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## **Al-Himyari's Malta**

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Dr. J. Brincat (*The Sunday Times*, August 5) deserves the congratulations and thanks of those who hold Maltese history dear. The newly discovered passage of al-Himyari is by far the most informative, though not necessarily the most authoritative, historical source for Muslim Malta discovered so far.

We are now certainly far removed from the situation faced by Comm. Abela in 1647, who was not aware of a single Muslim source of Maltese history. It also confirms what I have been suspecting for some time, that much remains to be discovered in the Arabic and Muslim libraries of the Levant and North Africa and the Oriental Libraries in the Western world, material which is effectively out of reach of most of Maltese historians because of their insufficient knowledge of Arabic and because the Arabists themselves are slow to reveal it to the Maltese historian simply because they are not interested in Maltese history.

### **Uninhabited?**

Al-Bakri's passage has remained generally unknown to the Maltese historian. I only know that it refers to Malta, an island famous for its harbour and pine trees, and that the writer of his source died in Andalusia before the year 1000. The passage from al-Himyari remained locally unknown though it was published 15 years ago. What more remains is anyone's guess. The need for Maltese medieval historians to obtain at least a working knowledge of Arabic does not need any further emphasis.

Coming now to Dr. Brincat's historical interpretation of Al-Himyari's passage, one notices his patent eagerness to reduce the duration of Muslim Malta to a mere 42 years, starting from the suggested date of the Muslim colony (1049) to 1090. He excludes from it both the alleged long period of abandonment of the island (except for the periodic visits by Muslims for timber and so on) and the period between the razzia visit of 1091 (observe again his ignoring of the consensus among historians concerning the date of Count Roger's visit) and the final conquest in 1127 by King Roger.

He writes of the Muslims' massacre of the Christian inhabitants in 870 when the translated text itself only speaks of the capture and demolition of the island's fortress and the imprisonment of its commander and the sacking and plundering of the island, ignoring the possibility that at least the women and children among the inhabitants were simply reduced to slavery and sold abroad away from the island – a possibility which would have impelled the conquerors to round up everyone else on the island for profitable sale abroad.

This brings me to another point. Why are we not provided with a copy of the Arabic text, instead of the two other illustrations which do not add anything to the argument?

The main impact of the next text is the claim that Malta was uninhabited for 180 years. It has long been known that certain Arabic texts describe Malta as an uninhabited island, but it has always seemed clear to serious historians that this idea arose by confusion with the almost identical name of the much smaller island of Galita, north of Tunisia inhabited only by domestic animals run wild, hunted by the sailors of passing ships.

Ibn Hauqal described Malta as uninhabited except for wild donkeys and sheep and he said that it produces honey – but, though a contemporary, he is unlikely to have had personal knowledge of Malta himself. In addition, in one MS of his work, the island, between Sicily

and Crete, is actually called Galita in the text, though Malita in the map. In another version, the island is called Halisa.

Abu Hamid al Andalusi describes a large island called Galita full of sheep which did not belong to anyone. Men went ashore and captured quantities of them, cut their throats and filled their ships with their carcasses without their carcasses ever becoming scarce, they were so numerous. Ad-Dimashqi describes Galita in similar terms, adding that the wild animals avoided people and that there was a convent called The Convent of the sheep. information is in Redjala's wellknown paper, which Dr. Brincat has read.

### Colonisation

Dr. Luttrell himself, in his paper on Ibn Hauqal's version, was reasonably cautious and, in fact, downright sceptical. Later historians like Al-Himyari must have found themselves faced both with this tradition and with the Al-Qazwini episode. The solution was to posit a colonisation of the island suspiciously just before the events of 1048.

One notes that Dr. Brincat considers the possibility of a Muslim colonisation only from Sicily. This is probable enough, but it is not implied by the passage in Al-Himyari. Some other scholars, linguists even, would probably prefer on linguistic grounds an Arabic community settlement from elsewhere, say from the Levant. It is up to them to speak out on the matter. One must also observe that Amari could not say much about Christian slaves in Sicily during Muslim times: "*di schiavi cristiani posseduti da Musulmani non abbiamo memoria,*" *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*, II, 458 of the recent reprint.

Incidentally, the rejection of the "zero option" and the removal back to 870 of a partial re-peopling of the island actually increases the possibility that the new Arabic speaking inhabitants came here from Sicily, since it is known that the invading and conquering army did, after all, come from there. But there is no such knowledge for the 1040s.

The problem of the meaning of *ghabid* in Malta of the 1040s remains unchanged. That they could have been foreigners but probably included the descendants of Maltese survivors of 870 I myself indicated in my *The Arabs in Malta*. That they were Christians in the 1040s I still think incompatible with the whole tenor of the events of that incident.

### Sources

The new version does not itself mention Christians; nothing really has changed there. Even if Al-Himyari thought they were Christian, he wrote four centuries after the event. We would have to examine thoroughly all his sources, if they still survive (and it is clear some study has already been done by others on that problem, as was done more than a century ago for Al-Qazwini).

One should discover precisely what Al-Himyari took from the known and identified sources, what he probably obtained from other sources, and what is simply mere conflation on his part. Thus the extra details, with names and all, of the events of 870 probably imply an extra source, while those of the Al-Qazwini incident could easily be mere extra wordage by Al-Himyari or his predecessors. Alternatively, they could be an older version which Al-Qazwini abbreviated. However, the number 400 seems realistic and genuine. But one cannot decide all this without serious study by suitably qualified historians within reach of mental libraries. The latter do not exist in Malta or within several hundred miles of Malta.

Coming to other details, no doubt Dr. Brincat would know that Arabic has a different for captives, *asir*, the word from which our Maltese *lsiera* is derived, that there is therefore a difference between *ghabid* and *asir*. The events of 1091 do not refer to Christian *ghabid* – which would probably have been Latinised into *servi* – but to *captivi* (Ar. *asir*) who left Malta

with Count Roger on the latter's return to Sicily. Only positive documentation, which just does not exist, would justify an identification of the two social groups. In any case, the *ghabid* of 1040s could no longer be referred to either as *ghabid* or *captivi* in 1091.

Dr. Brincat writes of "markers of continuity." If he is referring vaguely to identity of social group, including the Christian community fined during the reign of King Roger, and if he is proposing a continuity of the same religion throughout, one can only say that he is on extremely slippery ground. If he means anything else, why is he so vague?

I am surprised that Dr. Brincat still appeals to the so-called *problem* of the Christian vocabulary of the Maltese language. There is no problem. The words he mentions which, of course, can be found in documents from Sicily, can also be found from practically anywhere else in the Arab world, including – for *qassis* – Islamic Portugal (*vide* G.B. Pellegrini, *Ricerche sugli arabismi italiani con particolare riguardo alla Sicilia*, Palermo, 1989, pp. 242-445, a work cited by Dr. Brincat himself) as I have always maintained.

### **Mistake**

Dr. Brincat thinks that the *ghabid* of 1048-49 could have brought the words over with them from Sicily if they were Christian. No doubt this is so; however, by the end of the same short paragraph he switches quietly from the possible Christian *ghabid* of 1048-49 to undated "Arabic-speaking Christians from Sicily," which is not the same thing. I have always sustained the latter, dating them to 1127 and later times. There is no proof of the former. And I do not have to use the vocabulary argument to prove anything. Dr. Brincat is, however, trying to prove that the *ghabid* were Christian because of the existence of this vocabulary in the Maltese language; otherwise he sees a problem where there is none. This is the same mistake committed by so many others before him.