The history of a country may be regarded as the study of the life of its people, of their successes and failures, or, in other words, as an attempt to conjure up a living picture of the past. History, however, is also the record of what is known to have occurred, and here a careful distinction must be drawn between History and Legend. The latter may be historical fact, but it is not necessarily so. The most improbable of traditional stories has its foundation in some actual occurrence in the past, but the circumstances of that fact are not necessarily true. For the legendary version of a historical event is generally perpetuated in a form which satisfies popular taste, “containing that only which a nation desired to have happened, or which it regarded as being the only thing that should have happened.” (1) With this distinction clearly in mind, one can start studying the various types of Norman legends in Malta. It will be noticed that they all centre on one main event — the coming of Count Roger to these islands, and that they have survived mainly through the tenacity of folk-memory, aided as it is by topographical remains.

It is admitted from the outset that much of what is being considered as legendary in this article has long been regarded as historical fact and accepted by the majority of historians. If anything, this is a clear proof that influences, other than popular, have been at work in perpetuating these Norman traditions. As A. H. Kruppe puts it: “The legend will at the most have preserved the kernel of a historical fact, nothing more. Where the opposite is found to hold, one must inevitably reckon with learned influences.” (2) Otherwise, one has to accept the alternative that past writers, lacking historical docu-
ments and authentic material, have accepted tradition as historical fact, and thus lent greater authority to the legends. Historians of the Norman period have drawn extensively on contemporary sources, chiefly Goffredo Malaterria’s “De Rebus Gestis Roberti Guiscardii” and Abate Alessandro’s “Rogierii Sic. Regia Rum Gestorum”. In the absence of anything more authoritative these accounts cannot be discarded. A permissible remark, however, is that historians have accepted too much without any attempt at criticism. The Maltese historian Abela himself admits that in some cases Malateria is not to be trusted, although his attempts to remedy these shortcomings proved just as unconvincing (3). Later writers based their accounts on that of Abela without verifying the latter’s version with the original. The result was that the Norman Conquest, “through the preoccupation of the writers and the spirit of exaggeration prevailing among them, has been clothed in a garb and character which, it would seem, do ill accord with history” (4). Indeed, considering that Goffredo Malaterria was the scribe of Count Roger, at whose bidding he wrote the account, it may well be that he was more intent on magnifying the deeds of his master than on recording the true particulars (3). Undoubtedly, Malateria conformed to the practice of Medieval historians who “made little or no attempts to verify the statements which they made. The figures they portray for us are clear and definite … Often the portrait bears little or no resemblance to the original. It was but the ideal of the writer, the creature of his imagin-
tion" (6). The distance between the versions thus presented by writers and popular interpretation of events is easily covered by the amalgamation of the two elements into one creation reflecting popular psychology — the historical legend.

The term legend was originally given in early Christian times to religious stories, such as the lives of saints and portions of Scripture recited in public worship. Later, however, it came to be applied to any story presenting a popular, even distorted, version of history, but referring to some person (or event etc.) who has really lived and whose memory is attached to a definite period and lingers on in a definite locality. Such legends generally presuppose a historic or topographic link with reality, and may aim at idealizing the religious character of the people, often concentrating in a single individual the fruit of an age-long process of evolution (7). The Norman legends found in Malta fulfil all these conditions, in that:

a) they are mostly found or heard in a particular part of the island, i.e. at Rabat, Imdina and its outskirts;

b) they are a popular rendering of the coming of Roger to Malta — a historic fact;

c) they emphasize the triumph of the Cross over the Crescent. Indeed, the Maltese pride themselves on having retained their Christian faith throughout the Arab domination; and

d) they attribute all the benefits derived from the Norman occupation to one individual — Count Roger.

It may be surmised that these legends cropped up in our island and were kept alive, chiefly among the folk of the land, whose innate sense of credulity, coupled with the fact that the subject-matter satisfied the spiritual exigencies and material aspirations of our forefathers, made them readily accept the traditions, to which the passing of time has added the stamp of age-old authority.

Norman traditions in Malta, centring on the popular figure of the Count, have been worked up by the people into types representing group-characteristics which may be classified under two headings:

(1) Topographical legends, trying to explain or account for the origin of a place-name;

(2) Legends which exaggerate the importance of events or persons connected with the period, sometimes by the transposition of events from one time or person to another, attributing them to other persons who lived in different periods.

