

[p.415] The Christianization of Malta

A. Luttrell

Christianity first reached Malta through the accident of St. Paul's ship-wreck in AD 60. Symbols and inscriptions in the catacombs and elsewhere attest a periodic if not a continuous Christian presence on the island during subsequent centuries. There were probably a number of churches of the Byzantine type, such as the basilica at Tas-Silġ, as well as certain centres of cult, notably the well on the Late Roman farm at San Pawl Milqi which was apparently connected with a tradition concerning the Apostle Paul. Indigenous Christianity may have been reinforced by North African, conceivably even by Egyptian or Syrian, Christians fleeing from Vandals, Berbers or Arabs in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, but ecclesiastically Malta and Gozo depended on the Pope in Rome. There was probably a Bishop of Malta by 553 and there was certainly one by 592, when Pope Gregory I was intervening in the affairs of the bishopric. Probably in or soon after 756 Sicily, and Malta with it, passed under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and by then the Maltese church had presumably adopted the Byzantine rite with Greek as the liturgical language. Malta was conquered by the Muslims in or close to 870; its bishop was imprisoned at Siracusa, columns which came from Malta and probably from a church there were exported to Africa, and in all likelihood the native Christianity of the island was more or less completely extinguished. Malta could still be described as "inhabited by Saracens" in 1175.

Count Roger the Norman conducted a three-day *razzia* on Malta in 1090, reducing it temporarily to a somewhat distant tributary status. He was met by a number of non-indigenous "Christian captives" who sailed away with him and finally returned to "their own kingdoms." Norman domination was indirect and discontinuous, but it must have brought occasional Christians to Malta, and from 1168 at the latest there was a Bishop of Malta who apparently held his office *in partibus* while residing in Sicily. Latin colonization probably began around 1200 and the Muslims were "expelled," most probably in 1224; some lost their lands and others perhaps even left the island, but many must have changed their religion while continuing to speak their Semitic language. These converts, together with the Latin colonists from Sicily, Italy and elsewhere, obviously required religious instruction and organization. The enduring Christianization of Malta and Gozo took place at this point: churches were built and endowed with lands and incomes, jurisdictions and tithes were established, and by about 1270 the Maltese diocese was operating as a suffragan of Palermo and had an archdeacon, a cantor and a group of canons. The Sicilian connection involved Malta in the political difficulties facing the church in Sicily during the fourteenth century, with some bishops being provided by the French popes at Avignon while others, often royal confessors, were nominated by the Aragonese rulers of Sicily.

A closer approximation to standard Latin practices came in the fifteenth century, as the Maltese church took on the aspect of a [p.416] regular Italian diocese. There had been a cathedral church dedicated to St. Paul at Mdina since the thirteenth century. The cathedral had its complement of canons and other dignitaries, and sometime before 1436 Malta was divided into twelve *cappelle* or "arch-parishes," including one in Rabat and one in Birgu, while in Gozo there was a "major" church or *matrice*. The *cappelle*, each with its own endowments and incomes, had their own *cappellanus* or archpriest who administered baptisms, marriages and the other sacraments from a central church which corresponded roughly to the Italian rural *pieve*. This church was not necessarily situated inside one of the villages within the circumscription of the *cappella* but might, like that at Bir Miftuh, be placed outside and

between a number of the settlements it served. Other clergy and numerous scattered rural chapels were dependent on the central *cappella* and its *kappillan*, as he came to be known in Maltese.

