

Book review

Documentary Sources of Maltese History Part IV: Documents at the Vatican.

Edited by George Aquilina OFM and Stanley Fiorini. lxxviii + 328 pp. incl. 1 col. pl. + 10 b. & w. ills. Malta University Press, 2005.

The corpus of documents from the Vatican, appearing in the *Documentary Sources of Maltese History* series, is a scholarly achievement that will provide researchers on the Maltese Middle Ages with an important tool. The 209 documents spanning more than a 1000 years of history, between AD. 416 - 1479, open new perspectives and fine-tune the details of a vitally important period in the forging of the Maltese national identity. The wealth of new information that they provide contributes in a substantial manner to the still far from complete mosaic of the Christianization and Latinization of the Maltese Archipelago. This long and often traumatic process is still only partially understood and the Early Middle Ages remain particularly nebulous.

The significance of the corpus is best appreciated if viewed in its proper historiographic context. The years since 1975 when Anthony Luttrell edited the now classic collection of papers *Medieval Malta – Studies on Malta before the Knights*, laid the foundations for a scientific approach to the Maltese Middle Ages which steers clear of the myths and fabrications that had previously falsified a long and important chapter of the island's history. Jeremy Johns has demonstrated how in small islands the myth of a national identity grows 'in inverse proportion to their size - the smaller the island, the greater its myth of identity.'¹ The Islands of Malta provide what is perhaps the best example. The cherished belief in an interrupted Christian presence from Apostolic times, in a triumphant liberation from Muslim tyranny by Roger the Norman, in a quasi autonomous *Consiglio Popolare*, and in several other things besides, was fuelled by misinterpretations of the documentary and archaeological evidence, and sometimes by deliberate fabrications.² That the myth managed to endure for so long was due above all to the tremendous prestige of Giovanni Francesco Abela's *Della Descrizione di Malta* (1647). Abela was an eminent antiquarian and a *cognoscente* of excellent repute and there can be little doubt of his good intentions, but it is primarily as a result of the almost religious reverence that generations of Maltese historians have nurtured for his classic book that to borrow a sentence from Nigel Dennis' brilliant *Essay on Malta*, 'A litter of discarded theories trails over the whole island like a mad paper-chase, a grief to the devout, an amusement to the sceptic.'³

1. J. Jones, review of *The Making of Christian Malta: from the Early Middle Ages to 1539*, by A.T. Luttrell, published in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, xv, 2004.
2. A.T. Luttrell, 'Ghirolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and Invention in Maltese Historiography', *Melita Historica*, vii, 2, Malta 1977, 105-32.
3. N. Dennis, *An Essay on Malta*, London 1974.

The seminal archival work and scholarly publications of Godfrey Wettinger, together with the exploration and investigation of the unwritten source material, have done much to rectify the unhappy situation. Giant strides forward have in addition been made in the tapping of Maltese and foreign archives and new documentary evidence is surfacing with accelerated speed. Stanley Fiorini and George Aquilina have been major protagonists and their academic collaboration has borne exceptionally good fruit culminating in their work in the *Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, arguably, as pointed out by Victor Mallia Milanese in his foreword to the corpus 'the richest and the largest, the most important and the most valuable in the world.' The first major achievement of their happy marriage of research and palaeographic skills, and of sheer dedicated hard work, was the now already classic, superbly annotated edition of the original MS. of the Apostolic Visitation Report of Mgr Pietro Dusina, published in the Documentary Sources Series in 2001. The present corpus of documents is another tribute to their academic tenacity and single-minded dedication to scholarship.

The corpus presents documents with a Maltese relevance down to 1479. This is an arbitrary cut off date and the reason given in the introduction that it was chosen, in addition to problems of logistics, because it marked the end of the episcopacy of Antonio de Alagona is, I feel, not sufficient justification. A follow-up volume will, it is to be hoped, bring the documentation down to 1530. The very wide diversity of the documents impinging as they do on ecclesiastical, political, social, and multifarious other aspects, creates massive problems of digestion and interpretation. This is the great challenge that Fiorini and Aquilina have passed on to the established historian and student alike.

