

Source: **The Sunday Times** [Malta]. (1989)(19Nov.24)

Did Christianity survive in Muslim Malta? – further Thoughts

G. Wettinger

The question whether Christianity died out in Malta for some time during the High Middle Ages still shocks a surprising number of persons in the Maltese Islands.¹ Apparently such ideas are considered by some as the local equivalent of what would lead to un-American activities in the U.S.A. no doubt leading to un-Maltese activities here. It might therefore be worthwhile to detail again the reasons why that reinterpretation of Maltese history is now at last rapidly gaining ground among Maltese medieval historians having already won the field abroad.

The supposed evidence hitherto relied on for the survival of Christianity all been found to be defective or non-existent. Thus the Muslim epitaph reported by A.A Caruana to have referred to Maltese non-Muslims has apparently not been seen by any later historian, certainly not by Ettore Rossi who made a determined effort to find it 60 years ago, nor by later ones. Rossi presumed that Caruana was the victim of a misreading of one or other of the surviving epitaphs, since it was not likely that any was lost subsequently. The reference to Maltese Christians in Al- Qazwini's passage referring to an impending Byzantine invasion turns out to have been merely a mistaken reconstruction of the words of the original, which only refers to Muslims counting themselves and finding that the number of slaves or *ghabida* was higher than that of the free men.²

The slaves were undoubtedly Muslims, seeing that they were told by the free that they could only expect death at the hands of the invaders had the latter been successful. They were also offered equality if they joined with the others in the defence of the island. Now, a promise of equality by a Muslim ruling elite to a more numerous Christian population is highly unlikely, and that it actually took place is ruled out by the evidence of 1091. The passage in Malaterra referring to Christian captives in 109 greeting their deliverer, Count Roger the Norman, with shouts of *Kyrie Eleison* has been persistently and perversely misunderstood to refer to Maltese indigenous Christians though the rest of the passage makes it clear that they were foreigners who were not only freed by Count Roger, but were also actually taken away from Malta on his return to Sicily.

There are no Christian archaeological remains, apparently, strictly datable to the "Arab" period. The cave-churches with Byzantinesque paintings on the wall are, we are assured of post-Islamic date. San Pawl Milqi's first church dates back to ca. 1200. Both there and at Tas-Silg there are signs of devastation marking the change from Byzantine to Muslim times. In Tunisia an inscription spoke of the marble columns and masonry which was taken there after the capture of Malta. Surviving literary sources seem to point to a complicated process of capture in 869-870, making it probable that the conquerors treated the islanders otherwise than with their accustomed toleration. One has only to recall here the massacre of the male population of Syracuse and the sale of the rest of the population of that town into slavery in 878.

Assimilated

In view of all this, it is probable that the *ghabida* of 1048 mentioned by Al-Qazwini in his well-known passage actually refers to the descendants of the survivors of the original Christian inhabitants of Malta who presumably earned, in the eyes of the Muslim conquerors, either by their stalwart resistance or the suspicion that they were in concert with the Byzantine force trying to recover the island, the harsh treatment meted out to them. By 1048, still retaining their humiliating status of *ghabida*, they had, not surprisingly, become completely assimilated in culture, language and religion to their conquerors.

The question arises: were there any Maltese who were not treated in the same way in 870? Immediately, one is faced by the difficulty of explaining how this could have happened. Were some indigenous inhabitants considered to be less blameworthy than the others by the Muslim conquerors, earning for themselves merely the mildly inferior status of *dhimmi*³ rather than that of actual servitude or *ghabida*? On assimilation to the Arabs the *dhimmi* would have become *mawali*,⁴ still regarded as somewhat inferior by the aristocratic descendants of the Arabs, until they were given complete equality in some arrangement similar to the one reached in Malta in 1048 with the *ghabida*. Unfortunately, there is no record either of *dhimmi* in Malta or of *mawali*. Al-Qazwini mentions *ghabida* only. It is difficult to imagine *dhimmi* accepting the much inferior status of *ghabida* in normally peaceful times en route to complete assimilation and equality of status with the Arab conquerors or the descendants of the latter.