The bulk of the clergy were indigenous and Maltese-speaking even if the best posts tended to go to representatives of the Siculo-Aragonese patriciate, such as the prominent fifteenth-century archdeacon Lancea Desguanés who was able to wield considerable power since the bishop was always an absentee. The appointment of non-Maltese clerics aroused strong and repeated local protests, but a foreign element did reach the island through the religious orders. The Benedictine monks never established themselves on Malta, though they held lands there, while the friars, who might have been expected to have been active in an area demanding missionary work, came surprisingly late. The Benedictines of Catania evaded the obligation to set up a house on Malta which had been attached in 1362 to a legacy of property there, partly on the grounds that they would not be able to provide brethren linguistically capable of pastoral work with the Maltese-speaking populace. A hospital and a church had been dedicated to St. Francis at Rabat by 1372 when the king nominated a Sicilian Franciscan to govern the hospital. By 1413 the Augustinians had a convent at Rabat; the Carmelites apparently reached Malta between 1418 and 1441 and the Dominicans, after rejecting an opportunity to found a convent on Malta in 1431, finally installed themselves there around 1450. The Benedictine sisters had two nunneries inside Mdina, while at the end of the fifteenth century the Observant Franciscans also founded a house at Rabat. Religious establishments and hospitals multiplied both on Malta and Gozo, and in the sixteenth century Capuchins, Jesuits and others joined the older orders. These regular clergy, with their foreign membership and connections and their willingness to educate Maltese brethren abroad, undoubtedly made a significant contribution to Malta's cultural and spiritual life.

Numerous fifteenth-century wills demonstrated the strength of the Maltese people's devotion to their church through bequests for the saying of masses, the establishment of family endowments in *juspatronatus*, the foundation of side-chapels and of small country churches, and the patronage of paintings and other embellishments for churches and religious houses; by 1575 there were some 430 churches and chapels in Malta and Gozo. The small casale at Hal Millieri near Żurrieq, for example, consisted of only fifteen households yet in 1575 it had four churches standing in two groups of two abutting chapels. The Annunciation church there was covered in the mid-fifteenth century with a series of standing saints painted in fresco in the panels formed by the arches which sustained the stone [p.417] roof-slabs. Such churches had no priest and mass was celebrated there only on special feast-days, but they had their own endowments, often in the shape of incomes secured on particular fields and administered by a procurator who was responsible for the maintenance of altar furnishings, sanctuary lamps and suchlike, and for the organization of the annual festivities. At Hal Millieri the whole apparatus of masses, festas and field-rents continued under the supervision of a procurator long after the moment when the inhabitants of the *casale* had totally abandoned the settlement in about 1700. Intensely local institutions such as these helped to keep the bulk of the rural populace closely in touch with their Christian faith.

This insular Maltese church was naturally affected by universal developments. The Jews were expelled in 1492; the Knights of St. John took over the government of the islands in 1530, bringing with them a number of Greeks and a multitude of cosmopolitan connections; the infidel Turks invaded and were stubbornly, and triumphantly, resisted in 1565; and at the end of the sixteenth century there were even scares of Protestant plots. At the same time Malta participated in the main currents of the Counter-Reformation with the coming of the Jesuits, the foundation of schools and seminaries, the introduction of the Inquisition, and the arrival of Pietro Dusina to carry out the Apostolic Visitation of 1575 which revealed numerous irregularities, doctrinal and moral, in Maltese ecclesiastical life.

The Maltese clergy, like those elsewhere, clearly needed reformation; some were ignorant and ill-prepared for their task while many kept concubines. After 1530 the bishop, though still not a Maltese, was normally resident on the island. The arrival of the Knights and their followers, military, naval and otherwise, was followed by a dramatic rise in the indigenous population and by the foundation of Valletta and the development of the larger villages, so that the bishop had to face many fresh problems. The establishment of new urban parishes, the foundation of religious confraternities, the building of new style baroque churches by Girolamo Cassar and others, and the introduction of more modern forms of devotion all contributed to the unending work of Christianization, to that pastoral process which continued to pose new difficulties and to evoke new solutions in each successive generation.

Maltese religion was strengthened by a propaganda campaign sustained by members of the religious orders who deliberately fostered a series of historical inventions many of which were reproduced, and thereby established almost ineradicably, in Gian Francesco Abela's authoritative *Descrittione di Malta* published in 1647. Notable among these myth-makers was the Maltese Jesuit Girolamo Manduca who died in 1643 having written and worked extensively to cultivate popular sympathy for St. Paul and other saints, fabricating a network of pious legends on which Abela leant heavily. Manduca could, however, cite earlier enthusiasms such as that of Matteo Surdo, Archpriest of Malta, who was attempting in 1549 to restore the Pauline cult at St. Paul's cemetery in Rabat which, he complained, had been neglected for over a hundred years. Sainly dedications, reverence for the Virgin Mary and for St. Agatha, the carved souls in purgatory, the ex-voto paintings in the shrines and other such manifestations of popular religiosity all bore witness to the success of such promotions. A *Legendario Melitense* produced in 1775 reported, among the claims to sanctity for the Jesuit Giovanni Maria Vella of Lija, who died in 1689, that "he professed [p.418] a singular devotion towards St. Paul and St. Publius whose cults he laboured to propagate to everyone in the whole island, and he was a great devotee of the Holy Souls of Purgatory."

