SLAVES AND CAPTIVES ON MALTA: 1053/4 and 1091

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Despite the desperate scarcity of sources, it is now generally agreed that between about 870 and about 1200 Malta was in Muslim hands and that any element of Christian continuity from before 870 can virtually be excluded. Where texts are lacking, legend may flourish; but the notion of some Christian survival through the Muslim period, an idea long accepted as ancient unbroken tradition of the type described by Gian Francesco Abela in 1647 as the approuate tradizioni haiute da nostri Magiori, is demonstrably an early-modern invention. Most of the sources available for the period were indicated and discussed, somewhat disjointedly, in 1975, while others were supplied in Godfrey Wettiger’s standard synthesis on Muslim Malta as revised in 1986. Doubts remain however, especially since Joseph Brincat recently added an important new element to the discussion by noting a passage in the writing of al-Himyarī who died in 1494 but used earlier sources. Further such literary discoveries remain possible but excava...
The Maltese language was scarcely written down until modern times and cannot throw convincing light on the period before 1200, though toponyms, and especially microtoponyms which are documented in very clearly persisted for many centuries, are recorded in a considerable number for the fifteenth century and, occasionally, a little earlier. Whether such place names can safely be adduced as evidence earlier is extremely doubtful, but since none of them indicates a probable pre-870 toponym they would, if anything, strengthen any theory of a break following the conquest of 870 circa.

There are strong indications, and al-Himyari’s text reinforces them, of a Christian opposition to the Muslim attack of 870 which resulted in the dismantling of one or more churches and the death or exile of the bishop and many of the Christian inhabitants on Malta. Outright resistance on farms or in caves would scarcely have been possible on a small, flat island. It is possible that after 870 there were no Christians, but only Muslims, on Malta; or that a few hundred indigenous Christian inhabitants survived as dhimmis, that is as free citizens of inferior status; or that some inhabitants became mawali or converts to Islam and were accepted as equals; or that they became slaves precisely because they resisted the conquerors of 870. On a small and distant island the laws of Islam were not necessarily followed strictly and other situations are conceivable. Thus in the tenth century Ibn Hauqal described rural communities in Western Sicily in which Muslim men married Christian women as Islam permitted, their male children being brought up as Muslims and the females as Christians. In the late-thirteenth century the Sicilian Bartolomeo de Neocastro reported a more fantastic but possibly significant story told by a Muslim on Gerba, according to which the inhabitants of the islands, explicitly including Malta, were the


6. E.g. M.A. and D. Aquilina et al., in Hal Millieri: a Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings, ed. A. Luttrell (Malta, 1976), 26-27 and Fig. 2


8. Brown, 81-84; Luttrell (1975), 21-28; Wettinger (1986), 90-91; Brincat, 2, 6-7.


10. Wettinger (1986), 91, says that Maltese Christians must ‘undoubtedly’ have fled from Sicily to the Italian mainland; but that is a hypothesis.


15. Text and translation in Brincat, 25. Al-Qazwini’s less detailed version, which did not mention daughters or marriages, is given in translation by Brown, 84-85. Al-Qazwini dated the Byzantine attack to 440 (1048/9); Brown, 85, suggests 1038. Wettinger (1986), 91, interpreting Qazwini’s slaves as ‘a subject population, perhaps indeed partly of indigenous origin, already Islamicized and Arabized...’ implies that al-Qazwini wrote of the Muslims and slaves as ‘Maltese’.