The presence of *mawali* would no doubt imply the existence at some time of a stable *dhimmi* Christian population. The presence of *ghabida* carries no such implication, their Christian forefathers having certainly been reduced to that status straightaway without passing through *dhimmi* stage. If, on the other hand, one had to presume that there were indigenous Maltese who retained the status of *dhimmi* all along, then one would have to accept the idea that the presumptive heroes of 870, punished by reduction to servitude, were, in the end, less stouthearted than the craven Christians of 870, ending with a surrender of their Christianity some considerable time before 1048, while the faint-hearts if not outright colaberators of 870 retained their Christianity right through. In both cases, the psychology involved is complicated and difficult to accept unless it is much better documented.

Let it not be said that for a Christian to become a Muslim (and vice versa) is not easy, No doubt that is correct in the socio-political circumstances of today and has been so for centuries. But anyone who pretends to know his history knows (or perhaps should know in Mediterranean countries) that the Muslims managed over the course of some 150 years to assimilate in culture, language and religion several million Christians in North Africa and the Middle East. This was not done by massacre, expulsion or resettlement of people, active and severe persecution itself being rare. Relentless social and political pressure, together with much cultural and ethnic prestige, aided by occasional outbursts of popular pressure, did the trick.

The Norman conquest

Within 43 years of 1048 Count Roger the Norman raided Malta and Gozo. After harrying the countryside for a couple of days, he was asked for terms of peace by the peaceful inhabitants of Mdina. Eventually, the latter promised to recognise him as their sovereign, to give up their weapons, pay an annual tribute and surrender their Christian captives. Each side swore in its own way. The Maltese side on the Koran, the Norman one on the Bible or the Cross. Nowhere is there any mention of Christian Maltese inhabitants. It is clear that the

Muslims were in complete control, and were left in control. For almost a century after, their tombs continued to be found in the island. There are no contemporary Christian tombs in the Maltese islands.

The Norman invasion of 1091 was not a permanent conquest. The Normans consequently re-conquered the island in 1127. This time they came to stay. They must have left a garrison, administrators, a rudimentary clergy to administer to the at first completely foreign Christian community. The clergy would have been partly of the Latin and partly of the Greek rites, the former promoted and encouraged by the Norman conquerors and their close friends and administering largely to them alone, the latter (possibly Basilian monks and hermits) merely tolerated by the government, and serving mainly Christian immigrants from Sicily and perhaps South Italy. When, a generation or so later, a trickle of converts started to appear from among the indigenous Muslim population, in Malta no doubt as in Sicily the ex-Muslims preferred the Greek to the Latin rite. This is perhaps the explanation for the Byzantine style of wall painting in our cave-churches of sub-Islamic times.

The Latin clergy, when it got organised at all, did so as an Establishment Church, without much regard to the size of the population following the Latin rite, depending mainly on the constant support, financial as well as moral, of the Norman administration and its later successors. For a long time, it was merely a well entrenched church among a largely alienated population, at first of Muslims alone, later on of Muslims and Christians of the Greek rite. Its state of organisation in 1270 or at any other earlier period bore no relation to the size of the Christian population supporting it. Not only did the bishop (first mentioned in 1153) then and for centuries afterwards normally reside in Sicily, but he was endowed at an early date with extensive estates at Lentini: he did not have to depend on the existence of any Christian faithful in Malta at all. Eventually, of course, as the result largely of the undeviating support of the administration, the Latin rite supplanted the Greek one. Islam itself was suppressed as late as 1249 by the exiling of its last open adherents to Lucera in Central Italy, as is recorded by Ibn Khaldun.

Gradual conformity

For centuries after the disappearance of Islam in Malta, its former existence was remembered in the persistence of such surnames like *Muhammad* (13 men in the militia in 1419-20, only seven men in ca. 1424), *Xara* (one who knows the *xarija*, the Muslim Law), nicknames or field names like *Hafis* (one who knew the Koran by heart), *Tat-Hag* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), *Tal-Gazi* (the warrior of Islam), *Tal-Mislem*, *L-Imselliet*, *Ta' Miselmiet*, and so on, some of them surviving to the present time, especially among the place-names – more conservative than the surnames which had obviously to eschew such dangerous connections owing to the danger of persecution and discrimination (thus *Muhammad* seems to have died out as a surname before the end of the fifteenth century).