The strong attachment of the Maltese to their Catholic Christian faith may, in some curiously indefinable way, have been conditioned by their position on the frontier of Latin Christendom as a dimly felt response to the threatening proximity of Islamic Africa, or even as an almost unconscious form of compensation for that non-Christian past of which their non-European language was a perpetual memorial. Following their conversion to Christianity, some sections of the indigenous population probably tried to maintain their language in order to preserve the old way of life, as rustic and artisan sought to protect themselves against colonial exploitation by Romance-speaking Latin settlers. Something similar happened among the Valencian Moors, but they were defending a religion as well as their group identity. In Malta there was no religious barrier. The settlers' sons grew up as Maltese-speaking Maltese, while many of those who spoke only Maltese may have learnt Sicilian in order to avoid exclusion from continental contacts and from public affairs in Malta itself. The protests of the Maltese clergy against non-Maltese appointments suggest a "protonationalistic" element in the church as early as the fifteenth century. With the coming of the Knights, who established themselves as a ruling caste of foreign individuals who could have no permanent family or territorial connections in the island, a section of the Maltese clergy emerged among the leaders of local resentment and resistance against foreigners, conducting interminable jurisdictional quarrels with the Knights, participating in the armed uprising against the French in 1798, and subsequently propagating the Italian language as a form of opposition to British rule and culture. In terms of education, welfare and politics, the church at the middle of the twentieth century was still so firmly embedded in the parochial and national life of the island that it provided the Maltese with one element of their identity as a separate people.

The abundant evidence for the post-1436 period has been utilized in recent work by J. Boissevain, Alexander Bonnici, Arthur Bonnici, V. Borg, J. Cassar Pullicino, M. Fsadni, Q. Hughes, A. Vella, G. Wettinger and others, while their works cite further studies of individual parishes, confraternities, churches, and so forth. Even so, there is much scope for further research, especially on religious aspects of folklore and sociological aspects of Maltese religiosity. For the earlier period, of which all too little is known, see the references and materials in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A. Luttrell (London, 1975). V. Borg's study of the Early Christian remains is in the press. The coming of the orders is documented in A. Luttrell, "The Augustinians at Malta: 1413," *Analecta Augustiniana*, xxxviii (1975); the text of 1441 given there shows, when taken with the evidence in S. Abela, *L-Ewwel Karmelitani f' Malta u l' Ewwel Knisja u Kunvent Tagħhom 'Il-Lunzjata l-Qadima': 1418-1659* (Malta, 1976), 6-8, that the Carmelites had a Maltese convent by 1441. On the secular clergy, see G. Wettinger, "Early Maltese Popular Attitudes to this Government of the Order of St. John," *Melita Historica*, vi no. 3 (1974), [p.419] and "Concubinage among the Clergy of Malta and Gozo: 1420-1550" (forthcoming). The religious life and culture of a rural community are studied in *Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings*, ed. A. Luttrell (Malta, 1976). An article on Abela, Manduca and their contemporaries awaits publication; on Manduca, see J. Cassar Pullicino, "Il-Leggenda tal-Maltin assedjati fl-Imdina," *Lehen il-Malti*, xlv (1976); the Matteo Surdo text is in G. Gatt Said, *Risposta ... sulla primitiva chiesa vescovile in Malta* (Malta, 1868), 52/3 note b; for Manduca's use of it, see Valletta, Royal Malta Library, Ms. 25, f. 184-185; on Giovanni Maria Vella, see Mdina, Cathedral Archives, Ms. 57, f. 166-166v.

