The Arab conquest
by J.B. Barnard

The Arab history of Malta is usually treated in general surveys of Maltese history as a Dark Age. Data for this early medieval period are less than fulsome, and there survives no indigenous Chronicle; but Byzantine and Arab sources permit a coherent analysis of the events surrounding Malta’s transition to Islam in 870. In fact the real Dark Age is the period of clearcut Arab sovereignty, from 870 to 901, for which we have very little evidence indeed. Curiously, what are usually termed the Norman and Swabian periods yield more evidence of Muslim Malta than the explicitly Arab period.

Marçais informs us that the North African coasts were heavily fortified in the early 9th Century: using Ibn al-Athîr, he documents a reciprocal Byzantine energy in defence of Sicily. There were many Arab raids on Sicily before she was deliberately assaulted in 827, and those which tarried too long came to grief. Malta cannot have passed unscathed, but we do not hear of her during the raiding period, so she was probably tolerably well defended against casual pillage at least.

In 827 the Byzantine governor of Sicily, Euphemios, sought

5 GABOTTO F. Euphemiou – il Movimento separatista nella Italia bizantina Rassegna siciliana, Palermo, 2 Ser. 3, 1898, paints Euphemios as the earliest Sicilian nationalist. More soberly, BURY JB. 'The naval Policy of the Roman Empire in Relation to the Western Province from the 7th to the 9th Century', p 21 sqq. in Centenario della Nascita de Michele Ama-
help from Ifriqiya in a revolt against Constantinople. After some hesitation, Ziyādat Allah, Emir of Ifriqiya, despatched a force of 10,000 and 700 cavalry in a fleet of 100 keels to Sicily, 6 so initiating an eighty year long campaign which led, inter alia, to Arab conquest in Malta.

From 827 onward the Byzantine grasp on Sicily gradually slackened. Amari 7 records endless reversals of fortune, treacheries, and pestilences; innumerable intermicene squabbles between Muslims from Spain, Ifriqiya, and Crete; but until the intervention of Basil II, 'the Bulgar Slayer', in Western affairs in 867-8, the Empire's position in Sicily, and thus in Malta, became progressively more difficult. Basil II's ruthless energy came just in time to save Western Greece, too late for Sicily or Malta.

We have abundant proof that Malta, was both Byzantine and Christian in the early 9th Century. Papal letters place her firmly within the Province of Sicily from 589 8 and the itineraries collected by Parthey confirm them. 9 Malta is presented last, or last but one, of the Sicilian dioceses. We also have the Greek inscription of one Domestikos, 10 recorded by Ciantar and discussed by Cassar. The indication marks seem to support a dating of 810, but the stone is lost. The appellation is probably a Christian name rather than a rank.

ri II, Virzi, Palermo, 1910 describes the Governor as an opportunistic. Although the Arab sources play down Euphemios' role in assuring a safe landing, the complaisance of his fleet was plainly an important factor.


7 Amari M. Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia 2nd. Ed, Nallino C.A. Prampolini, Catania, 1933. [Storia] After more than a century still the masterwork on Muslim Sicily; Amari conscientiously isolated references to Malta, but they are few and plainly secondary. At least once Amari commits the classic howler of confusing Malta with Mijet (Vol I 115)

8 Greg I Epist. I 30: XIII 22,


10 Cian tar Malta Illustrata Vol. II Not. IV 22, Malta, 1772, and Cassar P. Medical History of Malta, Wellcome NS Vol. VI, 1965. For no obvious reason, Cassar takes Domestikos to be a medical Doctor.

11 Schum berger G. 'Sceaux byzantins inédits' IV Série in Revue des Etudes Grécoises 13 (1900).... 'ce rarissime petit monument', the author calls it.


till detached or forcibly separated from the vanishing theme of Sicily.

There is plenty of evidence in Amari and elsewhere of small scale naval encounters in Sicilian waters as the conquest slowly gained ground. Perhaps the most interesting is that of April 858, for it is recorded by a variety of sources:17 we read of a running battle in which the Arabs, at first victorious, eventually lost 20 keels, and the Byzantines, who seem to have been reinforced during the fight, lost twelve. Amari puts the Byzantine strength at 40 ships, which is very large for a thematic force, particularly because there is no confusion about embarked troops. There was work here, perhaps, for Nikita? He may equally well have acquired his fleet after the disastrous Kondomytés expedition of 859, when 100 of 300 chélândia were lost. No doubt the numbers are exaggerated, but after 859 the naval balance seems to have inclined toward Islam, and it is hard to see how the Sicilian thematic fleet can have survived such a defeat as a discrete force.

It would appear then that the delicate balance of naval power favoured the Arabs from about 860. Before this date there was no engagement which may have tested Malta’s defences. According to Ibn al-Athîr, in 835;

'A fleet was sent against the islands; having made a rich haul and having vanquished many towns and fortresses, it returned safe and sound.'

