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## [p.1] New Light on the Darkest Age in Malta's History

### 1. What language was spoken in Malta before the Arab conquest?

One of the most intriguing aspects of the evolution of the Maltese language is the lack of a clearly perceivable substratum. When the study of language became truly scientific, thanks to the developments of the historical-comparative approach in the late Nineteenth century, languages were no longer considered ready-made built-in systems, genetically transmitted like birdsong (as in Schleicher 1859). The geographical and social dimensions disproved the puristic and ethnic-nationalistic notions, and therefore languages came to be seen as products of the fusion of various elements reflecting historical events and durable contacts (Ascoli 1873). When a community adopted a new language it invariably grafted it on the old language, which remained recognizable in such elements as pronunciation (phonology), basic or local vocabulary (lexicon and semantics) and certain grammar rules (morphology and syntax). According to the stratigraphical concept of languages this underlying layer is called the *substratum*. The substratum of Maltese could have been either Punic, Latin or Greek.

The most popular explanation of this problem suggests that before the Arab conquest the inhabitants of Malta and Gozo must have spoken Punic, a Semitic language, and that consequently it was easy for them to learn Arabic, a genetically-related language. This hypothesis conforms to the geolinguistic theory of the conservative tendency of isolated areas, and it was launched by M.A. Vassalli (1827), promulgated by J. Aquilina (1961: 44-45, 121, 180) and adapted by Wettinger (1986: 90). It apparently relies heavily on the old misconception that Maltese was a unique survivor of Phoenician, a notion upheld by various traveller/writers of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries (see Cassola 1991-92) and linguists and historians of the Eighteenth, like J.H. Maius (1718), G.P.F. Agius De Soldanis (1750, 1759), M.A. Vassalli (1791, who changed his opinion in 1827), E. Magri (1902, 1907), A.E. Caruana (1903) and A. Preca (1904). At first the Phoenician/Punic origin of Maltese [p.2] was in line with the exotic pre-Romantic fashion of mythologizing ancient languages like Etruscan and Nuragic Sardinian (note the full title of De Soldanis 1750: *Della lingua punica presentemente usata da' Maltesi etc, ovvero Nuovi documenti li quali possono servire di lume all'antica lingua etrusca*), but it later became an indispensable imperialist lever to shove Italian from its position as acrolect in order to replace it with English (see Aquilina 1961: 167-8; Brincat 1990: 442-3; Cassola 1992: 871; and especially Frendo 1991: 201-211, 1993, and Hull 1993). This myth was considered useful because it could confer on Maltese the prestige of being connected to an ancient language and a highly-esteemed people, and would avoid the psychological resistance provoked by social and religious prejudice against Arabic-speaking nations.

If these factors are ignored it would be difficult to understand how the debate on the origins of Maltese could have gone on for so long when local and foreign scholars of the calibre of Gian Francesco Abela (1647: 257-259), Michel Anton Vassalli (1827) and W. Gesenius (1810) had already perceived the genetic link of Maltese with the Maghreb variety of Arabic. The paretymological fantasies of Annibale Preca, who went so far as to seek Canaanite roots for surnames like Anastasi, Aquilina, Diacono and La Rosa (*Għajn Istars, Għajn Kollija, id-daqni, l-għarusa*; 1904: 675-685) and of Manwel Magri, who gave Phoenician interpretations of Maltese place-names and surnames (Cassar Pullicino 1976: 83-

90), have now been rejected, and research by Prosper Grech (1961) and Alexander Borg (1977: 223; 1978: 348) has revealed that in present-day Maltese there are no traces of Punic.

Actually historical evidence of the use of Phoenician or Punic in Malta is rather vague. The earliest archaeological traces belong to the middle of the seventh century B.C. but literary records only date back to the fourth century B.C. Moreover Anthony Bonanno has shown that “Neither Livy nor any of the other ancient writers tell us whether the population of the archipelago at that time was actually Punic, or indigenous under a Carthaginian administration. Busuttil (1968) interprets *hypò Karchedoníon oikoumenai* in Pseudo-Skylax (4th century B.C.) as “inhabited by Carthaginians.” He also points out that Diodorus Siculus (V, 12 1-4) in the first century B.C. “qualifies Malta [p.3] and Gozo, somewhat anachronistically, as Phoenician colonies (*Phoinikon apoikoi*) but seems to distinguish between the indigenous inhabitants (*Katoikountes*) of Malta and the Phoenician traders (*empórous*)” (Bonanno 1992: 13 n. 2). In his account of the second Punic War, Titus Livius narrates how Malta was taken by Tiberius Sempronius Longus in 218 B.C. and specifies that it was then a Carthaginian possession (*a Carthaginiensis tenebatur*) defended by a garrison of about 2000 soldiers under general Hamilcar (Livy xxi, 51).