For the period from 870 to 1194 the materials are meagre and the dissension great, though the myths which once obscured these centuries are slowly being dismantled (*Medieval Malta*, 23-25, 96-103). The issue has been much confused when particular texts, such as the puzzling passage in al-Qazwini, have been interpreted unsoundly in isolation from the main context. There is still no single clear and positive piece of evidence that indigenous forms of Christianity survived through this period, but that is not to assert that Christianity was definitely or totally extinguished on Muslim Malta; in one debatable instance, that of the possible continuity of a Pauline cult at San Pawl Milqi, there is in fact some evidence for its survival (*ibid.*, 20, 28, 93-95).

New information is most likely to be provided by archaeological methods. The "continuationists" have often sought philological proof in alleged "Christian Arabic" survivals in the Maltese language. This debate remains at a preliminary stage, since the linguists still concentrate on the language in its modern form. They employ techniques and terminologies which the historian can seldom understand; they persistently interpret their findings within a historical framework largely rejected by historians; and they usually ignore the earliest texts and word forms. New approaches are now necessary, as various linguists have themselves suggested; see the views and references assembled in G. Mangion, "A Bibliography of Maltese: 1953-1973," *Melita Historica*, vi no. 3 (1974). The primary task is the completion of the extensive work of Godfrey Wettinger, who is publishing and studying all available Maltese names, place-names and microtoponyms for the century or more following 1419. Then, instead of comparing modern Maltese to Koranic Arabic or to modern "classical" Arabic, the fifteenth-century Maltese form of Arabic should be compared both to modern Maltese and to medieval Arabic as spoken at Palermo, at Tunis and elsewhere: cf. W. Cowan, "Caxaro's Cantilena: a Checkpoint for Change in Maltese," *Journal of Maltese Studies*, 10(1975). Meanwhile, it has yet to be demonstrated that the "Christian Arabic" terms in Maltese actually are both "Christian" and "Arabic" in origin, and also that they were really, or even probably, in use on Malta before about 1200. Given the complete absence of pre-1200

Maltese texts and the numerous opportunities for such words to have been imported into the language at the moment of conversion in the thirteenth century or at various later stages, this would be difficult to prove.

L. Trimble, "Some Linguistic Comments on Religious Terms in Maltese," *ibid.*, 9(1973), assumes that Maltese Christianity continued from AD 60 right through the Muslim period; that a pre-Arabic layer of [p.420] religious terms, some of them shared with Syriac, survived in Maltese Arabic; and that the "Arabs" were expelled in 1090. Trimble argues that certain Christian prayers received their modern form in the Muslim period and even contain pre-870 elements. His claim that "evidence from place names indicates an early Semitic structure, perhaps influenced by Punic," for the language spoken in Malta is a brave one, since no Maltese toponym can be documented before about 1250, by which time the island had been "converted" from Islam. Maltese was scarcely ever written before the eighteenth century. The modern Maltese forms of the *Credo* and *Paternoster* which Trimble analyses cannot be traced back further than Francesco Wzzino's *Dottrina Cristiana* of 1752, and when that was being compiled problems arose and the bishop was worried precisely because no standard form of these prayers was in existence: J. Cassar Pullicino, *Kitba w Kittieba tal-Malti*, i (Malta, 1962), 46-59. At the time of Dusina's visitation in 1575 a number of priests were teaching the catechism to children and others, and some of these priests could not read Latin but must have taught in Italian or, more probably, Maltese; again, however, there is no evidence for written texts: Valletta, Royal Malta Library, Ms. 643, f.488, 527 *et passim*.

Words such as *Gesu Kristu* and *Marija* may in some sense be "etymologically non-Semitic," as Trimble holds, but it could fairly be asked what other forms could reasonably be expected for them; for example, the Arabic for *Marija* is *Maryam*. Furthermore, it is hard to accept suggestions that Greek, Latin, Punic or Syrian elements can be identified in the "pre-Arabic sub-strata" of the Maltese form of Arabic when there is no substantial Maltese text datable earlier than ca. 1485. J. Aquilina, "Maltese Toponymic Stratification," *Onoma*, xiii (1968), 276, suggests that it is philologically possible that the word *Milqi* found at San Pawl Milqi "continues a pre-Arabic Carthaginian residue," but the historian is bound to observe both that there is no proof that the philological process involved took place in Malta and also that the most extensive research on this key point has not been able to document that toponym before 1616 (*Medieval Malta*, 20 n.124); possibly it was imported or invented shortly before that date by someone anxious to propagate the Pauline cult. If there were any direct Syriac influences in the pre-870 language, they presumably disappeared in or shortly after 870. Post-870 Syriac importations could have come well after 1200, but they might also have come with the Muslims. In 827, for example, a thousand families of Egyptian Copts were sent from Egypt to Tunis to construct and man a fleet, and other Eastern Christians are known to have travelled to Tunisia and to have Orientalized its Christianity: references in H. Idris, in *Revue Africaine*, xcvi (1954), 271/2 n. 39, 275 *et passim*. According to al-Qazwini (text in *Medieval Malta*, 84-85), the servile population of Malta outnumbered the free Muslims in about 1040, so that Muslim Malta may well have had non-indigenous "Christian Arab" inhabitants.

