MEDIEVAL MALTA
STUDIES ON MALTA BEFORE THE KNIGHTS

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BYZANTINE MALTA: A DISCUSSION OF THE SOURCES*

T. S. BROWN

THIS study of Byzantine Malta has no claim to comprehensiveness. It provides no analysis of the often ambiguous evidence supplied by archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic and place-name material which any definitive treatment would have to take into account.1 Such a study would be rewarding, provided that it complemented the rather meagre sources for the island's history with an incisive view of the wider developments to which Malta was exposed, that is of the considerable influx of Greek-speaking settlers and Hellenic culture into the Central Mediterranean,2 of the administrative changes introduced in Byzantine possessions such as Sicily,3 and of the frequent naval activity in the area which followed the rise of Islam.4 The present, more humble, aim is to survey the written texts and to correct certain misinterpretations in the light of more recent research and using the best available editions of the texts. The numerous Greek and Latin sources which refer to St. Paul's visit to the island, describe how it was populated by the sons of Ham, or repeat the commonplace classical allusions to Maltese dogs are, however, ignored; they have little or no bearing on the Byzantine period, and have already been diligently listed.5

This study commences in 533, when Procopius supplies the first unequivocal, datable reference to medieval Malta. For the preceding century there are no specific references, and it can only be inferred from a passage of Victor Bishop of Vita in North Africa, who wrote at the end of the fifth century, that the islands were conquered by the Vandals of North Africa and later handed over to Odoacer, the barbarian King of Italy.

* The research for this article was a by-product of work undertaken for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of Nottingham, and with the financial support of the Scottish Education Department and the British School at Rome. Just as it was going to press, it was discovered that Byzantine Malta was also being treated by Professor Agneta Pernoud, who kindly discussed the subject with the author.

1 For the archaeological and other evidence, some of which apparently points to an essential continuity of occupation on Roman sites down to the Muslim conquest, see p. 41-42. The author intends to publish the substantial number of Byzantine coins in Malta in a future article.

2 A. Pernoud, 'Sicilia e la presenza di elementi cristiani', in XXI Sottoscrizione di Studi del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, (Spoleto, 1964), 156-158; see also P. Chaniotis, 'On the Question of the Hellenization of Sicily and Southern Italy during the Middle Ages', American Historical Review, III (1946).


5 G. Bonetti, 'Fonti greche per la storia della isole maltesi', Rivista Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Riprodizioni fotografiche della Campagna 1964 (Rome, 1965), 19-24; giving the Greek text without translation or commentary. For a discussion of the references to Greece in classical, Byzantine, Arabic and Western medieval texts, see 'Genoa', Archiv für Orientalistik, No. 1 (1965), 71-72. 
conquered by the Vandals, such as Carthage, Sardinia and the Baleric Islands. It is highly probable, therefore, that Sicily and Malta were incorporated into the African church during the short period of Vandal rule, but since no episcopal lists of that period survive from Africa there can be no conclusive judgement as to whether Malta belonged to the ecclesia Africae, or whether it then possessed a bishop.

The first, tantalizingly brief, reference in Procopius describes the Byzantine general Belisarius as ‘touching at’ Gozo and Malta in 535 while his expeditionary force was sailing from Cauaca in Sicily to North Africa in order to overthrow the Vandal kingdom.

Procopius, Bellum Vandalorum (90)

But when the servant had come before him and told him the whole story, Belisarius rejoiced greatly, heaped praise upon Procopius and gave orders for the departure to be signalled by trumpets. Having set sail quickly, they touched at (meaning the islands of) Gozo and Malta, which separate the Adriatic and Tyrrenian Seas. There is a strong wind arose for them and carried the ships the following day to that part of the African coast which the Romans call in their own tongue ‘Head of the Shallows’.

The Greek verb used can mean either ‘landed at’ or merely ‘approached’. The passage does not show that Belisarius conquered the island for the empire, nor is it likely that Malta was already Byzantine, for the Byzantines went to the length of obtaining permission from the Goths to use Sicily as a base for launching their expedition against Africa, which they would hardly have done had the excellent harbour of Malta been at their disposal. This is confirmed by the omission of the island in the Symmachus of Hierocles, a list of the cities belonging to the empire compiled in 547–549. Most probably Malta, like Sicily, was still under Ostrogothic domination and only passed to the Byzantines around the time of their conquest of Sicily in 535.

Procopius’ second reference suggests that Malta was certainly in Byzantine hands by 549, although it does not specifically mention the island:

Procopius, Bellum Gothorum (55)

Some of the surviving Libyans fled to the (fortified) cities, others to Sicily and the other islands.

