of a parish system and on the arrival of various religious orders. The history of Gozo, given scant attention in the 1975 volume, is covered in two items (XIV, XIX). From about 1400 to 1530 a mass of written material is available, but for earlier periods it seemed necessary to turn to non-written sources such as coins (VI). One particular multi-disciplinary initiative was the intensive study of a small country settlement through the archives, through a limited topographical survey, through the restoration of its unique fresco cycle and through the excavation of the twin churches at Hal Millieri (XX–XXI). Certain of the author’s writings on Malta, including a number which were concerned with Malta’s place in the late-medieval Aragonese–Catalan ‘empire’ and which were summarized in the 1975 introduction, are not included. A few pieces contain references to plates and figures which could not be reproduced below. This volume could not contain any comprehensive survey or listing of the numerous publications which have appeared since 1975. The process of reprinting unavoidably leads to an element of repetition, but it is hoped that this volume may draw the attention of non-Maltese readers to an island whose history provides an interest out of all proportion to its size, and that it may assist them by presenting some materials which can be extremely difficult to consult outside the Maltese islands.

The original publishers of these studies deserve the greatest gratitude for permitting their reproduction; so do Godfrey Wettinger, Mario Buhagiar and Stanley Fiorini who kindly helped with the first item below. The resulting volume is dedicated in grateful thanks to all the many Maltese and other friends and colleagues who have participated in various ways in the creation of its contents, and especially to the memory of a great friend Tom Blagg, excavator at Hal Millieri, who died in 2000.

ANTHONY LUTTRELL

Bath
May, 2001

Medieval Malta: Approaches and Reproaches

The nine studies published in 1975 were intended to provide within a single volume a coherent point of departure for the study of Malta's medieval past. A selection of articles by Maltese and other scholars established the state of the question, while the editorial introduction, entitled ‘Approaches to Medieval Malta’, included a survey of the historiographical background and the archival sources.1 Inevitably there were gaps, errors, omissions and other points which, more than twenty-five years later, invite reproaches and impose revisions. Since 1975 research and publication have accelerated in an extraordinary fashion, far outstripping any possibility of brief condensation. The leading scholars have been Godfrey Wettinger, Malta’s foremost medievalist,2 Mario Buhagiar and, more recently, Stanley Fiorini, while many others have made serious contributions, especially through a number of fine and well-illustrated collaborative volumes; medieval Malta has been revolutionized.3 The early researches of Godfrey Wettinger and Mario Buhagiar marked a heroic stage in Maltese historiography, as they worked as school teachers, travelled the island by bus and on foot, and copied documents by hand; they lacked photocopiers, word processors, reference works, proper library facilities and travel grants. More recent research has been extensive but has lacked overall synthesis, though the Buhagiar–Fiorini volumes devoted to Mdina go some way towards a general survey applicable to the whole island.4 The most recent scholarly treatment of the whole medieval period is still Andrew Vella’s Storija published as long ago as 1974.5 Its author, the university’s first

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1 Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights, ed. A. Luttrell (London, 1975): introduction reprinted infra II.
2 C. Dalli, ‘Enlightening the Middle Ages’, in Karissime Gottfrida: Historical Essays presented to Professor Godfrey Wettinger on his Seventieth Birthday, ed. F. Xuereb (Malta, 1999), surveys Wettinger’s numerous achievements but certain comments seem somewhat hagiographic; Wettinger’s publications are listed ibid., 185–7.
3 No comprehensive bibliography can be given here; in addition to works cited throughout this volume, the collaborative volumes cited in notes 4, 54, 56, 68, contain important recent lists.
5 A. Vella, Storja ta’Malta, i (Malta, 1974), 55–181; this work was not available to those writing for Medieval Malta. The undocumented medieval section of C. Cassar, A Concise
Professor of History, made important contributions to the island's historical process, for example by encouraging undergraduate thesis work and by fostering foreign contacts, but his training was that of a theologian whose book, published in Maltese, constituted a cautious partial advance which was useful for school teaching and for a general public; it remains a standard work. Its medieval section marked only limited progress and is seldom cited. On the Norman incursions for example, Vella stuck doggedly to the outdated interpretations advanced in Gian Francesco Abela's seventeenth-century history. Abela's classic does however contain much material still of value and it has meanwhile been reprinted.