Taking each class by itself, some examples will be given of legends forming part of the two main subdivisions.

I. (a) Migra l-Ferha. This place-name, which means "the streamlet" or "the small watercourse", is given to the small inlet beyond Intahleb, some four or five miles from Imdina, which is traditionally pointed out as the place where Count Roger landed with his companions. "Ferha" in Maltese means both "small, young" (ex. mohza ferha—young goat) and "joy" (e.g. tah ferha—he made him glad). This latter meaning, associated with the idea of running in the word "migra" (from gera—to run) made people think that it had some connexion with the welcome accorded to Roger, and it was popularly explained as meaning "the race of Joy". Others pronounce the name "Mija l-Ferha" (the Joyful Arrival) (8). It is believed that in those days the inlet

was used as a secret port in time of danger. The legend says that Count Roger, having landed at Miqra Ferha, was met by the Maltese and led in triumph to Imdina. Some add that this name was then given to the place to commemorate the event. A similar origin is given in connexion with the other name “Miqja Ferha”. This legend is reproduced by the majority of historians; Vassallo mentions it (9) and Preca refers to it as well (10). The late Professor Sir Augustus Bartolo, however, writing in “Malta and Gibraltar”-London, 1915, p. 49, says that this old legend “though repeated by the great majority of historians, will not bear analysis.” The place is quite unsuitable for a landing and, besides, “it can hardly hold two or three small ships, neither would these be safe, in case of a strong wind blowing from outside” (11). It is apparent that the legend owes its existence to folk-etymology, i.e. the popular interpretation given to a place-name, the correct etymology of which could not be understood or accounted for in another way by the people.

(b) Wied ir-Rum (The Valley of the Christians). It is believed that the Christians (Maltese and Greeks) under the Arabs had to live in this secluded part of the island. It is situated to the west of Imdina and, according to Preca (op. cit., p. 460) “marked the limits assigned by the Arab despots to the unfortunate Maltese”. It is added that, on the landing of the Count, the Maltese met in this valley, whence they proceeded to meet Roger, carrying palms and olive branches in their hands and singing “Kyrie Eleison” (12). Vassallo further states that, on his way to the capital, the Count was led by the joyful crowd through the place most commonly known as “Wied ir-Rum” (13). Without pausing to question the truth of this legend, one is referred to the works by A. E. Caruana and Professor Sir Augustus Bartolo, in which the various fables of Arab oppression and persecution are finally accounted for, and where it is conclusively shown that is was not the Maltese who went out to meet the Count, but the Christian slaves kept within the city, those same “captivei christiani” to whom subsequently Roger offered a new home in Sicily to be called after them Villafranca (14). On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the Count was welcomed by the Maltese, for the latter could not but bitterly resent their enforced acquiescence to the rule of Islam. From the point of view of Folklore, this is another instance of folk-etymology — an attempt to explain the strange word Rum (Roman), which at one time designated those Greeks converted to Christianity (15).

(c) Għajn Klieb (The Dogs’ Fountain). This place-name is bound to another, “Galet il-Bahrija”, by a common legend based on an attempt by the Arabs to regain possession of the island. It is related that after the coming of the Normans the Arabs chose the lonely place of Galet il-Bahrija where they could live unmolested, subject to the payment of an annual tribute. At one time, however, they decided to refuse to pay this tribute, and they hatched a plot to regain their power over the island. The

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parecchie altre denominazioni simili, e vale scaturigine, corrente, noto di recente, ed adoperato in forma di nomen unitatis e in assoluto, va inteso nell’uso per una vitellina.”

(9) G.A. VASSALLO, Storia di Malta raccontata in compendio, Malta 1854, p.64.
(10) A. PRECA, Malta Canonia, Malta, 1904, p.609.
(11) A.E. CARUANA, op. cit., p.279.
attempt was to take place during Holy Week, when the
Maltese would be all assembled within the Cathedral,
thus rendering it easy for the Arabs to surprise them in
church. Others put the date of the attempt as Christmas
Eve. Fortunately, the plot was discovered by a shepherd
girl, and everything was prepared to spring a surprise on
the Arabs. Great secrecy was kept, and on the appointed
day our men lay in ambush near the fountain on the
road leading to Bahrija. When the Arabs approached the
fountain, the Maltese crying “Ghall-klieb! Ghall-klieb!”
(At the dogs! At the dogs!) sprang upon them, massacred
a great part of the enemy and pursued the rest as far as
Bahrija, which was surrounded and cut off from all com-
 munications. The name “Ghajn Klieb” was then given
to the fountain, in memory of the conflict.