This flight was a response to the devastation caused by the Berbers in Libya as a reprisal for the imperial recapture of Hadrumetum or Susa. Procopius gives no clue as to whether the migration was permanent.

This is suggested by the inclusion of bishops from these areas in the nomenclature of African bishops to Sardina by King Thearchus for twenty years, during which time they held a church council: cf. Courtois, Vandalia, 279, 379. The view of Maier, 504, that the African church always counted only the six mainland provinces seems too rigid.


For the background, C. Deichl, ‘D’Afrique, i (Paris, 1951), 491.
Procopius' third reference, again cursory and incidental, gives little help:

Procopius, Bellum Goticum.54

But one ship, that on which Artabanes himself was sailing, had its mast broken off in the heavy sea. Although it had got into such a dangerous position, it was carried by the surge and followed the swell until it reached the island called Melita. And so it came about that Artabanes was unexpectedly saved.

This episode occurred in 550 during the voyage of the general Artabanes from Cephalonia off the mainland of Greece to take up his post as commander of the Byzantine forces in Sicily, after a storm had risen up when the ships were off the Calabrian coast.55 Despite suggestions that Artabanes reached Melita rather than Malta, both the manuscript tradition and geographical probability favour Malta.56 Most of the other Greek references to Malta from the Justinianic period are recorded by Busuttil, but they tell nothing of the island's history. Two anonymous epigrams in the Greek Anthology57 describe a temple dedicated by the Consul Theodosius in honour of the Emperor Justin I and his adopted son Justinian in a place called, according to Paton and Busuttil, Melita, but the correct reading is Melita, apparently an oratory in Constantinople to which the emperor retired for meditation.58 The Latin sources are equally uninformative. Busuttil pointed out that the sixth-century writer Arator called Melita a statio or place of call for ships,59 but this reference occurs in an account in St. Paul's shipwreck there and cannot be used as evidence that Malta was a _statio_ in the strict naval sense in the sixth century.60 It seems probable that a bireme was set up in Malta for the first time in the wake of the Byzantine conquest. A _Itinera episcopatus Mediteraniæ_ subordinated the _Constitutum de Tribus Capitulis_ of Pope Vigilius in 559, but there is ambiguity in the names in the different manuscripts, and there can be no certainty as to the bishop's name or as to his association with Malta.61 The first unequivocal references

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54 J. Bury, History of the Later Roman Empire, ii (London, 1913), 355, given the background.
55 Dewing, v, 45 note, suggests Melita, but Hausner rightly prefers Melita, the commonest form for Malta; the common Greek form for Melita is Melito. The route of Artabanes makes a diversion to Malta more likely, but it should be remembered that when the storm blew on the ship the coast of 'Calabria', and that in the 6th century that name referred to the Terra d'Otranto and not present-day Calabria; cf. G. Dehl, Études sur l'administration byzantine de l'omophòrion de Ravenne (Paris, 1868), 38.
56 Busuttil, 17-18.
58 Paton, i, 41; Busuttil, 19 no. 17. Flavius Theodosius Philoponos' council in 505, 581 and one other unknown year: Andelegs Gams, ed. Beckly, 62f.
59 Ibid., 106 see also R. Jamin, La géographie littorale de l'empire byzantin, 1ère partie, le côtes de Constantinople, lll, les côtes et les monastères (ed. mech. Paris, 1960), 331.
60 J. Buffeteau, Melissae Harboree in Amoquile, Mélitae Historiae, v, no. 4 (1915), 765.
62 Paton, ii, 1 (ibid., ii), 57.
63 As suggested in Busuttil, 21-21.
64 See a suggestion in Busuttil, 17-18.
68 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
69 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
70 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
71 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
72 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
73 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
74 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
75 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
76 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
77 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
78 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
79 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
80 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
81 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
82 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
83 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
84 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
85 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
86 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
87 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
88 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
89 E. Capponi, Geografie degli Eroi della Terra di Gregorio the Great (Cambridge, 1931), 33-38.
archipelago. The see of Rome owned extensive estates on Sicily, and the order issued to the papal defensor Romanus to intervene in the case of the former Bishop of Malta suggests that Romanus may also have exercised in the islands the other, non-judicial function of a defensor, that of the management of papal lands. A list of donations made by the Emperor Constantine I in the early fourth century includes the grant to the basilica of the Lateran of a manus with a revenue of 222 solidi, which was apparently located on the island of Gozo. It can be assumed that such possessions would have remained in the hands of the Roman church until the early eighth century, when the Roman patrimony in Sicily and Calabria was confiscated by the Emperor Leo III in retaliation for papal opposition to his iconoclastic policy. That Malta was similarly incorporated into the secular administration of Sicily is confirmed by the civil geographical list attributed to George of Cyprus and datable ca. 609-ca. 666: Malta (Malvra) and Gozo (Galvra) are placed in the section of Sicily. Another geographical list, compiled in Latin at Ravenna in the late seventh century, lists both Melite and Galvra among the islands lying near Sicily. Two passages from Byzantine historians show that Malta was used as a place of exile for rebels.