New materials and fresh insights have come from the island's medieval archives, the contents of which were outlined in a publication of 1974. The notarial registers, the acts of the università or council at Mdina and parts of the holdings of the cathedral archives were already well known. The cathedral documents include building accounts, court cases concerning Jews and a variety of other materials, some quite recently discovered, which have been extensively exploited by Wettinger and Fiorini. The fundamental problem, however, is that so little of this material dates before circa 1400. The very small number of fourteenth-century documents surviving on Malta, almost all of them in copy, have been studied with comments on their background and diplomatic problems. For other pre-1400 texts concerning Malta, research outside the island became imperative. Fortunately, more than 100 late-thirteenth century documents and notamenti from Naples were published before the Angevin archive there was destroyed in 1943, and others are available in the well-indexed reconstructions of the lost registers. Archives containing further sources include those in Venice, Dubrovnik, Marseille, Barcelona, Siracusa, Catania and, above all, Palermo. Contributions based on various Sicilian archives have come from the French scholar Henri Brece, who alone has used notarial documents from Sicily to illuminate Maltese topics; a variety of Sicilian possibilities were taken up by Luttrell and Wettinger, and a selection of Palermitian texts has been edited by Fiorini.

For much of the seven centuries before the accession of the Angevins in 1268 the written evidence is so minimal that recourse to non-written materials, and occasionally to inscriptions and coins, is essential. The Roman and Late-Roman centuries have been covered thoroughly by Anthony Bonanno. For the post-Roman or Byzantine period, arguably commencing with the visit to Malta of the Byzantine general Belisarius in 533, the written evidence, presented by T.S. Brown in 1975, must be supplemented by the extensive and meticulous topographical work and record taking, especially of catacombs and other rock-cut features, conducted over many years by Mario Buagiar, whose rescue achievement is particularly precious in view of the widespread destruction wrought by modern upheavals across the Maltese countryside. The obscurity of this early-medieval period is compounded by the practical difficulties inherent in excavation. The Maltese islands are notably small and rocky, the soil cover is very shallow and much earth has been moved around or seriously disturbed. Archeologically useful stratifications are, therefore, extremely rare. There is no local tradition of medieval archaeology, and since 1970 even the brief annual reports issued by the Museum Department, which had usefully summarized finds and activities, have been discontinued.

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15 E.g. A. Bonanno, 'Malta in the Third Century', in The Roman West in the Third Century: Contributions from Archaeology and History, ed. A. King - M. Hening (Oxford, 1981); see also Buagiar - Fiorini, i, 2-42.


17 M. Buagiar, Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands (Oxford, 1986); idem, 'Early Christian and Byzantine Malta: Some Archaeological and Textual Considerations', Library of Mediterranean History, i (1994).
The obstacles to excavation, which offers perhaps the most likely chance of filling some of the enormous gaps in medieval Maltese history, are most unfortunate. In 1963 excavations were begun by a mission financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an institution whose own archives have been used by an outspoken Italian historian to demonstrate how scientifically disastrous a blatantly political approach to Mediterranean archaeology has often been. Two of Malta’s very potentially productive medieval sites, at Tas-Silg and San Pawl Milqi, were partially ruined. Eight volumes of preliminary reports contained just one stratigraphical section and no final report appeared. In 1975 it seemed useful to include a summary of these activities as an archaeological item in *Malta* but its conclusions have been dismantled. The search for Saint Paul largely distorted both the direction of the investigations and the interpretation of some of the results, as a leading Italian scholar Margherita Guarducci promptly pointed out, while the presentation of the medieval findings at San Pawl Milqi was simply indefensible. The excavation process in Malta was seriously compromised.