This figure is described as “sizable” by Bonanno who links it with the Roman raid of 255 B.C. when the islands were plundered and devastated. Could this event have affected the population in number and/or attitude? Were the privileges granted to the island (its special political status and relative administrative autonomy) a result of the Romans’ recognition of the inhabitants’ betrayal of their former rulers (Livy used the word *tradtur*)? Cicero and Diodorus show that the islands enjoyed a good standard of living in the first century B.C. and bear witness to the symbiosis of the Punic, Hellenic and Roman cultures which is confirmed by archaeological evidence. Even coinage bears inscriptions and legends in the three languages for a number of centuries. Bonanno points out that in the first and second centuries B.C. Greek legends substituted Punic ones while Punic iconographic motifs were maintained; later on legends were written in Latin but were accompanied by Hellenistic motifs. There are also bilingual inscriptions, like the candelabra with dedications in Punic and Greek.

This proves that the three languages were used contemporaneously in official circles but it does not tell us anything about the language actually spoken by the population of the Maltese islands under Roman rule. The only hint is contained in the Acts of the Apostles where the locals are defined as *barbaroi* (*Acta*, xxviii, 1-11), but Bonanno presumes that Luke may have been referring to “uncultured peasants” and adds that the apostle did not actually say that they spoke Punic. Although the latter still seems to be the most logical conclusion, it does not exclude the fact that in the town the locals would have reached the bilingual stage, and anyway it does not justify the sweeping [p.4] generalization that Punic was spoken up to the Arab conquest, a period spanning 800 years. One must keep in mind that archaeological evidence shows that Punic inscriptions only come down to the first century B.C. and that while Maria Guzzo Amadasi described 37 inscriptions in Punic and 19 in Neo-Punic (1967: 64, n. 18), Mario Buhagiar found only one Punic inscription (datable between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D.) in late Roman and Byzantine catacombs, the others being 13 in Greek, 13 in Latin, 1 in Hebrew and 11 undeciphered (1986: 392-402).

Romanization and Latinization were slow processes everywhere, not only in Malta, because the Romans’ linguistic policy was not to force Latin on the conquered peoples but to concede its use as a special favour. This was the main reason why the Romance or Neolatin languages, including the dialects of Italy itself, began to develop as soon as spoken Latin

spread all over Southern and Central Europe. By analogy it is difficult to conceive how the inhabitants of Malta and Gozo, barely 10,000 in all, could avoid Latinization when much larger communities, spread over huge areas, succumbed so readily. The time span, between 218 B.C. and 476 A.D., was ample enough for the process to be accomplished. The earliest known Latin inscription dates to 200 years after the conquest but the local twin of the Naples bronze tablet, though it never came to light, was reportedly written in the first half of the first century B.C. (Bonanno, 1992: 15). Intense relations with Sicily could have brought about linguistic together with cultural and artistic influences, the question being whether these were Latin or Greek.

The Latin hypothesis was affirmed by T. Nöldeke (1904) and Carlo Tagliavini (1964: 261). The first local scholar to uphold it was Giuseppe Micallef (1931, and some articles in the newspaper *Malta*) who laid stress on Latin calques in Arabic words, but his conclusions were not accepted by J. Aquilina. P.P. Saydon (1956) declared himself cautiously closer to Micallef than to Aquilina and focused on words and place-names of Latin origin which are still in use in present-day Maltese: *gawwija* ‘seagull’ from GAVIA, *saborra* ‘ballast’ from SABURRA, *kalanka* ‘creek’ from CALANCA, *kmieni* ‘early’ from CUM MANE, *Malta* from MELITA, *Pwales* from PALUS, -skala (as [p.5] in *Marsaskala*) ‘port’ from SCALA. But Aquilina expressed the opinion that their number is not sufficiently large to prove that the inhabitants of Malta and Gozo spoke Latin before the Arab conquest, and suggested that these words could have come in through Sicilian or Italian (1961: 8-9). Saydon repeated his claims in 1966, adding a few other examples like *Gozo/Ghawdex* from GAUDOS and *qannotta* from CANNETUM. The most interesting case is that of the toponym *Marsaskala* which Saydon justly explains as composed of the synonyms *Marsa* and *Skala* which both mean ‘port,’ but he could have added weight to his argument by referring to two other examples: the Sicilian *mongibello* and the Maltese *l-Abbatija tad-dejr* in which the first term (the new one, *monte*, *abbatija*), shows that the meaning of the second term (the older one, *ġebel*, *dejr*) was no longer understood. By the same pattern in *Marsaskala* the first term, *Marsa*, would be the new one and *Skala* the older one.

