They explained this immunity as a special grace enjoyed by the descendants of the apostle on the island of Malta after he had been bitten by the viper. Pini recalls how as a young man in Rome he had heard one of these swindlers boast that St. Paul had conceded this miraculous power to the descendants of a particular Maltese house who could cure all venomous bites by administering drinks made of a certain rock. To prove that he was a member of this household, the swindler had shown his audience the serpentmark on his shoulders, but Pini recognised it for a simple tattoo.\(^\text{160}\)

In Sicily (where the Sanpaolari were usually called cirauli), and in Puglia, this gift was also claimed by persons who were born on the eve of the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul,\(^\text{161}\) but the Malta connection remained an essential condition and it has been proposed that the original Sanpaolari might have been Maltese swindlers. Their activities have, however, not so far been recorded in Malta.\(^\text{162}\)

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\(^\text{152}\) J. Wolff, Scrutinium Anatomorum Medicum, Librae et Jenae 1680.
\(^\text{155}\) G. Zunnit-Maempel, ‘Fossil Shark’s Teeth’.
\(^\text{156}\) Better known as Nikolaus Steno.
\(^\text{159}\) B. Montinaro, ‘Credenze Popolari’, op. cit., 91-97.
\(^\text{160}\) The full text of Pini is reproduced in Italian translation in B. Montinaro, ‘Credenze Popolari’, 96-97.
\(^\text{161}\) B. Montinaro, ‘Credenze Popolari’, 91.
\(^\text{162}\) Ibid.