The injection of an archaeological approach into Malta’s medieval historiography, and especially into the study of its countryside, was renewed from a different angle through a project on the late-medieval casale with its four churches at Hal Millieri. The excavations were preceded by archival research, the detailed planning of the buildings, the restoration and study of the important fifteenth-century fresco cycle and a small-scale topographical survey which was supplemented by details from the late-medieval notarial registers and from a list of field names compiled for wartime purposes in 1944. These researches were integrated into an historical account which defined a number of problems worth archaeological investigation, and these essential preliminaries were published in 1976 before any digging was undertaken. The excavations proved valuable in some ways but disappointing in others, since no useful pottery sequence was established and almost nothing was discovered for the period before the fourteenth century. Elsewhere there are places where a stratigraphy which might throw light on medieval Maltese developments still exists, but such sites await investigation, as for example in the citadel on Gozo where reasonable opportunities have not been exploited; medieval information, for example that uncovered at the Marsa in 1993, remains unpublished. This situation is damaging not only to the historical process but also to the development and protection of the heritage, with economic losses arguably resulting, for example, from the failure to encourage a more sophisticated tourism. For decades the responsibility for this blockage has lain in ministries, in parliament and, in the last resort, with public opinion.

With regard to the pottery, Carmel Cassar’s recent concise history proposes that the importation of seventh- and eighth-century Byzantine wares was at a remarkably high level, that Malta was ‘fully integrated within the cultural and economic systems enjoyed in the Maghreb and Sicily’, and that after about 1268 a period of lively commercial activity was overtaken by an apparently rigid autarchic economy and the abrupt end of importation of ceramics from Sicily, Italy and the Magreb with only ‘local poor quality pottery’ being found. He deduces that ‘under the Aragonese Crown Malta was transformed into an economically impoverished and inward-looking community’. The last point conflicts, at least partially, with firm documentary information on shipping routes and artistic importations, while it is doubtful how far so few pottery finds can safely indicate broad economic developments or the state of Maltese mentalities. There was apparently no glazed pottery produced on Malta. The possibilities, and the difficulties, of using ceramic tiles are minimal.

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22 *Infra XX*, 26; the preservation of this pencil-written list, if it still survives, would be extremely important.


24 Blagg – Bonanno – Luttrell: postscript *infra XXI*.

25 Compare developments on Gozo since 1981 with proposals in A. Luttrell, *Gozo Citadel, Malta: Report Submitted to the Division of Cultural Heritage, UNESCO* (typescript: Malta, 1981); this report, though technically reserved, has occasionally been cited and may be consulted in the Malta University Library.


MEDIEVAL MALTA: APPROACHES AND REPROACHES

evidence to explore medieval Maltese history have long been noted.\textsuperscript{29} In 1969, when late-medieval Mediterranean pottery was still largely unstudied, Franco D'Andria published short notes on fewer than thirty unstratified medieval sherds from Tas-Silg, classing them roughly in five groups.\textsuperscript{30} The Hal Millieri excavations produced some 154 medieval sherds, 22 per cent of them stratified; these were described in detail with the identification of two late-medieval types of burnished and painted Maltese coarse ware.

More recently a short preliminary study by Alessandra Molinari and Nathaniel Cutajar divided the fine ceramic materials available in 1999 by find spots, proposed datings, pottery types and places of origin. They note that archaeological and archival sources are apparently in conflict, while they repeatedly, and correctly, warn of the numerous limitations of their exercise which nevertheless draws attention to potentially important lines of study; however, they also announce a number of broad general deductions.\textsuperscript{31} These are the generalizations repeated by Carmel Cassar, who at times copies them verbatim but without the reservations of the original. The suggestion made by Molinari and Cutajar that a heavy trade in 'transiting amphorae' was passing through Malta in the late-tenth and eleventh centuries is certainly revolutionary and might eventually lead to important revisions, but the interpretations seem premature. It is scarcely justifiable to draw such conclusions from extremely small and very possibly unrepresentative samples in which many sherds lack reliable stratigraphy or detailed expert analysis presented in published form. Furthermore, the study takes no real account of the local coarse wares.