It appears that the first part of this legend is
the counterpart of that of Wied ir-Rum; only
the tables are now turned, for it is the Arabs
who have had to live in a segregated spot. It is
noticed that great emphasis is laid on the battle-cry used
by the Maltese “Ghall-klieb!” In itself this is of small
consequence, but in such legends cries, implorations etc.
play an important part. In our case, it serves to give a
popular explanation for the name “Ghajn Klieb”.

II. To account for these legends one has to go down
to the depths of folk psychology. Popular fancy often
seizes upon a figure — in our case Count Roger — round
whom it weaves a crop of legends. The people, remember-
ing only the good points of such a figure multiply them
indefinitely and perpetuate his memory in traditional
stories of this kind, to the exclusion of other people who
may have been just as good rulers, or who may have
really achieved the events attributed to the other. To
quote an example. Such an important event as the expul-
sion of the Arabs from Malta has to be the work of an
uncommon figure, dear enough to folk-memory to be
remembered in legend and story. Little does it matter to
the people that it was only in the time of Roger II (1127
A.D.) or, according to A. Bartolo (op. cit., p. 53) as late as
1224 A.D., during the reign of Frederic II, that the Arabs
Count leave no room for the idea of Arab persecution so
common in these islands; the Maltese had to be suffering
under the Arabs, living and worshipping in underground
catacombs, before being liberated by the Count, whose
renown for fighting the Arabs had no doubt preceded
him here. Such a feat could only be accomplished after a
desperate resistance by the Arabs and the Count, fighting
against great odds, succeeded in defeating them. He was
met by the Maltese, whom he had thus liberated, and was
given such a reception, with palms and olive branches
and songs of thanksgiving, as befits only a hero. Other
Norman rulers may have done their best to uplift the
social and moral condition of the people, but the Maltese
remembered nothing of their deeds, probably they never
cared to know that we had any other Norman rulers
besides Count Roger, and they accordingly attributed all
the good derived from their period of domination to the
best exponent of Norman adventure and courage — Count
Roger.

The “Consiglio Popolare”. It is traditionally held that
the “Consiglio Popolare” so famous in our island history
was first instituted by Count Roger, who also re-establish-
ed the Diocese with its Bishop and its clergy. This tradit-
ion has given rise to much serious research, inasmuch
as two schools of thought sprang up in connexion with it.
Working by analogy with the history of Sicily, local
writers such as A. H. Stilon (16) contended that, as in the
Sicilian states, Malta already possessed civic representation
and a local administration, the direct descendant of the
“municipium” of Roman days and the “gemhba” of the
Arabs. Vassallo upholds the tradition, however, and argues
that Roger, who had already established Parliaments in

(16) A.H. Stilon, Dell’esistenza dei comuni durante la dominazione
normanna, Malta 1911, pp.1-10.
his Sicilian states, did likewise in Malta, “instituting a Parliament, which the inhabitants later called “Consiglio Popolare” (17). Judge Debono, on the other hand, refutes this, saying that traces of the life of the Consiglio in Malta appear to be established much later (18). He also waives aside the tradition as follows: “Non occorre spendere parole per confutare ciò che i nostri storici e i nostri politici, mossi da non lodevole parzialità per le cose patrie, asseriscono intorno al Parlamento o Consiglio Popolare, che vogliono istituito nell’isola fin dal tempo del Conte Ruggero.”

The **Count’s reception by the Maltese**. Tradition claims that Count Roger was acclaimed as Liberator by the Maltese, who met him with palms and olive branches in their hands. Strictly speaking, however, it was not the Maltese who did so. Abela’s mistake in reading “captivos” mentioned by Malaterra (19) as referring to the Maltese was perpetuated by others who based their account on Abela’s (20). It is evident that “captivos christianos” could not have referred to the Maltese as these same “captivos” were later carried on Count Roger’s ships and encouraged to settle in Sicily, in a place to be called after them Villafranca. This they refused, as all of them wished to return to their homes (21).