The third possibility could be that the language spoken here would have been Greek (obviously not the Classical *koiné* but a local variety of one of the dialects). First of all one cannot exclude that Greek could have been spoken here even during the Roman period: only Greek could have blocked the penetration of Latin as it did on the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean and in parts of Sicily, mainly on the Eastern coast, the ones nearest to the Maltese islands. There is certainly scope for comparative study between the situations prevalent in Sicily and Malta at the time but concrete information regarding both is still scarce.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, following the death of Romolo Augustolo in 476, the Maltese islands fell to the Vandals and the Ostrogoths, and then in 535 they passed, together with Sicily, under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine Empire. Literary sources are almost silent on this period (see Brown 1975, Pertusi 1977) and therefore the same considerations have to be made as for Latin: the isolated area could have preserved the use of the old language, whether Latin, Greek or Punic while the length of time, 350 years, would have been sufficient to bring about a shift to Byzantine Greek, especially in consideration of the smallness of the population (the lack of archaeological [p.6] evidence presumes socio-economic decline). Anyway the short distance (93 km) which separates the Maltese islands from Sicily would suggest an analogous situation.

Research in this area has yielded very little fruit. Joseph Busuttill investigated a few terms of Greek origin which might be pre-Arabic, especially place-names whose first term is *marsa*, like *Marsalforn*, *Marsaskala*, *Marsamxett* and *Marsaxlokk* (1972: 520-522). Another word which could be of Byzantine origin is the toponym *Xlendi*, from *kelandion*, but it could have also been adopted from the Arabic *xalandi* (Aquilina, 1990: 1579). On the other hand it is interesting to note that Godfrey Wettinger has observed a surprising number of placenames derived from Greek personal names, like *Hal-Kirkop* < Percopu, *Wied Inċita* < Nikita or Nicetas, *Ta' Xbiex* < Sabas, and these, together with surnames of Greek origin (Cachia, Callus, Cumbo and perhaps Grixti and Schembri) “might indicate the persistence of a substratum of persons with Greek names or surnames” (1986: 95). However Wettinger then adds that these “might be of Norman or even post-Norman age.” Even more interesting is the fact that the vowel system of Sicilian, characterized by its three-level classification (open, half-open, close), has been attributed to the influence of Byzantine Greek (Fanciullo 1984, 1985). This system is shared by Maltese and it is still productive, that is it governs new lexical acquisitions. Even in this case, however, it is not easy to determine whether it is attributable to the influence of Sicilian (Brincat 1980: 606-7) or perhaps Arabic (Aquilina 1988: 52).

Many terms have found their way into Maltese, directly or indirectly, from various languages, ancient and modern. In this context it is sufficient to point out the words *fellus* and *gattus* which ultimately derive from Latin PULLUS and CATTUS, but which came in through Arabic, which had adopted them from Berber which had in turn adopted them during the Roman domination and the consequent Latinization of the coastal areas of North Africa. There are also numerous examples of Arabic terms which have entered Maltese through Sicilian and Italian, like *ħamallu* and *tarzna*, not to mention modern international words like *alkoħol* and *magażin* (through English). Thorough comparative investigations still need to be carried out [p.7] on both the etymological and geolinguistic levels in the neighbouring dialects. At this stage it is simply not possible to define the language spoken in Malta before Arabic. Some consolation is to be found in the fact that the situation in neighbouring Sicily is not much better: Alberto Varvaro, who is keenly propounding the theory of the continuity of Latin speech in spite of the massive Arabization, has up to now gleaned very few examples in support of his theory (1981: 116-124). Even placenames, usually the most conservative element in the language, do not offer much help: Varvaro admits “I casi in cui possiamo provare la continuità di un toponimo dall'età bizantina a quella normanna, quando si tratta di abitati minori o minimi o di semplici siti disabitati, sono veramente pochissimi” (1981: 87).