T.S. Brown's article in Medieval Malta included some pages on the Muslim period but, partly because of the poverty of the sources, there was no separate treatment of Muslim Malta, though the topic was covered in the contribution on Norman legends by Joseph Cassar Pullicino and in the introductory essay.\textsuperscript{32} The volume's consensus, that any continuity of a Christian presence or tradition on Malta was highly unlikely and that Muslim predominance on the island was scarcely disturbed by the Normans in 1091 has, with a few somewhat bizarre exceptions, been accepted. There were some who suggested that what

\textsuperscript{29} E.g. infra II, 12–13, 22; XXI, 103.  
\textsuperscript{31} T. Blagg, 'The Finds, i. The Pottery', in Blagg - Bonanno - Luttrel, 68–80.  
\textsuperscript{32} A. Molinari – N. Cutajar, 'Of Greeks and Arabs and of Feudal Knights', Malta Archaeological Review, iii (1999); the authors’ methodological assumptions that 'archaeology can provide a separate 'objective' account of medieval Malta, its 'feudal knights', its 'voiceless' Maltese population and so forth demands serious debate.

\textsuperscript{33} J. Cassar Pullicino, ‘Norman Legends in Malta’, in Medieval Malta (1975), and infra II, 21–32.

\textsuperscript{34} A. Luttrel, 'Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and Invention in Maltese Historiography', Melita Historica, vii, no. 2 (1977); the studied proposal of Byzantine coins (ibid., 113, n. 39) was abandoned because the coins available lack a secure Maltese provenance.  

\textsuperscript{36} J. Brincat, Malta 870–1054: Al-Himyar’s Account (revised edn.; Malta, 1995).
\textsuperscript{37} A. Luttrel, 'Ibn Hauqal and Tenth-Century Malta', Hyphen [Malta], v. no. 4 (1987).
\textsuperscript{38} H. Brown, 'The Coins of Muslim Malta', Melita Historica, ix, no. 1 (1992), and infra VI.
\textsuperscript{39} V. Grassi, 'Materiali per lo Studio della Presenza Araba nella Regione Italiana, i: l'Epigrafia Araba nelle Isole Maltesi', Studi Magrebini xxi (1989). The provenance of the Maimuna tomb slab of 1174 now on Gozo (text infra II, 29) is now highly dubious: infra V, 97, n. 3; XIX, 52–3; G. Bonello, Histories of Malta: Deceptions and Perceptions, i (Malta, 2000), 9–12.
\textsuperscript{40} A. Pesutti, 'Le Isole Maltesi dall’'Epoca bizantina al Periodo normanno e svevo (secc. VI–XII)', Byzantinische Forschungen v (1977), 289.
\textsuperscript{41} Bresc (1986), ii, 589, 593; cf. Luttrel (1991), 37–9, and infra IX, 18–19.
churches and their paintings. Conceivably Malta’s inhabitants did prefer the Greek rite to that of their Latin conquerors; very possibly some immigrants from Sicily or Southern Italy were Greek speaking and the presence of Basilian monks cannot be excluded. However, there was no known monastic foundation, royal or otherwise, on Malta and the explicit evidence for a Basilian presence is lacking. The theory would eventually demand a demonstration that various rock-cut features discovered by Buhaqar really were churches or monasteries; that they can reasonably be dated to the relevant period; that they coincided fairly precisely with place-names in dejr studied by Wettinger but seldom located; and that dejr did mean monastery or convent, as Buhaqar maintains, rather than simply sheepfold, as Wettinger holds was normally the case. The Sicilian background, itself unclear, provides only limited direct evidence concerning any Basilian activities in the conversion of Arabic-speaking Muslim villani on Sicily, where Greek monasteries were already in decline during the thirteenth century. Furthermore, the new hypothesis overlooks the point that in Sicily some indigenous Muslims whose Greek-speaking families had originally been Greek Christians were likely to be reconverted to a Greek form of religion, whereas on Malta and Gozo there can scarcely have been any significant group of former Greek Christians waiting to revert to earlier practices; instead there was a community some part of which remained on Malta and Gozo and continued to speak Arabic after being converted to Christianity.