Here again it must be borne in mind that “conversion” from Islam to Christianity then bore no similarity to what it would be to-day. In most cases it represented the unavoidable gesture of near-desperate peasants and land-proprietors to avoid exile and confiscation of property or severe bodily harm. Even before the death of King Roger (1156) the Christian communities of Malta and Gozo were laid under an obligation by the Norman administration of paying an annual fine for assassinating a Muslim inhabitant, a fine that was remitted in 1198. Ibn Zubair gives several examples of unwilling “conversions” of Muslims to Christianity which he came across in the course of his travels in twelfth century Sicily.

Islamic law permits Muslims to conceal their religion in the face of persecution. Exile and migration must have helped in the disappearance of Islam, but there is no doubt that demographic continuity was largely preserved in the Maltese islands, thus accounting for the survival of the Maltese language.

One has to emphasise that the religious changes in Malta took a very long time to come about. They started in 1127 with the arrival of foreign Christians. In 1133 a Greek Sicilian exiled to Malta by the Normans referred to Maltese *Agarenes* and who were also Godless, in other words, *Muslims*.⁵ In 1175 the writer of the account of the voyage of Bishop Burchard to Saladin referred to them as *Saraceni*, a term then used only to refer to Muslim Arabic speakers. In 1240 the Muslims still numbered several hundred families, the figures as preserved actually putting them far in advance of those of the Christians. The year 1249 marks the culmination point when Christianity formally took the place of Islam completely. However, of course, it is not clear how long it took for the islanders to become Christians at heart as well as in outward conformity. Nor is it clear yet when and how the Byzantine Greek rite died out. It is certainly possible, should one say probable, that the Latin Church was further heavily endowed with ex-Muslim land after 1249, but so far that is only a suggestion. It would explain, of course, its state of organisation in 1270, and allow one still to suspect lukewarmness in its popular support among the Maltese ex-Muslim adults who had been baptised recently.

Unmistakable signs

The overall situation would also perhaps explain why, while the Cathedral itself was well-organised, it still took something like a whole century for the first friars to reach Malta, going by the dating available so far, and much more time had to pass for substantial progress in that direction. The appearance of the friars, the development of a parish organisation, the erection of innumerable little family chapels, and the endowing of scores of private chantries (not necessarily in that order) are the unmistakable signs of the gradual consolidation of Christianity in later Medieval Malta.

Curiously enough, the little festival organised at so many of the little chapels that dotted the countryside was not *festa* at all during the Late Middle Ages, but it continued to be called *zerda* as at North Africa's Muslim shrines until late in the fifteenth century, at least. Unlike *Alla*, *randan*, *ghasar*, *tewba* and so many other technical religious terms which the Maltese language shares with Muslim Arabic (*vide* one of Professor J. Aquilina's scholarly articles), it did not quite make it to the present time – but it took an unconscionable time to die out.

[by Professor Godfrey Wettinger]

¹ The reader who wants detailed references and a fuller treatment of most (but not all) the topics treated here is referred to the present writer's "The Arabs in Malta," *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History* (Malta, Mid-Med Bank Ltd.: 1986).

² *Aghbida* are slaves not captured in war; they could have started off as an enslaved population. Like Christianity, Islam does not permit the enslavement of persons of the same religion, but slaves of the opposite religion who were converted to their master's religion retained their status of slaves.

³ *Dhimmi* were "people of the Book," i.e. Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, etc., who were granted toleration in religion provided they practised it in private, recognised their

subjection to the Muslim rulers, and paid an extra tax. They were not slaves in any sense of the word.

⁴ *Mawali* were assimilated ex-Christian, etc., people, still not enjoying complete equality with the Muslim elite, though they had already switched over to Islam.

⁵ My attention to this particular source was drawn by my colleague, Professor S. Fionni.