offspring of black African men and Byzantine women form Sicily. Offspring of black African men and Byzantine women form Sicily. 10 Arabic-speaking or Coptic Christians might have reached Malta from the Arabic-speaking or Coptic Christians might have reached Malta from the Levant or from Africa; in 827, for example, many Copts were sent from Egypt to Tunisia where they reorganized its Christianity. It was stated by Ibn Hauqal and a number of other Arabic writers that Malta was totally abandoned in the tenth century. Al-Himyar’s account of the conquest strengthens the picture of destruction and abandonment in and after 870, and his claim that Muslims repopulated the island and built a city after 440, that is after 1048/9, implies a total depopulation of some 180 years and a complete break in ethnic, linguistic, and religious continuities. Al-Himyar repeats the story, known to al-Qazwini in the thirteenth century, of a Byzantine attack on Malta with many ships and a siege of the city, dating it to 445 or 1053/4 and adding new details. 12 It could have been that a Muslim settlement of 1048/9 circa provoked an almost immediate Byzantine riposte, and it would be unwise to dismiss entirely the idea of a complete abandonment since that would explain the general absence of evidence for continuing occupation; but the balance of probability seems to lie against a complete desertion. The various descriptions of an abandoned island have been explained, quite convincingly, as the result of textual confusion with another place with the similar name of Galita, 13 and it may be that al-Himyar, faced with evidence both for a total abandonment before 1053/4 and of a community on Malta in that year, sought to resolve the apparent contradiction by inventing a slightly earlier repopulation and the building, or perhaps a rebuilding, of the city. At present only a detailed and exhaustive investigation of al-Himyar’s sources and of their manuscript traditions offers even an outside hope of settling that problem. 14

According to al-Himyar, the 400 free Muslims on Malta and their more numerous abid or slaves were attacked in 1053/4 by the Rum, that is the Byzantines, and the Muslims asked them for clemency and they refused it, except for women and belongings. The free Muslims then pointed

13. Most recently Wettinger (30 September 1990), 16.
14. Brincat, 9-20, discusses such investigations and announces future contributions; Wettinger (26 August 1990), 23, and (30 September 1990), 16, indicates various problems.

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Had the slaves of 1053/4 been descendants of the pre-870 inhabitants they would probably have remained on the island with their kin, unless the latter alone had been deported or absorbed by Muslim conquerors, and the men would have had no pressing need to marry the free Muslims’ daughters. Had they been Christians, the threat of captivity and bondage under the Christian Byzantines would not have been very compelling. Only if they were Muslims would their condition, already one of slavery, have been likely to be worsened by a Byzantine victory. Furthermore, the free Muslim minority would have been most reluctant, even in an emergency, to trust a more numerous group of Christian slaves with their freedom as equals. That the free Muslims offered their daughters in marriage might suggest that the slaves were not Christian, since Islam prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims. Godfrey Wettinger points out that had there been Christian survivors from before 870 who remained Christians, they would presumably have been relatively free dhimmis rather than slaves. He suggests a re-peopling of the island, however gradual, by Arabic speakers who might have come from North Africa or other areas to the east or west rather than from Sicily, and he notes that the Muslims are not known to have had Christian slaves on Sicily. Unless in 1053/4 there were dhimmis who were not mentioned by al-Qazwini or by al-Himyar, then there were only free men and slaves; and the latter were unlikely to have been Christian even in origin. 18 Had the free Muslims’ wives and daughters been Christians according to the Sicilian practice reported by Ibn Hauqal, that would have allowed Christian slaves to marry them and might have explained why the Byzantines demanded the women; but that would be to pile hypothesis on hypothesis while leaving other problems unsolved. The reality may have been an undisturbed and fluctuating jumble of poorly defined personal conditions operating within a very small context.

Brincat writes of a ‘total and abrupt change of language’ and of the ‘lack of a linguistic substratum’ in the eleventh century. It could reasonably be supposed that such hypothetical developments would have been the result of some 180 years of total abandonment, if such an abandonment were proven. To assume such developments as facts which support an