It is therefore useless to bring up arguments based on whether the inhabitants of Malta spoke Latin, Greek or Punic before the Arab conquest. First of all, as Matthias Prevaes has pointed out, it should still be possible to distinguish between Punic and Arabic placenames (1993: 19). Secondly the lack of a linguistic substratum is one of the strongest proofs of a rapid and violent takeover. This is confirmed by the lack of archaeological evidence dating back to the Arab period (Mahoney 1988: 51-53), as well as by literary sources, Christian and Muslim, the most important one of which is the passage on Malta in the *Kitāb ar-Rawḍ al-mi‘tār fī ḥabar al-aqtār* by ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Ḥimyarī.

## **2. Al-Ḥimyarī's account of the two most important events in the period of Arab domination of Malta, 870 and 1053/54.**

When I was carrying out research in the problem of the linguistic sub-stratum of Maltese, I resolved to have a deeper look into the Arab sources on the period in the hope of finding hints about the language spoken in Malta before the Arab conquest. I first came across

the name of al-Ḥimyarī in G.B. Pellegrini's *Ricerche sugli arabismi italiani* (Palermo 1989) and since I could not trace his work here, I asked the assistance of Prof. Girolamo Caracausi of the University of Palermo. Very kindly Prof. Caracausi contacted Prof. Adalgisa De Simone, a colleague of his and an expert in the [p.8] field of Arabic studies, and I received a photocopy of the passage on Malta in the edition of al-Ḥimyarī's geographical dictionary published by Iḥsān 'Abbās in Beirut in 1975 (p.520). I passed it on to my colleague Dr. Manwel Mifsud who translated it, and in consideration of the surprising novel information it contained I published the English version with my comments in *The Sunday Times of Malta* on August 5 1990. It naturally caused quite a stir for al-Ḥimyarī was completely unknown in Malta since he had not been mentioned in the standard studies by Luttrell (1975a) and Wettinger (1986). Actually his works were only discovered in 1931 by E. Lévi-Provençal who published the parts describing Spain, Portugal and South-West France in 1938. Due to his absence from Amari's fundamental publications, he was not included in Minganti (1965), although Rizzitano had already published the parts relative to Italy in Arabic as early as 1956. Nor was he quoted in Redjala 1973, and consequently his inclusion of Malta remained unsuspected. Although the first full edition of al-Ḥimyarī's Geographical Dictionary appeared in 1975 (I. 'Abbās), and was followed by De Simone's 1984 edition of the parts relative to Italy and Sicily in Italian, it was still not utilized by Grassi 1989 (although the *Rawḍ* was included in her list of sources with "poche notizie," p. 18) and Barbato 1992.

While some reactions were enthusiastic and very encouraging, others were sceptical or very cautious. But since nothing stimulates scholarship like disagreement, I followed it up with further articles in the same paper on September 9 and November 5 of the same year. I was then invited by the FIS to produce a booklet which was published in 1991 and launched during an international conference I convened on Languages of the Mediterranean (Malta, September 26-29) where I read a paper in Italian presenting al-Ḥimyarī's passage on Malta to my Italian colleagues and delving into its implications for the early stages of the Maltese language (Brincat 1994: 130-140). The present edition is based on the above-mentioned writings but it takes into account further developments in the field. The English translation is by Dr. Manwel Mifsud and the *apparatus criticus* reproduces divergent words or phrases in the version published by Mathias Prevaes (1993: 15-16). The footnotes are reproduced from the edition of Iḥsān 'Abbās, where they carry different numbers.

**مالطة**<sup>(٣)</sup> : جزيرة من الجزائر التي تلي جزيرة صقلية . وهي في القبلة من مسينة بينها وبين [صقلية] مجرى واحد ، وكانت قبل هذا للمسلمين . وفيها مراس منشأة للسفن . وأشجارها الصنوبر والعرعر والزيتون . وطولها ثلاثون ميلاً ، وفيها مدينة من بنيان الأول . وكان يسكنها الروم .