1) "tripia adorato" of the Patriarch Nicephorus.

He (the Emperor Heraclius: 610-641) was informed that his son Anatharich and Theodorus, magister by rank, the son of Theodorus, the emperor’s brother, intended to conspire against him along with certain others. Believing in the accusation, he cut off their noses and hands and sent Anatharich into exile on the island called Principis. But Theodorus he sent to the island called Gaudemolot (Gwawdemon), ordering the duce of the place to amputate one of his feet on his arrival.

This conspiracy can be dated late in 637, and this passage shows that Malta then had a duce; maybe it was already being governed by a regime of military officers of the kind found in Italy and Sicily. Another chronicler, Theophanes, describes how in 799 the Emperor Constantine VI punished the leaders of the revolt of the Armeniakon theme by branding them on the face with the motto ‘Armeniakon trator’ and sending them to Malta and ‘the other islands’. A seal, datable to the eighth century, carries the name of one Nicetas dunavargus and archon of Malta: +ονικετο δυναργος (+ονικετο δυναργος). Busuttil deduced from it that Malta was governed by a high-ranking naval official who commanded a small fleet. Mme. Ahlweiler concludes, from a very precise study of references to archontes and dunavarges from various Byzantine coastal areas, that Malta was the base for an important naval squadron which came under direct imperial, as distinct from thematic, control, and that this fleet was commanded by a naval officer of high rank who was directly responsible to the emperor, who had at his disposal a detachment of troops, and who also possessed the rank of archon in the military hierarchy because he was entrusted with the administration of the island. An impressive battery of evidence was adduced in support of her view that such a system of naval commands, with civil and military jurisdiction, was common in coastal areas on the perimeter of the empire. Some reservations must however remain, especially as both the titles mentioned could have very diverse meanings. A case could be made, for example, for seeing this official as merely the land-army commander of a dunavus, a unit of between 1,000 and 3,000 men, who had taken over the functions of an archon or civil governor of a town. Ahlweiler only offered one other piece of evidence, a seal from Corinth which refers to the same combination of offices and which fits into her hypothesis. This meagre evidence does not justify all the details of her hypothesis, such as her description of the supposed naval governor of Malta as being under the direct control of the emperor. The existing sources point to continuously close bonds between Malta and Sicily in both the political and ecclesiastical spheres, but the very lack of references of
Malta counts against any view that the island was a naval centre of major importance; Byzantine historians never record it in such a role, and its supposedly important governor does not figure in Byzantine hierarchical lists.48 However, the fact that such a relatively small island apparently did not fall to the Muslims until 876, although their raids in the area began in the seventh century, does suggest that Malta was of strategic importance to the empire and that it had good defences.48

It is puzzling that after the smooth operation of the ecclesiastical organization shown in Gregory's letters, no Bishop of Malta appeared either at Roman synods or at ecumenical councils in the East in the seventh, eighth or ninth centuries. Pefri believed that a Maltese bishop named Manas attended the Eighth Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 680-707 and identified him with the un-named Bishop of Malta mentioned as a captive at Palermo in 878,49 but no Maltese bishop, of this name is recorded in that council's acts, and Pefri's identification is unwar-

ranted.48 This absence may have been due to the indisposition of individual bishops, the poverty and smallness of Malta, or the insecurity caused by Muslim raids. This non-attendance at the Eastern councils is especially surprising in view of the fact that the sees of Sicily and Calabria were transferred in the eighth century to the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople. As a result, eight sees from the province of Sicily were represented at the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787. Nor can this non-attendance be explained by suggesting that the Bishop of Malta was still Latin-speaking,50 as there is no evidence that this was the case. Indeed, the number of Greek incursions from Malta and Gozo gives some ground for believing that the islands underwent the same process of hellenization which occurred in Sicily. The surviving inscriptions are fragmentary and difficult to date; that a high proportion of them are in Greek51 suggests, though the date usually given to them and to the catacombs in which they were found is appreciably earlier, from the third to the fifth century.50 Cardinal Bréz took the view that the Maltese

48. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379, suggests that the name of the small Gozitan port of Xjenadd may have derived from the Byzantine definition or light naval vessels.