18. This is merely to elaborate, in the light of al-Himyar’s text, on what has been said by A. Mayr (1896). Brown (1975), 84-85, and Wettinger (1986), 91; idem (26 August 1990), 23; idem (30 September 1990), 16.
unproven hypothesis of a total abandonment would scarcely be logical. To say that a hypothetical immigration of Sicilians and Slavs in the eleventh century would solve the problem of those Maltese Semitic terms, including *knisij* for church and *gassij* for priest, which relate to the Christian religion, is to imply that the existence of the terms in modern Maltese strengthens the hypothesis that the slaves of 1053/4 were Christian and that they reached Malta from Sicily. In reality there is no such problem, since the Semitic terms are totally undocumented in Maltese until much later and there is no way of demonstrating that they reached Malta as Christian terms in the eleventh century. The situation on Malta had changed by the time of Count Roger the Norman's attack on the island in 1091. The chief source for that event is the chronicle of Roger's French chaplain and biographer Geoffrey Malaterra, who was either with Roger or received a first-hand account of events. His chronicle included a passage describing how the Muslims' Christian captives, of whom a great number or *plurima multitudine* were held within the town, came in procession to greet the victorious count:

Videntes autem captivos christianos, ab urbe progredientes, praebat gaudio suae insiputae liberationsis ab imo quoque cordis lacrimis profudi, lingo vel calamis, prout quisque primo invenerant, compositas cruces in dexteris ferentes, Kyrie eleison proclamando, ad pedes comitum provolvit, nostri vero ad talem intimum pictatis affecto lacrimoso rerum perfunduntur. Comes ergo, taliter urbe sibi confederata, captivos, asportet, per naves ordinans, rededit cum magno timore, praebat nimbio ponderis captivorum, ut submersionem veritus, accelerat. Sed dextera Dei, ut creditus, ex eventu patuit: naves per undas sublevantes, cubito uno liberiores super mare ferebat, quam in aditum suo cum eas minus omnis gravatab.

This means that by 1091 there were many Christian captives on Malta who went with joy to meet Roger, carrying crosses and crying *Kyrie eleison*; Roger took them away, seriously overloaded his ships, and devastating Gozo on his way. On reaching Sicily he freed the captives and offered to settle them in Sicily free of any 'servile exact', but they preferred to return to their own 'fields and

19. Brincat, 7-9; Luttrell, 'Christianity' (1977), 420, provides the literature on these Semitic terms. Brincat has the merit of being the first of the 'philologists' to confront the earlier historical evidence and to seek to place the language in a more acceptable context: cf. J. Brincat, 'Language and Demography in Malta: the Social Foundations of the Symbiosis between Semitic and Romance in Standard Maltese', in *Malta: a Case Study* (1989). The article provides a more convincing account of the origins of the language.

20. Luttrell (1975), 24-25.

21. Gaufredus Malaterra, *De Rebus gestis Rogerii* ..., ed. E. Pontieri, in *Refutatio italicorum scriptores*, n.s. v, part 1 (Bologna, 1927), 94-96; Cassar Pullicino, 100, points out that the story of the Christians carrying palms is a legend.

22. Cf. Pontieri's prefazione; Cassar Pullicino, 97.


not come from Malta and left the island in that year; they could have contributed little or nothing or any Christian continuity. What may be deduced about the Christians of 1127 to 1154, who are known to have been punished for killing a Muslim on Malta,\textsuperscript{25} is that presumably they reached the island after 1091 when the Christian captives left; most probably they came after the renewed conquest of Malta by Roger I in 1127 and were few in number.\textsuperscript{26} There was, therefore, little room for Christian continuities. The reality was probably confused and untidy with individual exceptions to general developments. If Geoffroi Malaterra was correct in reporting that Count Roger took away from Malta all, or perhaps most, of the Christian captives then on the island, it would follow that Malta was more Muslim after 1091 than before it.

\textsuperscript{25} Wettinger (1986), 98; Luttrell (1991), 37.
\textsuperscript{26} Luttrell (1975), 31. S. Fiorini, 'Malta in 1530', in Hospitaller Malta: 1530-1798. Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John, ed. V. Malti-Milanes (Malta, forthcoming), notes an Italo-Byzantine familiaris of Roger I who before about 1135 had been exiled to Malta where he spent fifteen years surrounded by Muslims.

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