A thorough critical appraisal of such a corpus of documents puts enormous demands on the reviewer, and one has to be necessarily selective. For the purpose of this study I have opted to concentrate on the earliest section, that ranging from the first manifestations of Christianity to early post-Muslim times, and to reorganize my ideas on the period in question in the light of the new material that the documents present. This includes *inter alia* a map of the world that forms part of an eighth or ninth century transcription of the *Descriptio Terrarum* of the Gallician historian and theologian Paulus Orosius (ca. 385-420)⁴ (**Doc. 8**). Neither the map nor the descriptive account mention the Island of Melite. They mention instead an *Insula Calypso*. The apparent probability is that Melite and Calypso are one and the same island and that the two names were sometimes interchangeable in late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The geographic location given by Orosius points in this direction. On the other hand there is also the possibility that the *Insula Calypso* may be the island of Kerkyna, off the Tunisian Coast, and it is a known fact that Orosius was well familiar with Africa in general and Carthage in particular. Whatever the true identity of the *Insula Calypso*, its interest to Homeric studies is general and the *Odyssey* in particular is considerable.

4. He was probably born in Braga, Portugal.

When Orosius composed his *Descriptio terrarum*, Christianity was well established in Malta. The *Acts of the Apostles* apart, the island's first known mention in a Christian document is probably the one contained in a list of donations allegedly made by Constantine the Great, in the early 4th century, to the baptistery of the Lateran. The donation included a grant of 222 *solidi* farmed from a *Massa Amalon* (or Amazon), on what were presumably Imperial lands, in a place called Mengaulum. The reference [**Doc. 2**] is contained in the earliest nucleus of the *Liber Pontificalis*, compiled at the latest, as convincingly argued by Louis Duchesne (1843-1922), during the pontificate of Boniface II (530-532 AD).⁵ Duchesne identifies Mengaulum with the Maltese archipelago,⁶ which in Byzantine documents is often referred to as Gaudomelete or, less frequently, Melitegaudos. The main difficulty about the reference is its reliability. Duchesne in his classic edition of the *Liber Pontificalis* has demonstrated how a great number of the biographies of early popes, up to the time of St Gelasius I (492-496) are full of errors and historically untenable. On the other hand, the Constantinian donation is defended by modern scholarship including the seminal 1957 study of L. Voelkl which dates it to 317 AD.⁷ The donation must on no account be confused with the notorious eighth or ninth century fabrication known as the *Constitutum domini Constantini imperatoris* the mythological nature of which has been known since as early as 15th century when Cardinal Nicola of Cusa dismissed it as '*dictamen apocryphum*'.⁸

That the Lateran baptistery dates approximately to around the time of Constantine can be argued on stylistic and art historical grounds. The adjoining basilica of St. John Lateran is, in addition, built on the site of the palace that came to Constantine through his wife Fausta.⁹ Indirect evidence seems to suggest that Constantine donated it to the Christian community in the interval between the Battle of the Milvan Bridge (312 AD.) and the Edict of Milan (313 AD.) which enfranchised the Christians. A Church Council against the Donatists is, in fact, known to have been held within its precincts in 313 AD. There is therefore a discernible link between Constantine and the Lateran complex and a bequest towards its upkeep is a real probability. The Mengaulum debate opens a spiral of possibilities that have still to be pursued, but even if Imperial lands on Malta did in fact form part of a grant to the baptistery, there is nothing to suggest that the archipelago was at the time Christian.

There is no archaeological or textual evidence for a Christian presence in Malta before the fourth century. A letter of Pope Innocent I (401-417) [**Doc. 1**], stresses the point that the churches established throughout Italy, France, Spain, Africa, Sicily and the islands in between, knew their foundation to Apostolic evangelization

5. L. Duchesne, ed., *Le Livre Pontificalis*, i, Paris 1886.

6. *Ibid.*, cxlix, 193, n. 63. Duchesne suggests Gozo.

7. L. Voelkl, *Der Kaiser Konstantin: annales einer zeitenwende*, Munich 1957, 90.

8. *De Concordantia Catholica*, iii, 2, in the Basle edition of his *Opera*, 1565, 1. It was not however until the publication of Cardinal Cesare Baronius' *Annales Ecclesiastici*, the last volume of which was published shortly before his death in 1607, that it was universally accepted as a forgery.