There follows a difficult reference to M. Dhâr which Amari associates with Tindari, and the 'islands' with the Lipari, on data, which in Talbi’s submission 'ne répètent évidemment sur une démonstration documentaire décisive. Il s’agit de suppositions basées sur des considérations géographiques ou des rapprochements plus ou moins convenants'.18

The Encyclopaedia of Islam invites us to believe that this raid marked the beginning of Muslim rule in Malta, which is patently absurd, for Ibn al-Athîr plainly speaks of nothing but a raid – the

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21 Bayân I 145; Talbi 440.
22 VELLA Codice Arabo-Siculo I/1 415, 419; I/2 130-133. Ibn al-Athîr, Ibn Khaldûn, and Nuwayrî all owe much to the Zirid Secretary of State al-Raqi, whose work seems to have disappeared fairly recently. Perhaps Vella pillaged it? The existence of a Sicilian Chronicle has also been posited, and although we must ascribe to Vella a high talent for forgery, it is very plain that he falsified from a basis of knowledge.
More dangerous still, they besieged Ragusa (Dubrovnik) for 15 months in 867/8, and were only worsened by the most vigorous exertions of Basil II and his Admiral Nicetas 'Ooyphas; Bury assures us that the Byzantine fleet was 400 strong. On the evidence of the Porphyrogenitos, the Imperial fleet in the 10th. century numbered 100 keels, to which 77 more warships from the three thematic fleets of the Aegean might be added (Kibyrrhaeot, Samos, and Aegean): the naval service was better found in the 10th. century than the 9th., and even allowing for 100% exaggeration, 'Ooyphas' fleet must have scraped every provincial barrel clean; there was no strength to spare for the west. Yet Byzantium 'in extremis' struggled through — she was to do so for a further six centuries — and in 870, when we next read of Malta, we again hear of a Byzantine fleet. This time it failed. Ibn al-Khaldun offers a very curt account of Malta's fall:

'The island of Malta was taken in 257' (870-871).

Ibn al-Khaldun's date of 257 AH is important, for he is far more scrupulous in this regard than his great co-religionist Ibn al-Athir. Nuwayri is a little more precise:

'In his time (Muhammad ibn Hafaghah, 869-871) the island of Malta was conquered by the hand of Ahmad ibn 'Umar ibn Ubayd Allah ibn al-Aglab.'

Here the name is of interest; an Ahmad ibn 'Umar ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Ibrahim al-Aglab 'el Habash' can be positively identified in contemporary Ifriqiya: as we shall see, he is of particular interest to the early medieval history of Malta.

Ibn al-Athir complicates the matter further, yet he complements rather than contradicts his peers:

'In 256 he (Muhammad ibn al-Aglab) sent an army to Malta, which was besieged by the Greeks. They raised the siege on learning of the Muslim strength.' Here there are three points of interest:

- The date is one year earlier than Ibn Khaldun: but Ibn al-Athir's dates cannot be taken as Gospel.


26 Bas XLVII p. 147

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The conqueror is said to be a Sicilian, not an African Arab: the writer is far more reliable for names than for dates.

A Byzantine naval force was in attendance — but we learn that it was relatively weak, and dared not suffer loss, which accords well with what we know of the Byzantine strategic situation of the age.

It seems that the first assault was launched from Ifriqiya and failed, and either lost its ships or saw them withdrawn, for we soon find it besieged by another naval force. Yet the inherent fault of the Galley was its unweatherliness, even Piali's vast force in 1565 could not prevent the 'Piccolo Soccorsa', so it seems likely that the fleet which decamped in 870 must have wintered in Malta's remarkable harbours — perhaps Nikita of the seal was the

We are thus entitled to infer from the sources that Habashi was rescued from his plight by a Sicilian fleet. It would follow that the rights of conquest fell to the Sicilian commander, not Habashi.

The date of definitive capture is recorded in the Chronicle of Cambridge as 29 Aug. 870.

The value of the Chronicle is that it is much older than the other Arabic sources, being a 10th. century compilation, and that it appears to have been written by a Christian Sicilian and later translated from Greek into Arabic. Unlike the foregoing Arab sources it owes nothing to the Zirid Secretary of State Al-Raqiq (d.418 AH/1027-8AD). But it is a curt, dry compilation, little more than a list of dates and events: nonetheless it offers the inestimable boon of a documentary control upon the sources founded upon Al-Raqiq.

We thus have a siege within a siege if we are to explain why the Greeks were besieging an island which had yet to fall to Islam. The galley had many virtues as a naval weapon in the Mediterranean, but the ability to maintain a blockade in foul weather was not one of them; this lay behind Piali's insistance upon the prior capture of St Elmo in 1565. Thus if Habashi was contained in 869, it was by a force garrisoned upon Malta, and we have evidence of such a force in the Schlumberger seal. But it is equally clear that no Byzantine commander had a mandate for losing ships whilst the Strait of Otranto remained in danger, as it plainly was until Bari

27 Amari Bas XXVII: VASILIEV AA Vol. II/2 p. 99;
was retaken. The Byzantine force which decamped in the face of a superior Sicilian fleet in the summer of 870 respected the strategic realities of the period and may well have abandoned the Byzantine garrison in the process as Vella contends. Thus abandoned, it behove the Maltese to make the best possible composition with the Arab force already disembarked. Indeed it is perfectly plausible that the financial exactions implicit in the maintenance of a Byzantine galleys force upon the Archipelago had left the population disaffected. This is Vella’s drift and Talbi is also convinced that the Maltese made an ‘ahd with their new masters. Two Arab references support this contention.