History apart, however, the mention of palms and olive branches on Roger’s advance on the capital shows a decided Biblical influence. Up to comparatively modern times books exerted little or no influence on the life and thought of the people; but our forefathers, humble and lowly though they were, could not but be familiar with the events of the Old and the New Testament, preached to them on Sundays by the Clergy. They knew the story of the entry of Christ into Jerusalem and how He was met by the people waving palms and olive branches, singing “Hosanna in Excelsis”; and the association of events presented itself to the people who probably saw in the coming of Roger another triumph for the Faith over the Arab unbelievers. They only remembered that the Count was joyfully received, and then perpetuated the memory of the welcome accorded to him in the form of an exact replica of the Biblical story.

It is significant that the memory of Count Roger has been further preserved at Rabat, where a band club has been named after him. On the occasion of the feast of Corpus Christi a beautiful statue of the Count on horseback is usually taken from the club premises to Piazza della Chiesa Parrocchiale, where a platform is raised on which to put up the statue, which is first paraded through the streets to the playing of marches. On this occasion young men can still be seen waving handkerchiefs and palm branches by the side of the Count’s statue. Unconsciously, the scene of the landing is being reenacted, as a faint survival from the past.

A parallel Sicilian custom commemorating Count Roger’s entry into Messina, thus freeing it from the Saracen yoke, was reported by an eye-witness in the 19th century. The figure of a camel was paraded through the streets of the city, as it was believed that Count Roger entered Messina on a camel’s back, and two citizens, one of them a Saracen, preceded the camel, feigning to dress up as Saracens, preceded the camel, feigning to flee at the approach of the liberator (22).

(17) G.A. Vassallo, op. cit., p.66.
(18) P. Debono, Sommario della storia della Legislazione in Malta, Malta 1897, p.114.
(19) These are the words used by Malaterra, op. cit., p.77: “Videns autem captivos christianos ab urbe progredientes, prae gaudio suae insperatae liberationis ab uno quoque cordis lacrymis profundi, ligno vel calami, prout quisque primo inveniebat, compositae cruce in dextera terentes Kyrie eleison proclamando, ad pedes Comitis provolvit, nostros vero ad talem intitum pietatis affectu lacrymoso rore perlundit.”
(21) Amari: op. cit., p.179.
(22) See Ms. 1186, R.M.L., being a diary of Donna Felice Colonna’s voyage from Gaeta to Malta on the occasion of her marriage to the Prince of Villafranca. On the 15th August, 1732, the following entry appears: “Circa le ore 20 l’Ecuma, spe sape, osservò dal Balcone della Casa la festa del Cameló, che consiste nel portarai dal popolo, per la
The Norman Pillar at Imdina. The pillar surmounted by a cross which is found in front of the principal gate of Imdina, and at a small distance from it, is held to have been raised by the Maltese to commemorate the liberation of Malta by Count Roger. Since olden times it has been the custom of the clergy of the Cathedral to go in procession to the place on Palm Sunday, and the Passio of St. Matthew is sung. This practice is referred to by the Maltese Father Domenico Magri (Hierolexicon, 1722, under Parascive) as follows: “In media insula, in Dominica Palmarum, ubi nunc columna cum cruce remansit, cani passione olim solitum fuisse senes affirmabant, ac usque ad eorum tempora durasse” (23). Throughout the year the column is surmounted by a cross made of palms and blessed olive branches, which are burnt and reduced to ashes on the second day after Carnival Sunday, and the ashes used on the following day (Ash Wednesday) in the Cathedral. On Palm Sunday an olive cross is put again over the pillar.

The National Colours. It is a widespread and deeply implanted belief in Malta that the white and red colours of the National Flag were bestowed by Count Roger who, having freed the island from the Arabs, raised Malta to the rank of a small nation, granting it the privilege of its own banner and shield. This idea is embodied in G. Laferla’s pamphlet “Cenni storici sullo scudo e stendardo maltese” (1841, p.6), but it should be remarked that this pamphlet has nothing historical but its title. Its contents are all guesswork and the biased politician is apparent between the lines. Although one cannot waive the historicity of the tradition in the absence of any documents, it is interesting to note that Malaterra, intent as he was on painting as beautiful a picture of the Count as possible, does not refer to it at all. And taking it by itself, as a popular belief, one is reminded of what A. H. Krapp says: “Related to historical legends, at least in a certain measure, are stories told about coats of arms, ensigns, battle cries, watchwords and armorial bearings. They are all without exception “aetiological” tales, meant to explain something, the true origin of which was either entirely unknown or at least hidden from the people on account of their lack of historical knowledge” (24).