وغزاها خلف الخادم مولى زيادة الله بن إبراهيم عند قيام أبي عبد الله محمد بن أحمد<sup>(٤)</sup> ابن أخي زيادة الله على يد أحمد ابن عمر بن عبد الله بن الأغلّب ، فهو الذي شقي في أمرها . وخلف هذا هو المعروف ببناء المساجد والقناطر والمواجل . فحاصرها ومات وهو محاصر لها . فكتبوا إلى أبي عبد الله بوفاته . فكتب أبو عبد الله إلى عامله بجزيرة صقلية . وهو محمد بن خفاجة . أن يبعث إليهم والياً . فبعث إليهم سوادة بن محمد . ففتحوا حصن مالطة . وظفروا بملكها عمروس أسيراً . فهدموا حصنها وغنموا وسبوا ما عجزوا عن حمله . وحمل لأحمد من كنائس مالطة ما بنى به قصره الذي بسوسة داخلاً في البحر ، والمسلك إليه **عل** قنطرة [ وكان ذلك سنة خمس وخمسين ومائتين ]<sup>(٥)</sup> فبقيت بعد ذلك جزيرة مالطة خربة غير أهلة ، وإنما كان يدخلها النشامون للسفن ، فإن العود فيها أمكن ما يكون ، والصيدون للحوت لكثرتهم في سواحلها وطيبه ، والشاترون للمسك فإنه أكثر شيء هناك .

فلما كان بعد الأربعين والأربعمائة من الهجرة عمرها المسلمون ، وبنوا مدينتها ، ثم عادت أتمّ مما كانت عليه ، فغزاها الروم سنة خمس وأربعين وأربعمائة في مراكب كثيرة وعدد . فحصرها المسلمون في المدينة واشتدّ الحصار عليهم وضعموا فيهم . وسأطم المسلمون الأمان فأبوا إلا على النساء والأموال . فأحصى المسلمون عدد المقاتلة من أنفسهم فوجدوهم نحو أربعمائة . ثم أحصوا عبيدهم فوجدوهم أكثر عدداً منهم . فجمعوهم وقالوا لهم :

إنكم إن ناصحتمونا في قتال عدونا وبلغتم من ذلك مبلغاً<sup>٣</sup> وانتهيتهم حيث انتهينا . فأنتم أحرار . نلحقكم بانفسنا وننكحكم بناتنا ونشارككم أموالنا . وإن أنتم تواتيتم وخذلتمونا لحقكم من السباه والرق ما يلحقنا . وكنتم أشد حالاً منا . لأن أحدنا قد يفسد به حميمه ، ويخلصه من الأسر وليه . ويتألى على استنقاذه جماعته ، فوعده العبيد من أنفسهم بأكثر مما ظنوا بهم . ووجدوهم إلى مناخزة عدوهم أسرع منهم . فلما أصبح القوم من اليوم الثاني غاداهم الروم على عادتهم ، وقد طمعوا ذلك اليوم في التغلب عليهم وأسروهم ، والمسلمون قد استعدوا في أكمل عدة للقائهم . وأصبحوا على بصيرة في مناخزتهم . واستنصروا الله عز وجل عليهم ، فزحفوا وثاروا نحوهم دعساً بالرماح وضرباً بالسيوف غير هائبين ولا مرجزين . والفقير يأخذى الحسين من الظفر العاجل أو الفوز الآجل . فأمدَّهم الله تعالى بالنصر . وأفرغ عليهم الصبر . وقذف في قلوب أعدائهم الرعب ، فولوا منزهين لا يلوون . واستأصل القتل أكثرهم . واستولى المسلمون على مراكزهم فما أفلتهم منها غير واحد . ولحق عبيدهم بأحرارهم . ووفوا لهم بميعادهم . وهاب العدو بعد ذلك أمرهم . فلم يعترضهم أحد منهم إلى حين<sup>٣</sup> .

<sup>٣</sup> أول المادة عن البكري (ج) : ٢٢٥ . إلا أن نصر البكري غير مستوفى . والمعتمد أيضاً أن أكثر المسادة الباقية عن البكري نفسه ، من موضع آخر في كتابه . وفي آثار البلاد : ٥٥٧ خلاصة للأخبار التاريخية الواردة هنا ، وانظر الإدريسي (م) : ١٩ ، ونجحة الدهر : ١٤١ ، وعند ياقوت نقلاً عن السلفي أن مالطة من مدن الأندلس .

<sup>٤</sup> هو المشهور بأبي الفرائق ، توفي سنة ٢٦١ ، وانظر نهاية الأرب ٢٢ : ٨١ .

<sup>١</sup> هذه العبارة وقعت في آخر مادة « مالطة » ووقعها هناك لا ينسجم سياق الأحداث ، وتبين هذا العناء يتفق مع فحوى ما ورد في البيان المغرب ١ : ١١٥ حول أحداث العام ٢٥٥ . وانظر كتاب الأستاذ الطالبي : ٤٧٥ وما بعدها في دراسة الغزو الأعلي لمالطة .

