

Source: **The Sunday Times** [Malta], (1990)(30Sept.16)

### **A realistic assessment of Al-Himyari's account**

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*From Professor Godfrey Wettinger*

Sir, – My colleague Dr. J. Brincat, wants us to take seriously (*The Sunday Times*, September 9) al-Himyari's description of an uninhabited Malta during 870-1040 A.D. by drawing up a rudimentary sources for his chronicle, suggesting that if al-Himyari based his reference to the facts of 1048-49 and 1053-4 on al-Bakri he transmitted a contemporary report.

It is not clear how the editor of al-Himyari arrived at his conclusion that the first part of the al-Himyari passage is derived from al-Bakri, even though he added "except that al-Bakri's text is not complete." Unfortunately, it is already known that al-Bakri simply describes Malta as an island famous for its port and pine trees. Elsewhere al-Bakri records the conquest of Malta by King Roger (but, perhaps significantly, omits the raid by Count Roger). Are Ihsan Abbas and Dr. J. Brincat hoping for another more relevant reference to Malta in al-Bakri? Why did al-Himyari suppress the reference to the port? Incidentally, the passage itself as published in *The Sunday Times* on August 5, 1990, does not contain a reference to its source or sources. It is clear, and it is admitted by Dr. J. Brincat (following his source, the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*), that his work is based mainly on three sources, including al-Bakri, and that Ihsan Abbas, the editor, attributes *most*, but not all, of the passage on Malta to al-Bakri and al-Qazwini. That is the crux of the question. The source of the statement that Malta was uninhabited until the 1040s is still very much unclear.

There are some obvious differences between the passages concerning an uninhabited island in other writers, detailed in *The Sunday Times* of August 26, and the relevant passage in al-Himyari. For one thing, the new passage does not refer to domestic animals run wild which all the others do, whether they attributed them to Malta (i.e. Malita) or to Galita, while the latter do not mention the use of Maltese timber for shipbuilding. On the other hand one of them mentions honey. It is plainly incorrect to state that the minor texts agree on the essential notion that *Malta* was uninhabited once they sometimes attribute this to Galita.

Galita itself, a rocky island some 30 km from Cape Serrat, Tunisia, is 5.3 km in length and 2 km in breadth, and rises to a maximum height of 400 metres. It once belonged to the Phoenicians and then to the Romans. Its few inhabitants keep vineyards but primarily fish for lobsters. The neighbourhood of the isle of *Galithon* abounds in fish – *merous*, *loups*, *saupes*, *limons*, *sars*, *mulets*, etc.: thus far the *Blue Guide*. An Italian guidebook of 1981 says that only the major island of the archipelago i.e. *Galithe* itself, a rocky island of 10 km<sup>2</sup>, was inhabited by an occasional fisherman. The surrounding waters abounded in lobsters! and there was a colony of seals on the islet of *Galithon*. No accommodation was available for visitors on *Galithe*, but the inhabitants were very hospitable. There was no regular ferry to the island, but it could be reached normally from Tabarka. Another Italian reference work dated 1956 says the island is volcanic, 7 km<sup>2</sup> in area and had some 170 inhabitants.

Whether one likes it or not, at least some scholars, independent of myself, are going to point to this island, in Arabic *Galita*, as the original, uninhabited island of the medieval Arabic chroniclers. The reason is not merely the intrinsically greater plausibility of such a small island bereft of resources and port remaining uninhabited for great lengths of time, but also the fact that the names *Galita* and *Malita*, written in the Arabic script, can easily be mistaken for each other and in fact simply replace each other in these texts. We have here an

analogous situation to that of the names of Malta and Mileto in Latin documents leading to the drawing up by old pioneering historians like Com. Abela of the crude and absolutely unreliable lists of the bishops of Malta which we have had to use until the matter was cleared up relatively recently.

The existence of 'abid in Malta in 1048-9 is much more difficult to account for, if one accepts a new colonisation of the island at that time than if one regarded the existence of 'abid in Malta in the 1040s as a mere relic of what had happened in 870, a survival ripe for abolition. One must note that the 'abid are not told to change their religion in al-Himyari's passage before the daughters of the Muslims are allowed to marry them. Indeed, there is no mention of such a change of religion anywhere. Such a change must already have taken place as Muslims are universally, I believe, forbidden to allow their daughters to marry Christians though Muslim men are allowed to marry non-Muslim women.