Al-Qazwini's passage, with its description of the servile majority as *abid* which normally meant "slaves," is difficult to interpret. Al-Qazwini was a thirteenth-century Persian author some of whose information about Malta was altogether confused, and whose sources for this affair remain unknown. Most probably he did not intend to refer either to Muslim [p.421] slaves, who were seldom at all numerous and who would have been unlikely to have constituted a majority, or to indigenous Christians who, had they survived, would normally have become not slaves but *dhimmis*, free citizens inferior in status: cf. R. Brunschvig, "Abd," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, i (revised ed: Leiden, 1960), 24-40. It could be argued that the inhabitants had been reduced to the status of slaves rather than *dhimmis* just because they

resisted the Muslims in 870, but there is almost no other evidence to support such an interpretation. More likely al-Qazwini was reporting rather imprecisely some notice concerning non-indigenous non-Muslims many or most of whom could have been either Oriental Christians or Greeks and Latins such as the *captivi christiani*, presumably prisoners-of-war, who as the chronicler Malaterra made clear – originated outside Malta in countries to which they returned after being freed by Count Roger in 1090. Quite possibly, the population of eleventh-century Malta included a *mélange* of some or all of such groups.

It has often been assumed that after 870 the indigenous Christians did survive with the subservient legal status of *dhimmis*, as occurred in Sicily and many other places. This assumption is, on balance, contradicted by the available evidence for resistance and persecution on Malta, which includes the archaeological indications of destructions at the moment of conquest, the imprisonment of the Bishop of Malta (and there is no clear evidence that he was subsequently released), the probable removal of the columns of a Maltese church to Tunisia, and – *ex silentio* – the absence of any positive evidence to support such an interpretation; see *Medieval Malta*, 22, 83-84, 89 *et passim*, together with J. Barnard, “The Arab Conquest,” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts: Royal University of Malta*, vi no.2(1975), and note that it is possible, though unlikely given the evidence for the destruction of a church at Tas-Silġ, that the columns did not come from a church. Byzantine Malta may well have been drastically crushed, conceivably by fierce nomadic tribesmen in Aghlabid service. There are many cases of departures from the strict theoretical letter of the Muslim laws of tolerance which, in any case, allowed scope for a diversity of interpretations and applications. There were numerous examples of slaughter and of the destruction of churches, while the rights of those who surrendered peaceably were distinguished clearly from the penalties incurred by those who resisted conquest; A. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their Non-Muslim Subjects* (London, 1930); A. Fattal, *Le Statut legal des non-Musulmans en pays d’Islam* (Beirut, 1958); C. Cahen, “Dhimma,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ii (revised ed: Leiden, 1965), 227-231. A relevant example of this distinction between capitulation and conquest was provided by the African judge Abu l’H’asan al-Qabisi, who died in 1012 when he ruled that Muslims could reuse the stones of a Christian church if the Christians had ceased to use the church at the moment of Muslim conquest, but not if the Christians had capitulated: cited by H. Idris, in *Melanges d’histoire et d’archeologie de l’Occident Musulman: Hommage à Georges Marçais*, ii (Algiers, 1957), 105-106. The probable reuse in Tunisia of the columns of a Maltese church would, therefore, suggest that Byzantine Malta did not capitulate, in which case its Christian population may have been ruthlessly reduced or even eliminated. These puzzling problems certainly require further study.

[Anthony Luttrell]