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Malta under the Arabs

G. Wettinger

From Professor Godfrey Wettinger.

Sir, – Thought I do not think it will be of any use answering by arguments anyone who starts off with an act of faith (“There are those of us who ... believe that Christianity ...”), I shall still attempt to deal with the more important points made in Dr. M. Brincat’s article on *Christianity in Malta under the Arabs* (*The Sunday Times*, February 11).

He begins with the vexed question of the Christian vocabulary in Maltese. This hoary argument goes back to Commendatore Abela and it is high time that it be put into its proper dimension. The Aghlabid invaders of Malta brought with them two forms of Arabic, Classical and Colloquial. Maltese is derived from the latter. Even if the former did not possess any of the words in question (and I am not saying so) the Christian vocabulary, originating from Syriac or what have you, existing in the various forms of Medieval, Colloquial or Middle Arabic, must have spread wherever the Muslims went and found Christians to subjugate and eventually to convert. Dr. Brincat speaks of the present distribution of these words. What about their former, more relevant, spread? What about their existence even in medieval Andalusia? What about their existence in the book of prayers and doctrine published in Granada early in the 16th century? Why should we, of all these people, be the only ones to have had to inherit these words directly from supposedly Punic-speaking ancestors? Why was it possible in Sicily to have at least large parts of the liturgy translated into Arabic without resort to Latin or Italian or even Greek equivalents? This has already been spelled out in one or other of my writings. Why has Dr. Brincat said nothing about this side of the problem?

Dr. Brincat appeals to logic, but forgets that one must first get one’s geographical and historical facts right. In Sicily it is clear that converts from Islam for long preferred the Greek rite to the Latin one. Dr. Brincat is wrong in denying this, perhaps misled by his secondary sources. He should read instead, for example, H. Bresc’s *Mudejars de la couronne d’Aragon et Sarrasins de la Sicile Normande: le problème de l’acculturation, X Congresso de Historia de la Corona de Aragon* (1979). Whatever happened in Spain, one must prefer the Sicilian parallel because it was so much nearer both in place and time to what could have happened in Malta. In Malta we have to account for the existence of post-Muslim Byzantine Greek cultural influences, the Greek Church in Sicily, and consequently in Malta, then being in communion with that of Rome. Dr. Brincat’s appeal to the folk-memory of pre-Arab Christian rites, in order to explain the existence of Byzantine rites in post-Islamic times, is at best based on extremely tenuous grounds. He refers to the evidence that post-Arab churches were built on the sites of pre-Arab churches or holy places: Tas-Silg, San Pawl Milqi, Hal Millieri, and probably, he adds, Bir Miftuh, as well as, for good measure, a church built at Msida over a Roman tomb, “perhaps the resting place of a Christian martyr or a reputed saint.” San Pawl Milqi is the only one of these to have been thoroughly investigated and published, the latter only in a preliminary form, and the matter is still under considerable doubt, doubt which seems also to surround the post-Islamic church at Tas-Silg. The others are mysteries; none of my colleagues here at the university seems to know anything about a pre-Islamic church at Hal Millieri or Bir Miftuh or the church at Msida – its underlying tomb, of course, would need the explanation he gives it.

On Bishop Burchard, Dr. Brincat allows that the chronicler did mean Muslim Arabic speaking speakers when he described the inhabitants of Malta as Saracens. A previous writer, Luret Cutajar, held that they could have been Arabic-speaking *Christians*. So we are making some progress. On the meaning ordinarily given by medieval writers to the word *Saracens* see N. Daniel, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*. It is up to persons like Dr. Brincat to prove, if they are that way inclined, that the chronicler of Bishop Burchard's journey made no such distinction, instead of merely first making a supposition, then taking it as proven.

Dr. Brincat makes much of the assassination of a Muslim by the Maltese Christians, arguing that the latter must have been already very numerous to have dared to commit such a crime, forgetting or overlooking the fact that the morale of the Christians did not necessarily depend on mere numbers, but also on the undoubted fact that the official regime, with its garrison, was ordinarily in their favour. That is was the result of an inter-confessional feud is likely, but we have only Dr. Brincat's word that it was a long-lasting one. The other side to the incident Dr. Brincat again ignores: the Muslims, definitely then still in a resounding majority here, were influential or strong enough both in Malta and Sicily to obtain redress from the Norman ruler; by the end of the century, however, the situation locally or in Sicily had changed: the Christians of Malta and Gozo were able to obtain a complete remission of their penalty, no doubt an important point in the consolidation of their hold on the islands.

Dr. Brincat's would-be-triumphant finale "it is even likelier that there were quite a few Christians . . .," in answer to my own "it is likely that there were no indigenous Christians for the whole period 1000 to 1150 A.D.," lacks one important consideration: the evidence of Malaterra's account of the taking of Malta by Count Roger, on whom Dr. Brincat otherwise waxes really eloquent. Perhaps, according to him, Malaterra was another of the unreliable chroniclers to whom he refers elsewhere. It is, however, unlikely that Dr. Brincat had not noticed that Malaterra's account confirms my reading of Al Qazwini's passage and renders ridiculous in the extreme his insistence that the slaves who in 1048 obtained equality with the Muslim ruling elite were Christian.

I have always tried to argue here and elsewhere in a way that would dovetail together the various scraps of information, without leaving, if possible, any loose ends. I am afraid, Dr. Brincat's belief in the continuity of Christianity really still begs quite a few questions.

The rest of the Middle Ages in Malta is the story of how the inhabitants of Malta very gradually switched over to a European culture although they certainly preserved their language, at least up to now. I have myself also written about that elsewhere.

May I in closing make one further remark. Dr. Brincat writes of religion being a *racial* characteristic. Perhaps he means *ethnic*, but the slip is characteristic of some quarters in Malta late in the 20th century. It is perhaps salutary to remember that Maltese and Gozitan Muslims are recorded in Norman documents of the 12th century as *Maltese* or *Gozitans* not Arabs; Abu Bakr al *Maliti*, Ghisa al *Maliti*, Ghomor bin al *Maliti* and Ghotman his brother Awlad al (the sons of the) *Maliti*, Mefrig al *Maliti*, Nighma al *Ghawdisi* and 'Ali his brother. These were all Muslims and are to be found in *I diplomi Greci ed Arabi di Sicilia pubblicati nel testo originali, tradotti ed illustrati* (Palermo, 1868; Vienna 1982). It was also this characteristic method of reference to persons as *al Maliti* in an Arabic anthology that enabled Michele Amari to identify three Maltese poets who wrote in the 11th and 12th centuries. Should we in

this supposedly enlightened age be more racially and ethnically minded than the writers of the 11th and 12th centuries?

Count Roger and the Common Market, what next? I thought this was an academic exercise, not a political or even a religious one, and much less a mere refurbishing of traditional tales and beliefs. On the latter, Dr. Brincat should read, if he has not already done so, *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. By Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 1983). He will have to be much more academic (in the best sense) next time if I am to indulge in another reply.

Yours truly,

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