The major piece of evidence for the composition of the islands’ population is the report made to the Emperor Frederick II in about 1241 by his own governor, Ghiberto Abate. This awkward text, in which evident corruptions ensure that all interpretations remain debatable, has been re-edited; in consequence of the recognition that the reading custa should be corrected to gotia, a term denoting a tax imposed on Muslims rather than on tailors, the information on the dues paid provides a new indicator for the size of the islands’ different groups. The most likely conclusion is that while there were indeed expulsions, conceivably, though without specific documentation, in about 1224 and probably again in about 1245, and immigrations and transportations, the latter at least partly from Italy rather than from Greek-speaking parts of Sicily, the bulk of the population changed its religion but retained an Arabic speech. Malta and Gozo were not like Sicily. After about 1270 no Muslim community retained any political or legal rights or position in the islands, and to what extent any earlier traditions remained alive in underground ways cannot be estimated. No one has taken up Heni Brese’s suggestion that following the conversion of Malta its defeated ‘notables’ turned defensively to the ‘ecclesiastical institution’, that is that the leaders among those who had once been Muslims preserved their status by taking control of the Maltese church, with the result that the cathedral chapter became the ‘seed-bed’ or nursery of the ‘families of notaries and intellectuals who ensured the survival of the cultural and linguistic Arabism.’

The period from about 1240 to 1400 also suffers from a scarcity of documentation, though the published Angelin texts once at Naples have yet to be exploited completely. A little has been added, mainly from Sicilian sources which, for example, provide new details concerning the Genoese Counts of Malta. After 1282 Malta became an outpost of an extended Catalan-Aragonese confederation. Surprises are always possible, as in the case of

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45 New edition and discussion infra IX; Ibn Khaldun’s date of 1249 for expulsions is, against the evidence, still commonly accepted. It seems unlikely that the original of Ghiberto’s report gave, as sometimes accepted, the figure of 47 for the Christian families on Malta, since the surviving text is a copy, with evident corruptions, of a recapitulation or summary of the original text. The ethnic composition of the apparently mainly Muslim inhabitants is altogether unknown and it seems confusing to continue to describe them as ‘Arabs.’ H. Brese, ‘Esclaves auliques et Main d’Oeuvre agricole dans la Sicile des XIIe et XIIIe Siecles’, in Figures de l’Esclave au Moyen-Age et dans le Monde Moderne, ed. H. Brese (Paris, 1996), 113, speaks of the royal estates in about 1241 as a ‘vaste entreprise esclavagiste’ but, while there were 84 slaves from Djebr, the villani curie, technically not slaves, apparently constituted a limited proportion of the rural population: infra IX, 13–14, 20–24.


the customs records from Sardinia which unexpectedly revealed a fourteenth-century Maltese cotton trade to Catalunya. Stanley Fiorini has published 293 texts from Palermo, many of them previously unknown, which are especially important as they date before 1400; but only three of them are earlier than 1360 and those three were already known. A concentration on archives outside Malta would further understanding of the relatively unknown thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, while the fifteenth-century materials are extraordinarily rich. Godfrey Wettinger’s publication of 977 acts of the Mdina council, the well-known but hitherto scarcely used text of Università Ms. 11 running from 1434 to 1499, is an immense, complex and enormously valuable scholarly monument. Other publications include 766 acts of notary Giacomo Zabbara drawn up between 1468 and 1497, recently edited by Stanley Fiorini. Much other material, published or cited during the last 25 years, covers the history of towns and countryside, commerce and agriculture, demography, religion and culture, social life and customs. Summaries of the results appear in recent collaborative works on Birgu, Mdina and Gozo, in *Melita Historica*, in the publications of the Malta Historical Society’s History Weeks, and in a wide variety of other studies and articles. Topics relating to the period following the arrival of the Hospitallers in 1530 may also be relevant, since much of the fabric of medieval Malta arguably survived until the great Ottoman siege of 1565 and even thereafter.