<sup>٢</sup> ص : مبلغنا

<sup>٣</sup> هذا أدق مما قاله القزويني : « واشتدت شوكتهم فلم تفرهم الروم بعد ذلك أبداً » . وذلك لأن مقتررات مالطة تغيرت بعد سقوط صقلية في يد الرومان .

[p.11] [1] MALTA<sup>1</sup>: One of the islands which lie close to the island of [2] Sicily, in line with Messina, and between it and [Sicily] there is [3] one strait. Formerly it belonged to the Muslims, and it has [4] harbours set up for ships. Its trees are the pine, the juniper and the [5] olive-tree, and its length is 30 miles and in it there is an ancient [6] city, and it was inhabited by the Byzantines.

[7] It was attacked by Halaf al-Hādīm, the master [or ally, mawlā] [8] of Ziyādat Allāh Ibn Ibrāhīm at the time of Abu ‘Abd Allāh [9] Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad,<sup>2</sup> the nephew of Ziyādat Allāh, with the [10] help of Aḥmad Ibn ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Aḡlab - and it [11] is he who suffered for it. And this Halaf is the one known for the [12] building of mosques, bridges and cisterns. He besieged it and died [13] during the siege. And they wrote to Abu ‘Abd Allāh about his [14] death, and Abu ‘Abd Allāh wrote to his governor (‘āmīl) in the [15] island of Sicily, Muḥammad Ibn Hafāḡa, to send them a leader [16] (wālī); and he sent them Sawāda Ibn Muḥammad, and they [17] captured the fortress of Malta and took its ruler ‘Amros (‘MRWS) [18] prisoner and they demolished its fortress, and they looted, and [19] desecrated (? SBW) whatever they could not carry. And he took [20] to Aḥmad from the churches (kanā’is) of Malta that with which [21] he built his castle in Susa by the sea and the path leading to it on [22] an arched bridge [and that was in the year 255].<sup>3</sup> After that, the [23] island of Malta remained an uninhabited ruin (hirba), but it was [24] visited by shipbuilders,

because the wood in it is of the strongest [25] kind, by the fishermen, because of the abundance and tastiness of [26] the fish around its shores, and by those who collect honey, [27] because that is the most common thing there.

[28] After the year 440 A.H. the Muslims peopled it ('MR) and they [29] built its city, and then it became a finer place than it was before. [30] In the year 445 the Byzantines attacked it with many ships and in [31] great numbers, and they besieged the Muslims in the city and the [32] siege became unbearable to them and they were hoping to take [33] them. And the Muslims asked them for clemency, and they refused [34] it except for women and belongings. And the Muslims reckoned [p.12] [35] the number of combatants among themselves and they found them [36] to be about 400; then they counted their slaves ('*abīd*) and found [37] they were more numerous than themselves. And they summoned [38] them and said to them "If you are loyal to us in our struggle [39] against our enemy, and you go as far as we go,<sup>4</sup> and end up where we [40] do, you will be free men (*ahrār*), we shall raise you to our level [41] and we shall give you our daughters in marriage, and we shall [42] make you partners in our riches; but if you hesitate and abandon [43] us, your fate will be the same captivity and bondage which will be [44] ours, nay you will fare even worse because with us one may be [45] redeemed by a dear friend or freed by his ally or saved by the [46] support of his community." And the slaves, of their own accord, [47] promised more than they [the Muslims] had thought they would, [48] and they [the Muslims] found that they [the slaves] rushed against [49] their enemy more promptly than themselves. And when the army [50] woke up on the second day, the Byzantines came towards them [51] early, as is their custom, hoping on that day to overcome them and [52] take them prisoners. But the Muslims had prepared themselves [53] very well to face them, and they came up early to fight them as by [54] premonition; and they asked for the help of Allāh the Almighty, [55] and they marched and stormed around them, piercing them with [56] spears and striking them with swords, without fearing or faltering, [57] confident of obtaining either of two fine goals: a quick victory or [58] the triumph of the hereafter. And Allāh the Exalted provided them [59] with help and gave them patience, and He cast fear into the hearts [60] of their enemies, and they fled defeated without looking back, and [61] the majority of them were massacred. The Muslims took possession [62] of their ships and only one of these slipped away. And their [63] slaves reached the state of their free men, and they were given [64] what had been promised to them. And after that, the enemy feared [65] them, and none of them [the enemy] showed up for some time.<sup>5</sup>

## [p.13]

### Footnotes of I. 'Abbās:

1) The first part of the article is from al-Bakrī (H.): 225, except that al-Bakrī's text is not complete. It is believed that the greater part of the remainder is also from al-Bakrī, from another passage in his book. And in *Atār al-Bilād*: 557 there is the essence of the historical information mentioned here. See also al-Idrīsī (M): 19, and *Nuḥbat ad-Dahr*: 141; and in Yāqūt there is a quotation from as-Salafī that Malta is one of the cities of al-Andalus.