Ibn al-Khatib says that

‘The island of Malta was conquered and its King taken prisoner in Jumada the First 261’ (874-875)

This tardy Grenadine reference has been dismissed as a confusion with the date of death of the Sicilian Emir Abu’l Gharianiq, yet it uses the curious term ‘king’ without mentioning the ubiquitous ‘Rum’. This suggests a Maltese dignitary administering the islands in accordance with an ‘ahd years after conquest. It can be squared with the Kitab al-Uyun, which quotes Ibn al-Gazzar to the effect that the marble columns and certain unspecified ‘materieux précieux’ in the Qasr Habashi at Sousse were brought from Malta by Habashi b. ‘Umar, whom we have already met in Nuwayri. Why should a figure prominent in the politics of Ifriqiya have taken leave to pillage a Sicilian conquest? Talbi offers the highly plausible explanation that the Maltese were punished after capture for having ruptured their ‘ahd. In passing, it is of no small interest that 9th century Malta possessed valuables and heavy marble columns of sufficient value to merit transportation to Sousse. A basis for taxation compatible with the cost of a locally based galleys force under Nikita begins to emerge.

Now Muratori tells us that when the captured Bishop of Syr-

cuse was conveyed to Palermo in 878, he found in the prison of that city

‘sanctissimus Melitensis episcopus duabus compeditibus astricin-
tus’

This reference has attracted frequent commentary, but no credible explanation of why the poor man was so afflicted. Since he was ‘sanctissimus’, he was presumably properly consecrated. The Encyclopaedia suggests that he must have been incarcerated since conquest in 835 or even before, which places an intolerably high premium upon human survivability in a medieval prison without saying why he had been imprisoned. His appointment offers no real grounds, for the conquests were marked by comprehensiveness to ‘People of the Book’ so long as they respected the new order, not persecution or forced conversion, which simply served to reduce taxation, Gregory VII conducted a cordial correspondence with the Emir of Bugia in the 11th century in response to the Emir’s request for the consecration of new bishops. Idris tells us that the Zirid Tamim was noted for his tolerance to Christianity a century later, writing thus to a mistress:

‘And how I love your soft spoken tones, though it cost me my life, as you read the works of the Messiah... For love of you I savour Christian feasts and the melodious tones of canonical chant’

In fact only the dreaded Vella offers a halfway credible explanation, saying that the Bishop of Malta – surely Ibn al-Khatib’s ‘King’ – had been sending grain to beleaguered Syracuse, was caught, and imprisoned. The most likely reason for the Bishop’s detention in Sicily is plainly that he was a focus for rebellion in

28 VASILIEV I/1 no. 32.
29 TALBI op. cit. pp. 474-6. The writer died in 394 AH/1004 AD, and thus offers another valuable control. The Kitab al-Uyun was apparently unknown to Amari and Vasiliev.
30 MURATORI Rerum Italicorum Scriptores I/2 p. 264A
33 VELLA Codice 1/2 374. He claims that the grain was sent from Marsaskala, which adds the idea of subterfuge; but it is difficult to imagine that the Bishop had ships enough for an operation of any size – a reason, perhaps, why he was merely imprisoned rather than executed.
Malta, which in turn tallies with Talbi’s concept of an 'ahd broken between 870 and 878. However much credence we may accord to Vella — and it cannot be much — the Bishop’s imprisonment must have something to do with the siege of Syracuse.

Nor does Muratori state the name of the unfortunate ecclesiastic, or whether he was set at liberty with his fellow unfortunates in 885. Possibly this was the Manas whom Abela writes about as one of the participants at the Eighth Oecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 868 — a further nail in the coffin of the Encyclopaedia. Unfortunately Manas is not to be found in Mansi’s uncharacteristically poor account of the Council, for which he neglects to give his customary list of participants and lists of signatories. Abela says that Manas signed Articles I and IV; his book antecedes Mansi’s immense work by eighty years, and is no doubt the source of Vella’s extraction of the name, but not of the ‘details’.

CONCLUSION

Any attempt at the reconstruction of the medieval history of a poorly documented area is of necessity tentative; by the same token it is unwise to discard early sources, even if they are less than contemporary, for they are too rare. The grave weakness of the Encyclopaedia’s account of Malta’s capture by Islam is that it adopts a ‘position prise’ on the strength of a selective reading of the Kāmil linked up with Muratori’s bishop. For Amari Malta was merely a passing interest in Sicilian studies, and he took little interest in the Byzantine naval situation in its wider sense. Talbi’s account is by far the most widely based in that he has found controlling references for the sources coloured by al-Raqiq, but his prime concern is medieval Tunisia, and he evidently knew nothing of the Nikita seal.

34 Amari Storia I 551.
35 Abela GF Descrittione di Malta Malta 1647 II not. 9
36 Mansi JD Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova 1728