50 Supra, 3 n. 14.


53 Especially important is G. Wettinger, ‘Agriculture in Malta in the Late Middle Ages’, in *Proceedings of History Week 1981* (Malta, 1982).


55 Supra, 1 n. 4.


A major theme in later-medieval Maltese and Gozitan history is the creation, on two small and isolated islands, of a community that was not merely Christian but very strongly so. Post-Roman Malta was at least partly Christian but after 870 circa Christianity was apparently eliminated. There were some Christians of uncertain origin, probably all or mostly captives or slaves, on eleventh-century Malta, and a few could perhaps have survived the reported removal of many Christian captives by the Normans in 1091. A few decades later a small Christian group, probably mostly Italian merchants, was established on the island. At some time after about 1220 expulsions of Muslims from Malta and forced immigrations from Italy led to the formation of a Christian population, so that it seems likely that by about 1270 the only Muslims on Malta and Gozo were slaves; there remained, especially in Mdina, an important closed community of Jews whose expulsion in 1492 was a further step in the Christianization of Malta. Very little is known of the actual process of conversion which presumably centred on the Sicilian outpost in the castle by the sea at Birgu and on the main town at Mdina. Apparently there was no parochial system but only a group of clergy or *capillari* who were attached to the cathedral at Mdina and perhaps also to a church on Gozo; the first known mention of a separate parish was that at Birirkara in 1402. The *biduinu* or country people may have been ‘old Muslims’ who harboured a hostility to the foreign Latin religion. A bequest of 1363 intended to establish on Malta a Benedictine house whose members could have functioned as proselytizers was frustrated by the monks in Sicily who clearly did not want to settle on Malta. Only in the fifteenth century did Franciscans, Augustinians, Carmelites, Dominicans and female Benedictines establish themselves permanently on Malta, mainly in and around Mdina.

The gradual emergence of a common identity, of a feeling that there was a group of people belonging on Malta who were Christians but used an Arabic language, must have been cemented by their common speech. The study of this virtually unwritten dialect was long conducted by philologists who interpreted lists of words for which they had no early date; in effect they were

58 Pioneering, richly documented treatment in G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (Malta, 1985).

59 *Infra* XVII–XVIII.

60 *Infra* XV.

 theorizing about medieval matters on the basis of modern Maltese. A partial remedy is provided by the many place and personal names in the late-medieval documents. Godfrey Wettinger has studied lists of persons and compiled an enormous and meticulously documented study of toponyms and microtoponyms. Inescapably, many places cannot be located precisely and the interpretation of some place and personal names remains debatable, while the application of fifteenth- or sixteenth-century names to discussions of thirteenth-century or earlier developments invariably results in debatable hypotheses. Wettinger and Michael Fsdmi discovered the notary Pietru Caxaro’s brief poem, the Cantilena, which is the sole surviving example of late-medieval Maltese literature and has attracted much discussion.

Human nature abhors a vacuum and peoples tend to invent ‘traditions’ derived from words belonging to their own language with scant regard for logic. A few Maltese words may be of Punic origin but their provenance is uncertain and they can neither prove nor indicate a continuous occupation of the islands by any ethnic group unchanged from late-Roman times onwards. The Christians on Malta in 1091 may have chanted Kyrie Eleison but they were captives rather than indigenous islanders, and they were not necessarily Greek-speaking since the phrase formed part of the Latin liturgy. Milqi is a classical Arabic term but is not recorded on Malta before 1673 when it was evidently introduced specifically to name the church at San Pawl Milqi. Modern Maltese masons apparently use more Romance than Arabic technical terms, but it scarcely follows that ‘Arab’ masons were expelled in the mid-twelfth century and that for a long time the ‘Maltese’ were not competent to take their place. The problem is that the Maltese language was seldom written down before the eighteenth century while only a handful of the surviving personal and place names are datable before 1400. A few comparatively early personal names suggest a division by 1275 between a wealthier Romance ruling class and an inferior group with Arabic names, but they provide no more than a glimpse of the ways in which a Christian population was formed.