2) Known as Abū al-Ġarānīq who died in the year 261; see *Nihāyat al-'Arab* 81: 22.

3) This sentence is at the end of the article "Malta" - but its position there does not agree with the sequence of events. The fixing of this year agrees with the contents of *Al-Bayān al-Muġrib* 115:1 regarding the events of the year 255; see the book by Prof. at-Tālbī: 475, and other works about the Aglabid victory of Malta.

4) S. gives mablaġanā.

5) This is more precise than what al-Qazwīnī says: “They became so powerful that the Byzantines never again dared to attack them.” This is because the fate of Malta changed after the fall of Sicily to the Normans.

**Variants in Prevaes’ translation:**

02 *in line with Messina*: from Messina in the direction of Mecca.

05 *an ancient city*: a city of ancient origin

07 *attacked*: raided

07 *the master [or ally, mawlā]*: a mawlā

09 *Ibn Aḥmad*: bn Aḥmad [known as Abū ’l-Ġarānīq, MP]

11 *suffered for it*: suffered for its cause

11 *known for the building of*: known for building

14 *in the island of Sicily*: in Sicily

16 *and he sent*: so he sent

19 *And he took to Aḥmad from the churches [kanā’is] of Malta that with which*: From the churches of Malta the materials were carried to Aḥmad with which

21 *by the sea*: which stretches out into the sea

21 *the path leading to it on*: which can be reached over

23 *but*: however

24 *the wood in it is of the strongest kind*: its wood is the strongest available

**[p.14]**

29 *a finer place than it was before*: even more perfect than it had been

32 *they were hoping to take them*: they hoped to overcome them

33 *clemency*: pardon

34 *except for*: except if they surrendered the

34 *reckoned*: counted

35 *combatants*: fighters

37 *summoned*: gathered

39 *go as far as we go*: go to the extreme

40 *raise you to our level*: take you as our equals

42 *make you partners in our riches*: share our possessions with you

44 *you will fare even worse*: your position will be even worse

45 *redeemed by a dear friend*: bought free by a friend or relative

45 *or freed by his ally*: freed from imprisonment by his patron

45 *or saved by the support of his community*: or his community might save him by its support

48 *they [the Muslims] found that that they [the slaves] rushed against*: they found them rushing to fight against

49 *more promptly*: even faster

49 *the army woke up on the second day*: the people got up on the morning of the next day

51 *custom*: habit

53 *as by premonition*: with foresight

54 *for the help of Allāh the Almighty*: the Almighty God to help them to win

55 *marched and stormed around them*: marched on and stormed towards them

55 *piercing them*: throwing them down

56 *striking*: beating

56 *without fearing or faltering*: without fear or turning away

57 *confident of*: trusting to

57 *a quick victory or the triumph of the hereafter*: a quick triumph or a later victory [in the hereafter, MP]

58 *Allāh the Exalted*: God Almighty

59 *with help and gave them patience*: with support and poured out steadfastness over them

61 *the majority*: most

62 *of these slipped away*: of them escaped

63 *reached*: acquired

65 *showed up*: disturbed them

[p.15]

### 3. How reliable is al-Ḥimyarī?

Biographical information about the author of *Kitāb ar-Rawḍ al-mi'tār* is not plentiful. In The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* he is described as a jurisconsult (*fakīh*) and *qaḍī*'s assessor or notary ('*adl*) who came from the Magreb. One of the manuscripts of his work gives the place and date of compilation of the *Rawḍ* as Djudda in 866/1461. The author of the entry, T. Lewicki, states that al-Ḥimyarī died in 900/1494 (but see De Simone 1984: 8-9, who proves that 727/1326-7 is more plausible; cfr. here pp.33-34) which means that he wrote a few hundred years after the events which concern us. Consequently the philological aspect of his work is of primary importance. The *Rawḍ* is said to be based on three sources: al-Bakrī, al-Idrīsī and the anonymous *Kitāb al-Istibṣār*. The editor of the *Rawḍ*, Ihsān 'Abbās, points out that most of the information in the passage about Malta is derived from al-Bakrī and al-Qazwīnī. But Umberto Rizzitano credits al-Ḥimyarī with a peculiar characteristic which distinguishes him from preceding chroniclers and geographers, namely the tendency to engraft historical anecdotes collected from various sources. Scholars have found that some of these sources are easy to identify but a few others are considered as lost, although further research may yield fresh evidence.