Pefri, II, 931-7; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

Masi, Zfr Gliedchdt. . . 260.

As suggested by Demontis, 281.

Bastianelli, 96, prints 3; see also E. Becker, *Malta Sacramentum: Studi sui archeologiae et medicalui Italicae ad secula Rerum (Strassburg, 1843), 230-145; A. Ferrua, *Le catacombe di Malta*, Civita Catalana, quarto 1791 (s. j. 1791). In Ferrua, 140, see also I. Pomponio: De officio episcopi et episcoporum, in *Martyrologium Romanum*, 401, 299. In Ferrua, 140, see also E. Becker, 140, assuming Christian or possibly Christian, 5 in Greek. S. Agrippa, Storia di farinone del Popolo della Sicilia (Rome, 1953), 12, concluded from a study of the inscriptions of Sicily that Greek was the most used text there, but that Sicily under-

went a process of partial "Hellenization" from the 6th century on.

Bastion, 151-157; Ferrua, 715. A marble inscribed inscription in Greek, incorrectly dated to 858, was recorded by G. Ciutier in his edition of G. Tulum, *Malta Illustrata* (Malta, 1722), 390. It was found b over the name of St. George, adjoining the church of the Patti Marini Osservanti in Rabat and con-

firmed the "renowned Donation, Christian and doctor." No dating is admissible in Corpus Inscriptionum Graece, 11, ed. A. Boethius-F. Dienst (Berlin, 1877), 500 no. 5457, or in Inscriptiones Graecae, 111, ed. G. Kahlke (Berlin, 1895), 145 no. 649 (with incorrect location as "in Ianone Gandi"). A. Masi, Die Archit Malta in Athen (Munich, 1909), 111 no. 2, favoured an early, pre-Byzantine date, but Becker, 137-137, demonstrated that a late date is equally possible, observing that the symbols mimicked by Ciutier as a date-

reference actually represent a pair of surgical instruments.


49. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

50. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

51. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

52. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.


54. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

55. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

56. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

57. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

58. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.


60. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.


63. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

64. *B. Sacra, *1, p. 379; on the 8th bishop, 764, 85.

of the second quarter of the eighth century. Moreover, an episcopal list of the iconoclastic period datable to ca. 730-ca. 780 gives Syracuse as a metropolitan see of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and names the Bishop of Malta as one of its suffragans within the province of Sicily. This suggests that the elevation of Syracuse to metropolitan status occurred at the same time as, or very soon after, the transfer of the Sicilian dioceses to the see of Constantinople.

Since such little use has been made of the notitia episcoporum for the history of Byzantine Malta, their references to Malta are here recorded, with their approximate dates: 63

1 'Iconoclast Notitia' (ca. 730-ca. 780) mentions Melqet as a suffragan see within the province of Sicily.

2 Notitia IX (806-815) lists Melqet in the province of Sicily (186, no. 166).

3 Notitia VIII (ca. 820) lists Melqet vides as in the province of Sicily (171, no. 257).

4 Notitia I (ca. 800-ca. 890). The compiler of this list, Basil of Ialimhama, employed earlier records of the Patriarchate of Constantinople for the sees within its jurisdiction, while for the sees belonging to other Patriarchates he reproduced the profane descriptio orbis Romani attributed to George of Cyprus, 60 which survives only as part of his notitia. As a result, instead of the usual 14 dioceses, 22 towns are listed as belonging to the province of Sicily, including Gozo and Malta, Melqet and Melqet (77, no. 592 and 593).

5 Notitia III (ca. 1100) mentions Melqet as one of the bishops under the metropolitan of Syracuse which had been removed from the Patriarchate of Rome (195, no. 720).

6 Notitia X (ca. 1200) gives Melqet as a suffragate of Syracuse (207, no. 399). 62

7 Notitia XIII (seventeenth century, after 1621) mentions the Bishop of Melqet as a suffragate of Syracuse (249, no. 168).