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63 Text and English translation infra II, 67.

64 Infra II, 24–5; III, 419–20; V, 101–103; Luttrell (1997), 125, n. 97, correcting 1616 to 1673.

65 As proposed in L. Mahoney, A History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1800 (Malta, 1988), 52–9, 337–40.


69 Infra XXI, 126–8; M. Buhaqar, ‘The Fresco Cycle in the Church of the Annunciation at Hal Millieri: Some Iconographical and Historical Considerations’, Melita Historica, xi, no. 2 (1993); see also Mahoney (1988), 51–75. Din L’Art Helwa did not publish any detailed report on the fresco restorations at Bir Miftah.


century texts naturally employed Arabic terms for the rooms of town houses, for the *sijah* or covered passageways and for other features, but twisting village streets and courtyard houses with zig-zag entrances should surely be considered as Mediterranean or even worldwide rather than necessarily ‘Arabic’ in origin. The Hal Millieri excavations allowed the foundations and structure of two late-medieval churches to be investigated. The graves excavated there, when studied in the light of notarial documents, demonstrate how a concern with burial influenced the arrangement of side chapels and other aspects of some ecclesiastical buildings and led to the construction of many small churches and chapels. The late-medieval Castellan’s palace at Birgu has recently been restored. There is much new detail concerning grand houses in the Sicilian style at Mdina, where the Palazzo Santa Sofia conceivably dates to 1233, and on the churches of the religious orders and the cathedral, within which significant Roman substructures have recently been discovered. These ecclesiastical buildings constituted another manifestation of Christian tradition; in 1575 there were some 430 churches and chapels on the two islands.

With so much prosopographical and other information available, the structure of fifteenth-century Maltese politics and the interaction of group and personal interests, which were both ‘Maltese’ and foreign, can now be analysed. Race, language, religion, ethnic grouping and nationality are mutually confusing categories. Henri Bresc may have gone too far in seeking to fit Maltese developments into a Sicilian model. His suggestion of a process in which notaries and other intellectuals sought to maintain an Arabic heritage and language has tacitly been ignored in the literature, yet an understanding of Sicilian institutions is clearly fundamental to any interpretation of late-medieval Malta. It remains debatable how far the island’s politics became a matter of an ‘old Muslim’ resistance to Christian outsiders as such or whether it was rather that local notables and their kinmen were simply trying to control the town council in opposition to a royalist foreign regime installed in the castle at Birgu. Equally uncertain is the extent to which some cathedral canons were, as members of an island establishment, merely defending their monopolies in seeking to exclude foreign clergy on the grounds that they could not conduct pastoral work in Maltese. Local members of oligarchical groupings sought profit from marriage, from municipal or royal office, from piracy or from church benefits, in competition with foreign captains and placemen who were Sicilians, Catalans, Aragonese, even Castilians. A restricted élite could utilize the capitoli or petitions from the universitas to the crown to establish its own privileges. On at least one occasion another group, the universitas of a rural casale at Tarxien, made its own petition to the crown against the landholders. The part played by Jews, businesses, artisans and the rural biduini requires study, as does the way in which foreigners, nobles and others, acquired fluency in Maltese as well as in Latin and Sicilian, sometimes marrying local women and having children who became Maltese in speech and mentality. Society was mobile as well as clannish. Recent work has approached such basic questions, but no more than partially.

The mass of documentary sources for the century before 1530 and the speed with which they are emerging have created problems of digestion; the publication of texts and surveys is essential to progress. Certain themes have, understandably, been preferred to others and the temptation to study purely

75 Wettinger (1986), 59–6; the placing of this late-fifteenth century data in a section concerning a much earlier period might be confusing, especially as it assumes that Arabic nomenclature indicates ‘Moorish styles’.