In addition, survivors of the original Christian ethnic Maltese inhabitants would have been given the status of *dhimmi* not of 'abid, in the 1040s, if they remained faithful to their faith so long after the events of 870. Their survival would also give the lie to al-Himyari's claim that Malta was inhabited – but perhaps that conclusion is merely my "interpretation" not a mere logical consequence of Dr. Brincat's own personal "interpretation."

Dr. Brincat apparently does not accept the possibility, even the probability, that behind Himyari's text lie several sources, not just one or two. Al-Himyari's passage has therefore to be portioned out among the various probable ultimate sources. This explains why Dr. Brincat raised the objection that Galita had never longed to the Byzantines, while the Malta of al-Himyari's text obviously once belonged to them, not understanding that no one is suggesting that the whole of al-Himyari's passage on Malta really probably refers to Galita, but only the short middle portion of it.

I have already suggested that the new information concerning 870 could be reliable and valuable, and that the fuller account of the al-Qazwini incident could be a mere adaptation and conflation by al-Himyari or a preceding chronicler of al-Qazwini or, alternatively, it could represent the old text later utilised and condensed by al-Qazwini himself. Both end portions of al-Himyari are interesting and valuable, and Dr. Brincat deserves our thanks for pointing out this recently published text. But the intermediate section, that concerning a supposedly uninhabited Malta, is doubtful in view of what is already known of similar passages. Though al-Himyari indicated three main sources in his Introduction, he apparently leaves the total list of sources an open ended one. Al-Himyari himself does not give the sources to the various portions of the passage concerning Malta.

On Ibn Makki, I wish Dr. Brincat well. It is high time that Maltese scholars forked out on their own rather than simply followed in the footsteps of others. Some of us perhaps allowed ourselves to be unduly influenced by the late Professor Rizzitano's somewhat cautious, even adverse, judgment in his *Storia e cultura nella Sicilia Saracena* (Palermo, 1975), p. 201. Professor Rizzitano, referring to Hasan Husni Abd al-Wahhab's statement (in the early fifties) that Ibn Makki's was a study on the popular dialect of Muslim Sicily, stated that the question remained uncertain and that he did not feel there was sufficient evidence to agree with Abd al-Wahhab, who did not himself produce enough supporting evidence. Professor Rizzitano left the matter open in the short entry on Ibn Makki in the *Enclopaedia of Islam*, published in 1972, and essentially the same position but treated at greater length was taken by F. Giunta and U. Rizzitano, in their joint *Terra senza crociati* (Palermo, 1987), pp. 83-84. Dr. Brincat is obviously now profiting from the work of Adelgisa de Simone, in her *Spoglio antroponimico della giaride (gara'id) arabo-greche dei diplomi editi da Salvatore Cusa* (Rome, 1979), pp. 38 onwards, intending on his part to introduce the Maltese element which she omits. Ibn Makki's book itself was edited by 'Abd al-'Aziz Matar and published in Arabic in Cairo in 1966.

On the Christian vocabulary, it is now apparently being proposed that a careful and detailed mapping of the various words involved be made. This would, of course, be interesting in some respects, but not in the one that has interested local historians so far. After all, no one is suggesting that Malta necessarily obtained its Christian vocabulary from Spain or elsewhere in the west. References to the existence of such words in Andalusia have been made only in answer to the local argument that such words in the Maltese language have necessarily a pre-Arabic local origin, perhaps from Maronite refugees to the island.

I have myself always thought we obtained them, or most of them, from Sicily, whatever their ultimate origin. I do not think that the work now envisaged by Dr. Brincat is going to help prove that those words reached Malta in the 1040s rather than in 1127 or later. And, as I have said before, I am not using them to prove that Christianity returned to Malta in or after 1127. In fact, I am not using them at all, and have never done so, because they are not sufficiently distinctive.

Mellieha,

Yours truly,

G. WETTINGER.