It is generally agreed that these lists had a practical purpose and did more or less reflect political developments. 63 There is, however, an obvious discrepancy in the lists concerning Malta and the other Sicilian sees. Some, such as Notitia VIII and IX, accurately reflected the position of their time, and some lists of the tenth century and later respected political reality by omitting the Sicilian sees. 64 Some very late lists, such as Notitia III, X and XIII, continued to refer to Malta and other Sicilian bishoprics long after they had passed out of the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople. This can best be explained by the hypothesis that the 'Iconoclast Notitia' and Notitia VIII and IX were based on an earlier list, the 'Notitia of Ephesians', compiled in the early eighth century, but had been brought up to date by the addition of a list of the provinces transferred from the Patriarchate of Rome. Notitia III, X and VIII seem to have been based on out-dated church lists and to have referred to a much earlier position than their date would suggest. 65 Leo VI (886-912) did make a major reform of the episcopal hierarchy and in so doing omitted lost provinces such as that of Sicily; but Leo's list, and those derived from it, employed an interesting fiction to avoid upsetting the hierarchy of metropolitan sees: Melqetene in Armenia was inserted in the place of Syracuse, although Melqetus was still in Arab hands. Geiler concluded that the Sicilian prelates were allowed to live as honorary, pension-receiving bishops in Constantinople, with their place in the hierarchy preserved. 66 There are other examples of such an arrangement, 67 but there seems to be no other evidence to confirm the theory in this case; nor is it known how long such a situation might have lasted.

After the Muslim conquest of 870, Byzantine sources have extremely little useful information about Malta. Even Constantine Porphyrogentius, usually a treasure-house of information about the territories of the empire and its neighbours, provides none. In his De Thematibus, he merely states that Sicily 'has notable cities... some of which have been deserted, and others of which have been conquered by the Saracens... There are 22 cities under Sicily and its governor or strategus'. His

62 Another MS gives the Bishop of Melqet: 'V. Remeslevic, 'Monumenta Vaticana ad in canonicanum', Studi Bizantini, xiii (1947), 146.
64 Notably the Nis Nonos, ed. H. Geiler, Georgii Cypri Episcopi Orbis (Leipzig, 1896), 57-83, and the so-called 'Diarizes of Leo the Wise' (Notitia XII, ed. Parshy, pp. 191-192).
65 Notitia VIII, ed. Parshy, p. 156-159.
66 Geiler, 'Nachträge... II, 392-395.
67 C. W. Ramsay, The Historical Geography of Asia Minor (London, 1891), 448.
68 Geiler, 'Ungedruckte... ', 'Teut', 394-395. Notitia X reflects this development, because Melqetene appears in the list of metropolitan sees, and then later its place is taken in the list of suffragans by Syracuse and its subordinate sees, including Malta.
69 For example, the rights of the refugee Archbishop of Cyprus over the see of Cypria were recognized by the Quincentenary Council of 646-7. B. Jolin, 'Cypris, Dictionnaire de l'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques', ii (Paris, 1993), ed. p. 296.
De Administrando Imperio contains no reference to Malta, but it mentions the Dalmatian Međimurje twice and states that it was the island on which St. Paul was shipwrecked.48 There are a number of sources for the Muslim conquest, but they contain contradictions. Muslim raiders were active in the Central Mediterranean from the second half of the seventh century and because of its strategic position Malta presumably came under increasing pressure, but there is no historical reference to raids on Malta before the ninth century. It has been suggested that by the time of the capture of Palermo in 827, Malta was already in Muslim hands,49 or at least 'under Arab influence'.50 The account given by Miège, from an unpublished work by Vincenzo Bonavita, of two Arab expeditions in 833 and 836 is now considered to have been derived from the fabrications of the forger Giuseppe Vella, and should therefore be discounted.51 There is, however, a likely reference to a raid on Malta in the Arab chronicles Ibn al-Athir; writing of the year 221 (26 December 833–34 December 836) he states that Abu al-Abdallah prepared an expedition which attacked the islands (near Sicily) and obtained great plunder.52 This can be taken to refer to the Maltese archipelago, but it does not imply a decisive conquest. There seems no justification for the argument that the Muslims must, for strategic reasons have attempted a conquest, as distinct from mere raids, at such an early date; their earliest operations were launched from Sana in Tunisia against the nearest, western part of Sicily in the zone of Mazara and Palermo, and they were not concerned with the area as far to the east as Malta.53 All the Arab and Greek sources agree in placing the actual conquest later. Ibn Khaldun gives the date as 255 (20 December 868–8 December 869).54 Ibn al-Khatib dates the conquest of Malta in the narrative of his 'king' between 11 February and 12 March 875.55 An-Nuwairi places the event in the same general period without precise indication of date.56 Ibn al-Athir records what seems to