77 Biagg et al., summarized infra XXI.


82 Bresc as supra, 3 n. 12, especially Bresc (1986), ii, 622–8; cf. infra II, 49–50, 67–9.


Maltese matters while partly ignoring wider factors is compounded by problems of travel and the limitations of libraries. Equally, non-Maltese scholars who do not speak the language, who have never lived in a Maltese village and who cannot easily appreciate local conditions, naturally tend to adopt more broadly-based interpretations of the islands’ affairs. Only Henri Bresc has treated Malta and Gozo in any detail as an integral part of the Sicilian economy and society.\(^5\) Fernand Braudel’s seminal study considered Malta as of major Mediterranean importance but at a time long after the Hospitallers’ arrival in 1530. The geohistorical realities sketched out in the 1975 volume naturally remain unchanged, and it still seems true that before 1530 the Maltese islands were not at a ‘strategic cross-roads’. More nuanced analyses have discerned a diversity of overlapping or ‘fuzzily’ defined Mediterranean worlds or sub-regions of which Malta and Gozo might form a minor but unique example.\(^7\) They were not part of an extended archipelago nor were they offshore islands integrated into a mainland economy or sub-region but, as their inhabitants well knew, they were little isolated rocks ‘in the middle of the sea’, dependent on Sicilian grain and on their own cotton monoculture, and endlessly in danger while defending a distant frontier of Christendom.\(^8\) This isolation may have contributed to the strength of Malta’s post-medieval Christian sentiment. The determination behind this religiosity may have reflected a need to reconcile a consciousness of a Muslim past and a continuing Arabic speech with a dedication to Latin Christianity. It remains difficult to gauge the extent of the late-medieval origins of what has been called ‘the hardening and fossilizing … of the xenophobic brand of Christianity which has characterized the islands in the last few hundred years ….’\(^9\)

Medieval Malta: What Future? The post-1400 materials are astonishingly rich and the volume of publication impressive, while public interest, stimulated by the very influential editorial initiatives of Paul Mizzi and by excellent semi-popular periodicals such as his Heritage and its various imitators, remains strong. Malta possesses a weekly, The Sunday Times of Malta, which actually carries learned contributions with footnotes, and the Malta Historical Society listed 445 members in 1999.\(^{10}\) Other considerations are less favourable. No extended general history of Malta has appeared since 1974 and that is in Maltese. The easy-going village ambience of saints and firewoks in which talented priests, doctors, lawyers and others made truly valuable scholarly contributions on themes of their choice, has been replaced by a more complex world of narrower, more technical expertise. Academic study on medieval Malta is essentially in the hands of one university professor in retirement, his recently-appointed medievalist successor, an art historian-cum-archaeologist in the Faculty of Architecture and Engineering, and a professor of Mathematics. Research on medieval Malta is therefore much stronger than its teaching; in fact, the university provides no formal instruction in palaeography. Maltese talents and enthusiasms will doubtless overcome these difficulties, but the drastic absence of written sources for almost nine-tenths of the medieval millennium profoundly unbalances the whole subject. A nation’s history, and the archaeology which is an indispensable component of it, are vital both to its political health and to its heritage and its economy. Malta’s failure to address the question of its medieval archaeological infrastructure is not merely frustrating but threatens to damage the future of its past.

\(^{5}\) Supra, 3 n. 12; for the Catalan-Aragonese connection, infra II, 41–52.
\(^{6}\) Infra II, 17–19.
\(^{7}\) P. Horden – N. Purcell, The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History (Oxford, 2000); this detailed book’s only significant references to Malta are to its Roman weaving industry and to contemporary bird trapping (ibid., 196, 358).
\(^{9}\) The judgement in Wettenger (1985), 150; earlier observations infra IV, 416–18. The significant synthesis in H. Bresc, ‘Genèse de l’identité maltaise’, in Mutations de l’Identités en Méditerranée: Moyen Âge et Époque Contemporaine, ed. H. Bresc – C. Vénavy (Paris, 2000), which was not available at the time of writing, demands further reflection and discussion.

\(^{10}\) Melita Historica, xii, no. 4 (1999), 445–52.