9. For which reason it was sometime called '*Domus Faustae*'.

from Rome. Pope Innocent, was writing to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio whom he entrusts with authority to standardize practices within the Roman Church. Innocent was one of the first known Popes to insist on the primacy of the Papacy and based his claims on the Synod of Sardica in Illyria (343 AD.) during which the Bishop of Rome had been invested with the supreme authority of the Church. The letter is therefore one with a political agenda and must be read and interpreted within such a context. It cannot be used as an argument that the places mentioned owe their Christian roots to Apostolic times. In Syracuse, which like Malta has a Pauline tradition, the first real evidence for a Christian community belongs, for example, to the mid-third century.

The account in (Acts xxviii,1) of the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul on an island called Melite, during his passage to Rome in AD. 60, is usually used as argument that Christianity in Malta can be traced back to Apostolic times. There is, however, in the present state of our knowledge, as I have already indicated above, no evidence for a Christian presence before the 4th century. The epigraphic, iconographic and archaeological evidence from the Early Christian burial places, suggests a post Constantine date,¹⁰ while the much publicized 'secure archaeological testimony' for an early Pauline tradition at San Pawl Milqi is both inconclusive and of a dubious nature and should be dismissed.¹¹ On the evidence of Pope Innocent's letter it may now be surmised that evangelization could have come from Rome as in fact happened in many parts of Italy and Sicily.

Christianity was certainly flourishing by the sixth century but there are doubts as to whether the Lucianus 'Episcopus Melitensis' who in 553 attended the fifth Oecumenical Council of Constantinople and subscribed to the *Constitutum de Tribus Capitulis* of Pope Vigilius [Doc. 3] was indeed Bishop of Malta as is maintained in the *Histoire des Conciles* of Hefele and Leclercq,¹² which relies heavily on J. Mansi's classic history of Church Councils.¹³ Fiorini and Aquilina are cautious and refer to the study of T.S. Brown,¹⁴ who draws attention that the names which appear in the ms published by O. Guenter are different,¹⁵ and that, as result, 'there can be no certainty as to the bishop's name or to his association with Malta.'

The first unequivocal reference to a See of Malta is contained in the four let-

10. M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*, Oxford 1986.

11. M. Buhagiar, 'The Early Christian Remains at Tas-Silġ and San Pawl Milqi, Malta: A Reconsideration of the Archeological Evidence', *Melita Historica*, xii, 2, Malta 1996, 1-41.

12. C. Hefele and H. Leclercq, *Histoire des Conciles d'après les documents originaux par Charles Joseph Hefele, nouvelle traduction française faite sur la deuxième allemande corrigée de notes critiques et bibliographiques par Dom H. Leclercq*, Paris 1909, iii, 1, 93-4.

13. J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, Florence and Venice 1759-98, reprinted 1901-27, ix, col. 106.

14. T.S. Brown, 'Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources', in A.T. Luttrell, ed., *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975, 71-87.

15. O. Guenther, 'Epistolae Imperatorum Pontificum Aliorum', in *Corpus*, Prague, Bonn and Leipzig 1895, xxxv, 1, 319, no. lxxxiii.

ters of Pope Gregory the Great [Docs. 4-7], written in the period between July 592 and January 603. The first three letters have long attracted the attention of scholars working on the Maltese Early Middle Ages and I discuss them at length in my studies on Byzantine Malta.¹⁶ They not only provide precious insight into sixth century Maltese Christianity but also raise questions which, in the present state of our knowledge, are impossible to answer. They talk about the *pensio* on lands belonging to the *Ecclesia Africana*, the disciplinary action against Bishop Lucillus who was to be deposed *sine ambiguitate*, for an undisclosed misdemeanour, and of the elevation of Traianus, a Sicilian monk, as the new bishop of the island. They emphasise the suffragan status of the Maltese Church to Sicily, raise the possibility of a monastic presence, and hint at the close ties with the African Church for which there is valuable archaeological testimony.¹⁷

The fourth letter [Doc. 7] is not exclusively concerned with Malta which may explain why its relevance to the history of the island has been largely missed. In it Gregory instructs the bishops of the province of Syracuse, among them Trajanus, Bishop of Malta, to welcome his *chartularium* (proctor ?) Hadrianus whom he is dispatching to them to administer the patrimony of the Roman Church and to ensure that they are acting correctly. Bishops whose conduct is found to be unbecoming are to be admonished in secret, but he warns that Hadrianus will report to him those who persist in their errors. The Pope finally exhorts them to resume the practice of caring for sick children. It is apparent that all was not well with the Sicilian Church. This puts the Lucillus incident in a new perspective and may possibly suggest that the misdemeanour of the Maltese bishop should be seen in a wider Sicilian context.