48 De Théodulide, 10, ed. A. Perrot, Storia e Stati, 166 (Vatican, 1951), 666; Bonavita, 29 no. 77; Porphyrjogiton, De Administrando, cr. 39, 56, ed. G. Monacelli, Washington, (1977), 144 line 110, 164 line 17.
49 Eichhoff, 45–47.
50 ibid., 162; M. de Goesse, quoted by T. Noldeke in Zeitschrift für die Reim Geschichts- und Altertumskunde, 191 (1901), 903 n. 2; F. Minganti, 'Istoria storica araba', Minerva 1954, 18.
51 S. Romi, 'Le bassi isole arabe-musulmane di Malta', Rivista degli studiosi orientali, xii (1932), 408.
52 E. Milione, Storia di Malta, ii (Paris, 1926), 90–94.
53 Text in M. Amari, Biblioteca Arabica Siciliana (Leipzig, 1857), 249; translation in Bibliotheca orientalis, i (Berlin—Rome, 1879—1881), i. 752. See also M. Redlina, L'architettura araba della biblioteca historico-geografica d'espansione araba all'epoca medievale, 'Acta du Premier Congrès d'Études des cultures méditerranéennes de l'aire arabe-bétique' (Aix-les-Bains, 1973). Despite some inaccuracies, such as the description of the Norman conquests of the island as 'Byzantines' (p. 207), this study represents a useful discussion of most of the Arabic references to Malta, together with French translations. Redlina, 204, 206, is probably correct in interpreting a passage of an-Nuwairi (Kitab al-'Ukhball ila sitt爱人 e kalbi) as certain (Cairo, n.d.), i. 333 to mean that Malta was among the islands attacked by the Arabs from the first half of the eighth century. Redlina, 206, points out that several Arab geographers may have confused Malta with the island of Khalfa or Jaffa (the present Jaffa Jilija) off the north coast of Tunisia, and claims that divergent readings in the Arabic MS. support this assumption. Redlina, 207, concludes that to Arab authors Malta was only 'un marecos obscuro derelitolo della Sicilia'; this present author reached a similar conclusion.
54 Amari, Amari, i. 955.
55 Text in Minganti, 19, from Amari, Biblioteca, 470 (transl. ii, 179).
56 Text in Minganti, 17, from Amari, Biblioteca, 470 (transl. ii, 178).
57 Text in Minganti, 18, from Amari, Biblioteca, 470 (transl. ii, 179):
58 Text in Minganti, 18, from Amari, Biblioteca, 470 (transl. ii, 179): the passages of an-Nuwairi and Ibn al-Khatib were transcribed by Minganti in his article.

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be a Byzantine reaction to the conquest; for the year 256 (9 December 868–28 November 870) he states that the Emir of Sicily sent an army to Malta, to which the Röm, the Byzantines, had laid siege, and that the latter took flight at its approach.58 A Greek chronicle composed at Cassano in Calabria in the eleventh century, states for the year 659/58 (285–59) that the island of Melita surrendered on the 29 August, in the third indiction; the notice is repeated in an Arab version of the same chronicle.59 This date is given striking confirmation by another Arab source, the anonymous Kitab al-'Ukhball, which states that Malta was conquered by Habib ibn Umar ibn Abu al-Khaliq, the man who commanded the expedition described by Ibn al-Athir, and gives as the date for this three days before the end of Ramadan 295, that is 28 August 870. The discrepancy of one day can easily be explained by the uncertainties of the observation of the moon upon which the Christian calendar is based.60 Amari reconciled these discordant sources by accepting Ibn Khaldun's date of 870 for the first Muslim conquest of Malta, and then postulating a Greek reconquest, to which both Ibn al-Athir and the Greek chronicle of Cassano refer.61 This hypothesis has recently been accepted, with some minor corrections, by Talbi who does not however succeed in explaining away the fact that Ibn al-Athir mentions only a siege, and not a Byzantine reconquest.62 Talbi also refers to the letter from a Greek monk Theodorus which describes how the Archbishop of Syracuse was taken to a prison in Palermo after the conquest of his city by the Muslims in 878 and met there the un-named bishop of Malta in chains.63 Talbi suggests that the Aghlabids showed unwonted severity towards the Christian inhabitants of Malta by resorting to the ground of their place of worship and imprisoning their bishop, because they regarded them as having broken their 'a'dil or treaty of submission to the Muslims by helping the Byzantine relief force. Talbi is wrong to imply that Theodorus mentions the destruction of a church in Malta, but his theory does derive support from the archaeological evidence for the sudden destruction of the important church at Taš-Silq at around this time.64 Talbi also pointed to a quotation in the Kitab al-'Ukhball from the historian Ibn
slave: 'Fight with us; and if you win you will be free and what we have will also be yours; if you do not agree to this, we shall be killed, and so will you.' And when the Rūm came forward [the Muslims and the slaves] charged the enemy as a single man; and God helped them, so that they defended and slaughtered a great number of the Rūm. The slaves were raised up to the level of the free men; their [joint] power became very strong and after this event the Rūm never again attacked them. May this passage to sustain his argument that Christianity had died out on the grounds that such co-operation against the common foe would hardly have taken place had the 'slaves', or servile cultivators, not been Muslim like their masters. Furthermore, the Byzantine invaders would not have shown such violent hostility to all the inhabitants, if a substantial proportion of them had been Christian. The episode may be associated with the attempts of the Byzantine general George Maniakes to recapture Sicily, although the Byzantine sources place this rather earlier, in 1095. Butzoll has taken two accounts of Maniakes' expedition to Sicily to include references to Malta, but these merely record that the Saracens of Africa and Sicily were infesting 'the islands and coast', presumably that of the empire's possessions in Greece and Southern Italy, and that the Byzantine fleet responded by rounding defeating the raiders. They therefore give no direct information about Malta. Nor is there any solid evidence for Butzolli's view that Malta was at this period a pirate nest from which raids were launched against the Italian mainland, although such a hypothesis cannot be ruled out. The episode to which he refers occurred when Saracens from Sicily besieged Reggio Calabria. They then retreated by land to Milletto, not to Malta, which they could hardly have reached, as their boats had been set on fire. In any case the notice describing this episode occurs in a chronicle which is generally held to be an eighteenth-century falsification.

