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Saracenic Remains in Malta

The Arabs, known generally as the Moors or as the Saracens, appear to have occupied the Maltese islands late in the ninth century. It was but natural that, after the conquest of Sicily, the Arabs could not leave the neighbouring islands in the hands of Christians, and as a simple precaution they sent a garrison to occupy Malta in the name of the Kalifa. It is presumed that there was no armed opposition, and the garrison settled quietly in the capital of Malta which they denominated Mdina. By no stretch of imagination can one believe that the Arabs brought with them thousands of people to colonise the land, for the island offered no inducements to settlers especially when the fertile plains of Sicily were in their hands. So long as the islands were not in the hands of an enemy who could contend with them, the power over Sicily and North Africa, no thoughts about Malta troubled the mind of the Kalifa. That no particular importance was attached to the possession of Malta is desumed from the fact that, whereas Arabic writers are fond of dwelling on the minutest details of their conquests, about Malta they found very little to say. Many of the first class writers do not mention the occupation of Malta and others allude to it in an offhand way.

This scantiness of literary information agrees with the scantiness of Saracenic relics we have met with in both islands. No mosques, no palaces, no routes, no characteristic pottery and practically no coins are ever met with in any part of the country. The only monument of the Moors is a cemetery on the outskirts of Notabile, the old Mdina. A Roman palace, known as the Roman Villa, stood between the first and the third centuries in the capital of the Island. When this came down and the very stones of its walls were carried away, a mound of debris was formed which, being waste land close to the centre of the town, was utilized by the Arabs as a burial place.

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Some of the bodies were buried in a trench cut in the mound, others were deposited in graves built of small squared stones, often taken from the walls of the Roman house. Some of the graves were built on the very pavement of the house, others a little higher up in the mound a couple of feet below the surface. On clearing the debris of the Roman house to make a plan of the same, hundreds of these graves came to light. One of the illustrations shows a number of Saracenic graves in a trench cut to the south of the Roman Villa Museum.

The graves are all built in a W. E. direction; the body is always lying on its right side with the head to the west and the face looking to the South. In some cases the body was buried in a wooden coffin of which only the iron clamps remained. Nothing appears to have been buried with the body, as no objects were ever found in the graves.

Only once a silver ring was found in a finger of the occupant of a grave; it was a solid ring with the short inscription on it "*Rabbi Allah wahid*", God alone is the Lord.

Fragments of funerary inscriptions on stone or marble slabs were found at Rabat but hardly one was found complete and apt to give definite information about the burial and the time in which it occurred.

One of the illustrations shows a fine inscription on a marble slab, in raised Kufic characters.

The best inscription of the time was found at Gozo. It is cut on a thick marble slab which evidently had formed part of a Roman architectural decoration, for at the back a rosette is cut in high relief.

Beside its peculiar shape the inscription is remarkable for its date (1173 A.D.) which is later than that in which the Arabs are supposed to have left the island. It is easy to presume that some Arabic families remained as peaceful aliens when the garrison was turned out by the Sicilians who took possession of the Islands. The inscription runs thus:—

"In the name of God the most merciful—May God be propitious to the prophet Mahomet and greet his followers. God has majesty and eternity and he prescribed that his creatures should perish. Of this you have a proof in the Apostle of God."

"This is the grave of Maimuna, daughter of Hasan, son of Ali-el-Hadli,* from Gabes of Sura. She died, God's mercy upon her, on Thursday the 16th. of the month of Shabaan the great, in the year 569 (1173 A.D.) and she bears witness that there is only one God without equals.

"Ask yourself if there be anything everlasting, anything that repels death, or casts a spell upon death.

"Death robbed me, alas, of my short life, and from death I was not saved neither by my piety nor by my reserve.

"I was industrious in my work and all I did is reckoned and remains.

"Oh thou who lookest upon this grave in which I am enclosed, dust has covered my eyelids and the corners of my eyes.

"On my couch and in my abode there is nothing but tears and (what is to happen) at my resurrection when my creator comes to me?

"Oh brother take....."

T. ZAMMIT





PHOTO - T. ZAMMIT.

SARACENIC GRAVES
RABAT — MALTA.



PHOTO - T. ZAMMIT.

SARACENIC BURIAL
RABAT — MALTA.

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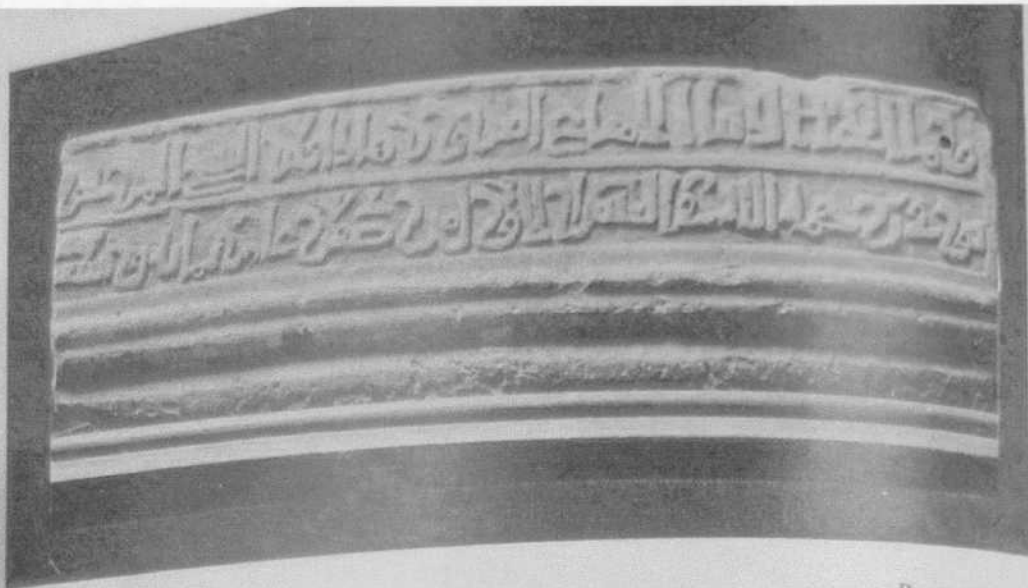


PHOTO - T. ZAMMIT

SARACENIC INSCRIPTION IN KUFIC CHARACTERS
ON A TOMBSTONE FOUND AT RABAT — MALTA.



PHOTO - E. A. GOUDER

KUFIC INSCRIPTION ON A MARBLE SLAB FOUND AT GOZO.

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