The 12th century:

Muslim Malta and Christian Gozo?

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A few decades ago the pendulum swung irrationally from the traditional and rhetorical declara
tion of staunch confirmation of Christianity and the "Mal
tessa" from St Paul's shipwreck throughout the ages to the iconoc
sal denial of the presence of any Christians at all under Arab rule.
In the latest contribution to this debate, Joseph, Busuttil, Stanley Florioti and Horatio Vella have come to the conclusion that Christianity survived on Gozo on the basis of a Greek poem writ
en by an unknown author who was imprisoned in Gozo be
 tween 1135 and 1151.

"Christianity survived on Gozo on the basis of a Greek poem written by an unknown author who was imprisoned..."

The book (Tristis ex Melitogaudo, Passions Foundation, 2010) is confidently dedicated to "the memory of the Bishop and his community found by Roger II on Gozo..." but in actual fact the interpretation expressed in the book is anything but convincing on some impor
tant points. Firstly of all, the Greek manuscript of the "Melitogaudo" and the Greek poem are in different parts of the narrative, which refer to three different episodes in the history of our islands. Melitessa is used when the narrative states St Paul's shipwreck. Melitogaudo is used when describing Roger's conquest and Malta is only used in the notes to denote the poet's place of confinement.

"What is the exact meaning of Melitogaudo? According to three specialists on ancient languages that I have consulted: the compound may mean Malta and Gozo or Malta and Gozo. Mr. Busuttil, Mr Florioti and Mr Vella have opted for the second alternative, but one cannot rule out the first one, Malta and Gozo. The exact meaning can only be seen in the context. A note in the manuscript explains: 'He healid the father of Pulibus, the governor of Melitogaudo' (page 169). We shall now that the accoun
ting to the Acts, Pulibus was governor of Malta, not of Gozo, therefore the writer of the note here surely meant Malta and Gozo. In fact, when narrating St Paul's shipwreck, the poet only uses Melitessa. Again, the poet does not distinguish between Malta and Gozo when describing Roger's reconquest. On page 168 he write
s: "the most recent of all the teachers..." he added in Melitogaudo, the country of Hugar, and he breathed the breath of Life..." Horatio. Melitogaudo means both Malta and Gozo, since both were reconquered by Roger II.

It is significant that the name for Gozo, Gaudo, is never used by itself, neither in the poet nor in the notes.

The place of confinement

References to the poet's prison are vague and mention neither Malta nor Gozo. In the passage on page 89 the poet only says that he is in a place inhabited by Muslim Arabic speakers: "...wretched man, confined as a captive, prisoner, tarrying in the lands of Barbary." Barbary is a vast area and could be misleading, and therefore a note in the margin explains: "This is at Malta." The poet mentions his placing of exile again on page 107, lamenting his fate: "to what end have I been flung, in the midst of trackless seas, where the children of Godless Hagar live." This vague reference too is explained in a note saying: "This concerns Malta, an island in the direction of Barbary, where he lives in the country of the Agerenes." Here again there is no mention of Gozo. Mr. Busuttil, Mr Florioti and Mr Vella attribute the margin notes to the poet himself, but in the notes the poet is only referred to by prominence and remains anonymous.

All the references to the poet in the margins are in the third person ("The poet here speaks of himself", or its in the oth
erwise) ([here it says that ...]), with two exceptions on page 91 and on page 115. [Here it says how...]." He is described by the King's will and Pope Leo I that have been taken custody for nine years.

But, even if the poet wrote the notes himself, the above-mentioned references to Malta rule out the hypothesis that the poet was imprisoned in Gozo. Arguments supporting the Gozo hypothesis from the text's hints are even less convincing. Sicily is understandably more visible from Gozo than from Malta, but I myself

Christians

The presence of Christians is not clear in the text. The poet repeatedly laments that he is surrounded by Muslims (Agarines) who maltreat him in Melitogaudo, the country of Hagar, in Malta (notes on pages 89 and 107). However, he was exiled to Malta between 1135 and 1151, after Roger II's reconquest and since the Christians of Malta and Gozo enjoyed the King's protection, he should not have been so badly treated by the Muslims.

If the poet were imprisoned in Gozo, and Gozo's Christians were free, he would have practiced his religion since 1129, the poet should have mentioned it at all by the Muslims, whom would have been in a minority. It seems unlikely that in the mid-12th century there were still more Muslims than Christians in both Malta and Gozo.

The co-existence of the two religious communities is attested by Queen Constance's diploma of 1198 addressed to "all the peo
ple of Malta and Gozo, both Christians and Saracens".

That day also revealed a tax imposed on the Christians of Malta by Roger II in 1154. In this light, the poet's laments about being maltreated by the "Agarines" for nine years (pages 1135-1145, 1149-1149, 1142-1151) con
tact with the fact that Roger II felt obliged to protect the Muslims by punishing all the Christians of Malta for murde
ring a Muslim in 1154.

The presence of Christians in Malta and Gozo under Arab rule should move to a more moderate central position. Both extreme views were founded on the dearth of evidence, but the new hypothesis of a Christian God and a Muslim Malta is weak.

The little documentation that has become available since 1190 can allow us to "join the dots" and trace a picture indicating some form of Christian con tinuity under Muslims and, to some extent, the significance one chooses to go by.

The coronation mantle of Roger II King of Sicily, made in Paler
mo in 1134, stressed the tre”ive of life and a lion killing a camel, with red inscription on the border giving the date as Hegira 524 (Kunsthis toriales Museum, Vienna).