The references to Malta in Arab geographies are short and uninformative, although they do usually attest the prosperity of the island. However Idrisi, the geographer who gives the fullest account, was writing in the twelfth century, after the Norman conquest of the islands. As a whole the Arab source material for Malta is very limited. Certain earlier scholars gave credence to the copies of documents and annals incorporated by A. Airoldi in his Codices Diplomatici di Sicilia sotto il governo degli Arabi published at Palermo in 1789 and 1792. The Arabic codices in question were falsified by the Maltese Giuseppe Vella, and the rich information they contained, including records of a census of Malta and Gozo supposedly conducted in 991 and a notice of the sale of the islands to the Byzantine

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al-Jazzār, who died in 1094, in which he recorded an inscription on a fort at Qasr Habashi near Šānūn in Tunisia. Talhi incorporated this text as reading: 'Chaque dalle taillée, chaque colonne de marbre qui se trouve dans ce fort provient de l'église de Malte, apportée par Habashi ibn Umar dans l'espoir de métir ainsi l'agrément de—Dien Puisant et Glorieux'—et ses bontés.' Such an inscription would have supported the notion of a Christian betrayal of the Muslims, while the harsh persecution reflected by the destruction of a church and the imprisonment of a bishop would also have explained the complete extinction of Christianity during the Muslim period. A close reading of the original text, however, does not bear out this theory, since the word interpreted by Talhi as meaning 'church' appears to refer instead to the 'attack' launched by Habashi. The level of persecution initiated by the Muslims cannot be determined with precision, and it remains possible that Christianity lost its hold because much of the population fled before or soon after the Muslim invasion, more out of fear of a new regime than because of any specific acts of repression. One of the most striking features of this period in the Central Mediterranean is the extent of the migration which took place.

A possible reconstruction of these events is that the Aghlabids captured Malta in 869, but shortly after a Byzantine force arrived and received the co-operation of the local population, perhaps with the result that the Muslim garrison was forced to take refuge in a citadel. In 870, however, a Muslim relief force appeared, the Byzantine forces fled or were driven out, and the island came securely under Muslim domination. This is merely a hypothesis, which does not resolve all the anomalies or fill the gaps in the sources.