Gregory's letters are the last papal documents that make specific reference to Malta before the traumatic Muslim conquest of 869-870 AD. There is no further mention of the island until 1156 when Pope Hadrian IV (1154-1159), by virtue of a Bull issued in Benevento on 10 July of that year, invested Hugo, Bishop of Palermo, with the diocese of Malta as a suffragan bishopric together with the dioceses of Agrigento and Mazzara [Doc. 9]. The political and religious situation of the archipelago had meanwhile undergone a profound change. Christianity had been stamped out and the status of Islam as the exclusive religion did not change with the arrival of the Normans in 1091. A Latin garrison took possession of the City, or Medinah, on Malta and, presumably also of the City of Gozo, when the islands were definitely integrated in the Kingdom of Norman Sicily in 1127. The native population remained nonetheless steadfastly Muslim. Pope Hadrian's Bull, ratified by his successor Alexander III (1159-81) [Doc. 10], confirms that a See of Malta was established some time between 1127 and 1156. Henceforth there is an unbroken succession of bishops but what role they played in the long and traumatic reChristianisation process is not known.

16. M. Buhagiar, 'Early Christian and Byzantine Malta: Archeological and Textual Considerations', *Library of Mediterranean Studies*, i, Malta 1994, 115-7.

17. On the *Ecclesia Africana* and Malta see *ibid.*, 109-11.

The first bishop of Malta, after the Christian reconquest, to be known by name was Johannes who is mentioned honourably in the *Historia Hugonis Falcandi*, also known as the *Liber de Regno Sicilie* [Doc. 11] starting in 1167 when he swears loyalty to Stefano de la Perla, the Chancellor of the Realm, upon the latter's confirmation as Metropolitan Archbishop of Palermo. Johannes lived in Sicily and was close to the Royal Curia winning the esteem of King William II who in 1168 nominated him to sit on a commission of bishops convened in Messina to settle a dispute on landed property in Calabria between the Canons of Santa Maria di Bagnara and the monks of Santa Euphemia [Doc. 12]. Its judgment in favour of the former was confirmed by Pope Celestinus III in 1192 [Doc. 15]. Johannes had a long episcopate, but there are doubts whether he can be identified with the bishop of the same name mentioned alongside other Sicilian bishops in a letter of Pope Honorius III, dated December 1217, wherein they are admonished to warn the clergy and people of Syracuse to accept their new bishop [Doc. 20]. Bishop Johannes had a prestigious career, but there is no record of his visiting his diocese. Like most of his successors in the course of the Middle Ages, he was essentially a Sicilian high prelate farming the revenues of the Maltese Church from the comfort of his Sicilian home. In one interesting case [Doc. 40], Nicolaus, a deacon of the Church of Syracuse was elected Bishop of Malta in 1304 before he had even been ordained priest.

The rich harvest that scholars working in different disciplines can reap from a scrutiny of the documents is tremendous. An explicit reference the *Cathedralis Ecclesia Maltensis* in 1267 [Doc. 33] is in my opinion sufficient proof, in spite of the caution of the editors, for the existence of a cathedral church predating by thirty-two years the 1299 document published by H. Bresc in 1974.¹⁸ S. Maria in the Gozo Castello was a Collegiate church with a tithes prebend in 1463 [Doc. 199], and a tower was being built in 1464 next to the parish church of S. Caterina in Żejtun [Doc. 200]. A lengthy introduction provides the historical background for the documents. One may differ with some of the interpretations but in history academic debate is a necessary exercise if we are to arrive at an approximation of the truth. What really impresses is the thoroughness and sheer dedication with which the work has been carried out. The task was not easy and palaeographic and interpretative problems apart, it was complicated, especially for the earlier centuries, by the different name variants used for the archipelago which often made it difficult to decide whether a document referred to Malta or to some other place. Furthermore vague references to 'islands in Sicilian waters' or to 'islands close to Sicily' need not necessarily refer to Malta. It is to the merit of the two editors that they rose above these and other difficulties. Their achievement brings credit to themselves and to the institution that sponsored them.

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18. H. Bresc, 'Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano', *Melita Historica*, vi, 3, Malta 1974, 313-21.