Similar traditions are found in many countries; in England, for example, many Norman legends survive, of arms borne by Duke William and his followers. “But” says Oswald Baron in his article on Heraldry in the “Encyclopaedia Britannica” (Vol. 11, p. 456 – 14th Ed.) “nothing is more certain than that neither armorial banners nor shields of arms were borne on either side at Hastings”. If this is true of William and his followers, it is not likely that Roger and his men bore any armorial banners or shields of arms when they came to Malta in 1090 — only twenty four years after the Battle of Hastings. Besides, modern writers on Heraldry tend to the view that true heraldry began to appear in the first half of the twelfth century and “that the reign of Stephen (1135-1154) was the period in which heraldic bearings were assuming a definite form” (25). It may well be that

(24) A. H. Krapp, op. cit., p.52.
(23) Quoted by A.A. Carduana, Monografia critica della Cattedrale Apostolica di Malta, Malta 1899, p.29.
our national colours were bestowed on us by some later Norman ruler, whose name was forgotten but whose generous act was attributed to Roger — the first of the House of Hauteville to be overlord of Malta.

There are other traditions in which Count Roger plays a part. A Gozitan legend has it that he restored the principal church of that Island, the original of the present Cathedral in the Citadel (26). Tradition also claims that Roger raised the chapel of St. Lawrence at Birgu to the status of a parish church — the second in the Island (27). Another popular belief is that the annual procession to St. Gregory's Church Żejtun, which used to take place on the first Wednesday after Easter, commemorates the Island's liberation from the Saracens' yoke by Count Roger (28).

The legends we have included in this article undoubtedly present Roger in a romantic light, just as Arthur and Charlemagne in the Arthurian and Carolingian cycle of legends are figures of romance developed on the lines of medieval chivalry. The truth of the coming of Roger can never be denied, nor that he exerted a far-reaching influence on the social life of the Maltese people. But one fact emerges clearly from these legends: that the Roger of history, leading his men against the traditional Arab foe, having the same virtues and the same weaknesses of the other leaders of his day, is replaced by the Roger of tradition, the centre of a picture of chivalrous ideals, the perfect Count and the perfect heroic knight who crosses over from Sicily to conquer wrong and free the oppressed Maltese. And whatever good has come down to us, his colours, the Consiglio Popolare, and so on has been through his generosity. In these legends Roger is traced in his development by writers, from the colourful account of Malaterra, through the version of Abela and later historians, to the pamphlets of political broadside such as that by G. Laferla. With such powerful forces at work to perpetuate his memory, added to the tenacity of place-names and folk-memory, it is not likely that the Rogerian legends in Malta will easily die out.

l'altra di vermillio". Chev. H. Scicluna in his minute of the 20th. June, 1939, also wrote: "Further evidence, according to Mgr. Mifsud, is that such escutcheon was the one officially used by the Municipality of Malta during the rule of the Knights of St. John, and that the Mace carried by the Jurats of the Municipality which is still preserved in St. John's Church, bears these arms." When the file was referred to the Director of Education, the late Dr. Laferla wrote (Min. 39 dated 7/6/39) "There is no record of the alleged grant of the Maltese Coat of Arms by Roger the Norman, although tradition has consistently attributed it to him. There is, in fact, no record of any grant by any sovereign." Prior to this, Sir Gerald W. Wollaston, Garîer Principal King of Arms, had written to the Under Secretary of State that he was not aware of any records of the grant of arms made by Count Roger to the Island of Malta. He further observed that "1066 is a date prior to the earliest hitherto known evidence of the use of armorial bearings, still more of the documentary grant of them."

(26) A. FERRIS, Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo, Malta, 1906, p.56.
(27) FERRIS, op. cit., p. 266.
(28) For a summary of the various theories put forward to explain the origin of St. Gregory's procession the reader is referred to E.B. Vella, Storja ta' Żejtun u Marsaxlokk, Malta, 1927, pp.119-120.