Information about a later Byzantine attempt at reconquest is given by al-
Qazwīni:

The Rūm attacked it (Malta) after 440 (1058/9); they waged war with the inhabitants and they demanded from them riches and women. And the Muslims assembled and crowned themselves, and the number of their slaves exceeded the number of free men. So they sold to their

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112 Safit, Kiiith, 13, c. 16.
113 Talbi, 177-178; Habashi was appointed governor of Sicily in 873, (ibid., 4:28).
114 After a detailed study of the evidence, Mary, 'Zur Geschichte... (1948), concluded that the Byzantine church on Malta died out after the Muslim conquest. His main grounds were the complete lack of references to Maltese Christians during the Muslim period and at the time of the Norman conquest, the overwhelming Muslim nature of the population even in the 12th and early 13th centuries, and the reaction of the servile population to the Byzantine attempt at reconquest of 1127/28 (ibid., 82). Recent archaeological activity and work on possible Eastern ecclesiastical sites and on Greek inscriptions in the Maltese literature do not seem to support the case for believing that there were no significant numbers of Christians in Malta in the Muslim period (ibid., 23-25, 25-32).
115 Talbi, 493, read kīthār (church, synagogue), while Safit, Kiiith, 13, c. 16, gave kāthā (raid, attack). Consultation of the M. shows the reading kāthā to be the more sound from a palaeographic viewpoint: West Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Wessner, ii, 312; folio 1 (and at Talbi, 435 n. 2, 496 n. 1). Kāthā, however, is not a common word, and the reading kīthār cannot be entirely ruled out. The author wishes to thank Professor Irfan Shalalid and Dr. Clive Foss for their help with this passage, which he inserted into a future article.
116 E. Erichsen, 'Trosa e durato di Calabria', Archivio Storico per la Lucania e le Calabria, xii (1955), 109, speaks of a strong line of refuge from Sicily to Calabria after the Arabic conquest; further references, supra, 21 n. 2.
117 Cf. A. Vailhe, Byzance et les Arabes, ii (Paris 1908), 23 and n. 1, for a similar reconstruction of events and for useful comments on the Arab sources.
Emperor Basil II in 992, must be discounted. Most subsequent references to Malta in Greek sources are confined to the visit of St. Paul, or to traditional items borrowed from earlier geographers, but ‘The Order of the Patriarchal Thrones’, composed in 1143 by Nilus Doxopatres, a Greek monk who migrated from Constantinople to Sicily, stated that Sicily had one metropolitan see, Syracuse, and that under it were 21 bishoprics, including one each for Malta and Gozo. This was actually incorrect, because Nilus used a source derived from the civil city list of George of Cyprus which led him to overlook the metropolitan status of Catania and to exaggerate the number of Sicilian bishoprics; there is, therefore, no evidence for the existence of a bishopric on Gozo in this period.

The fact is that the sources for a detailed picture of life in Malta in the Byzantine period do not exist. Moreover, the Arab domination seems to have represented a complete break between the Byzantine and the later periods, and it is difficult to point with certainty to any permanent legacy from Byzantine times. Further study of certain alleged Byzantine survivals would be worthwhile, but the very sparseness of the evidence, even by early medieval standards, suggests that the strategic and political role of Byzantine Malta was a limited one. The idea that the island was an important naval base rests on one ambivalent piece of evidence and needs to be re-examined in the light of Byzantine naval strategy as a whole. The main conclusion of this study is not that Malta formed a distinctive or important part of the Byzantine Empire, but that it participated fully in the momentous political, religious and cultural changes which occurred in the Central Mediterranean area from the sixth to the eleventh centuries.

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Appendix

A Byzantine Lead Seal from Gozo

Shortly before this article went to press, Dr. Anthony Lutfrell drew the author's attention to a Byzantine lead seal located in the Gozo Museum which records an archon named Thorophylact.

**Lead seal. Diameter 0.036 m. Plate 5b and c. Impression off-centre on bottom; deterioration along circumference.**

**Obverse:** Monogram with the initial of the usual tetrasyllabic in the cantons:

ΓΑΛΑΚΤΟΣ ο θάρσου [?] ι θυσία

**Reverse:** Legend in four lines:

Παντείως θεοτόκης [?] [?] [?] [?]

In the marked area along the circumference, something further has been impressed, which does not appear to be lettering but a design. Since this seal is provincial, a leaf design may fairly be postulated.

Date: 8th-9th centuries, and most likely between ca. 750 and ca. 850.

This seal was certainly found on the island of Gozo ca. 1960. It possibly represents evidence that a Byzantine archon possessed authority over Gozo. It sheds no light, however, on the obscure functions and standing of the office of archon (see supra, 72-78). Two possibilities remain open: either the authority of the archon is simply that of a local official, or else Gozo had its own archon. The title mentioned by the Patriarch Nicephorus (op. cit. 6) clearly ruled both islands, but some measure of independent administrative status is suggested by the separate mention of Gozo in the geographical list of George of Cyprus (op. cit. 76).

The author wishes to thank Professor Nicolas Lathropides and Mr. John Niederer for their helpful advice on the seal evidence for Malta and Gozo.