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Malta under the Arabs

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Sir, – In thanking my friend and University colleague Dr. Mark Brincat for the attention he has given to my publications on Paleo-Christian, Byzantine and medieval Maltese antiquities (*The Sunday Times*, March 18), I must confess to a feeling of academic frustration at finding my writings being used to support a thesis which my studies have lead me to reject.

In the introduction to my book *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands* (Oxford, 1986, pp. 6-7), which Dr. Brincat twice refers to in his article, I wrote:

“The rise of Muslim power in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries naturally affected the islands which were probably raided a number of times but were not definitely conquered until 870, when they were captured by the Aghlabid governor of Sicily. The conquest may not have been easy and possibly provoked a harsh Muslim reaction. There is some evidence that the general rule of tolerance practised elsewhere by the Muslims may not have been followed in Malta. The extent of Muslim persecution cannot naturally be determined but it may partially account for the erosion of Christianity during the two centuries of their rule. No bishop is recorded after 876 and the only known Christians were apparently Greek slaves. It was they who welcomed Roger the Norman when in 1090 he plundered the islands and reduced them to tributary status to the Normans in Sicily. No attempt was however made to interfere with the now well-entrenched Muslim culture of the Maltese, and Malta was still *a sarracenis inhabitata* in 1175.

“The connection with Latin civilisation apparently remained loose throughout the Norman period ending in 1194 and it was probably only after 1220 that the islands were integrated in the Sicilian realm ... The Angevin domination ... saw the emergence for the first time of a Christian European style of government and society. By about 1270 there was an organised diocese which functioned as a suffragan of Palermo. All connection with the Muslim world had definitely been severed and Latin Christianity was further consolidated by the long Aragonese rule between 1282 and 1530. Even so, the grafting and sustaining of Christianity on the formerly largely Muslim islands must have been difficult. Its success was nonetheless complete. The Muslim past was soon to become an embarrassment and history was distorted by false traditions which determined the course of Maltese historiography till the twentieth century. These traditions, some of which appear to have been deliberately fabricated, were apparently encouraged by the Knights of St. John, who held Malta between 1530 and 1798. The catacombs did not escape this myth-making. They were used as arguments for the unbroken Christian traditions of the islands from the time of St. Paul. The idea that they were used as hiding places during periods of presumed Roman persecutions and Muslim intolerance is an important element of Maltese folklore.”

More recent research has substantially confirmed these views and corrected a few inaccuracies as, for example, the date Count Roger's razzia which took place in 1091, and not 1090.

Referring my contribution on “Medieval Maltese Architecture” (A.T. Luttrell ed., *Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, Its Churches and Paintings*, Malta, 1976, p. 81), Dr. Brincat makes me state that “other Christian churches in Malta may have been built on *pre-Arab* burial sites.”

What I in fact wrote was: “Other early Christian churches may have been built on burial sites.” The adjective *pre-Arab* is a gratuitous interpolation by Dr. Brincat, who apparently failed to realise that the hypothesis concerned presumed paleo-Christian and Byzantine (and therefore necessarily *pre-Arab*) churches!

The case of the church of the Immaculate Conception at Mosta, which according to Hugh Braun (*Works of Art in Malta: Losses and Survivals in the War*, London, 1946, p.17) had its altar “sited exactly above a Roman tomb,” is certainly intriguing but unfortunately of little practical help to archeology.

The tomb was apparently discovered when the church, which stood in the neighbourhood of Ta’ Qali, was demolished and its materials used to make aircraft pens. Not only was the site not scientifically excavated but no records, photographic or otherwise, seem to have been kept.

In my 1976 study I suggested, not necessarily correctly, that the presumably late medieval church “could have occupied the site of an earlier building” but given the flimsiness of the evidence, it is unwise to back his arguments that the church of Immaculate Conception at Msida had “had catacombs.” In my book on catacombs (p. 324), I mentioned the neighbourhood of the church as the site of a possible hypogeum, basing myself on the manuscript notes of Themistocles Zammit who, on November 17, 1927, was approached by a certain Dun Gejt Sammut of Casal Lija who told him that “behind the church there was once a catacomb which was closed up, for people used to go in it at all times.”

Zammit remarked that inquiries would be made about this but regrettably did nothing about it. What I fail to understand is how arguments about the validity of a Christian presence in Malta under the Arabs can be bolstered by the suspected existence of an early Christian burial site in the vicinity of a late medieval church. There is absolutely no evidence that The Immaculate Conception church at Msida had *pre-Arab* origins.

Finally I want to make it clear that it is not my intention to be dragged into a polemic with Dr. Brincat on a topic in which I have a direct academic interest. My research on the subject will no be published in newspaper debates but in a book which I am at present writing.

Yours truly,

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Msida.