Al-Ḥimyarī's work is therefore seen as epitomizing the documentation which was available at his time, and although he obviously had no first-hand experience of Malta the contents of the passage are absolutely realistic. This is confirmed by 'Abbās's footnotes, which show a careful critical approach, and by the fact that all the names of the Arab leaders mentioned in the first part of the passage can be checked in E. de Zambaur's *Manuel de Généalogie et de Chronologie pour l'histoire de l'Islam* and were active in the dates mentioned. Al-Ḥimyarī's text is clearly divided into three paragraphs which probably correspond to three different sources: the first one (I) is a geographical description, the second one (II) is a detailed narration of historical events concerning the conquest, and the third part (III) affirms the Arab colonization and recounts the episode about the defence of the islands against the Byzantine attack of 1053-54.

[p.16] The geographical facts about Malta are, by the age's standards, reasonably correct: it is described as being 30 miles long, with pines, junipers and olive trees, which are all endemic, while the references to its harbours, deforestation and the abundance of fish and honey are time-honoured. Reference to the one and only city confirms the demographic pattern since Roman times.

The historical facts in part II are more detailed than those given by previously-known sources. Moreover some of the information is absolutely new. Al-Ḥimyarī is the only author to give the name of the last Byzantine ruler or governor of Malta, Amros (probably <

Ambrosios), and in his account of the Arab conquest he names the leaders involved and specifies the parts they played. He reports that the decisive attack took place in the time of Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad (who was the Aḡlabid ruler of Ifrīqiyah between 250 and 261 AH) and was led by Ḥalaf al-Ḥādīm, who was a renowned engineer and who lost his life in the siege. This siege must have gone on for some weeks, if not months, because the attackers had to inform Abū ‘Abd Allāh who was presumably in the Maḡreb, and the latter then asked his agent (*‘āmil*) in Sicily, Muḥammad Ibn Ḥāfaḡah (who was governor of Sicily between 255 and 257 AH) to send a new leader (*wālī*). This fact also proves that the route of communication between Malta and the Maḡreb was via Sicily, geographically as well as administratively. Sawāda Ibn Muḥammad was sent and he proved to be a ruthless invader for he reportedly destroyed the city, killed the inhabitants and looted the churches. He later became governor of Sicily between 271 and 273 AH.

The names of these rulers clearly establish the date of the conquest, ruling out De Goeje’s and Minganti’s “before 831” (AD), as well as Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb’s 875. Keeping in mind that Abū ‘Abd Allāh was the Aḡlabid ruler of Ifrīqiyah from 250 to 261 AH and that Muḥammad Ibn Ḥāfaḡah was governor of Sicily between 255 and 257 AH, the Arab conquest must have taken place in 255 at the earliest, 257 at the latest. The unspecified length of the siege could have carried the action from 255 over to the next year; [p.17] otherwise the dates 255 and 256 AH could overlap on 869 AD. Prevaes, like Brown discussing the date question more fully than Wettinger (1986:90), reminds us that the anonymous *Kitāb al-‘Uyūn* and the *Chronicle of Cambridge* both specify a very precise date in 870, August 28 and 29 respectively and repeats Wettinger’s conclusion that “Malta was in the hands of the Arabs by 870 but the exact date is doubtful” (1993: 19). The *Kitāb al-‘Uyūn* also mentions Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn al-Aḡlab known as Abū ‘l-Ġarānīq and Ḥabaṣī Ibn ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Aḡlab, while Ibn al-Aṭīr mentions Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn al-Aḡlab as the Amīr of Qayrawān but says that in 256 AH he sent a relief force to Malta which was besieged by the Byzantines. These seem to be the same persons mentioned by al-Ḥimyarī.

The anecdote about the castle at Susa being built with materials brought over from Malta confirms the inscription quoted in the *Kitāb al-‘Uyūn* as recorded by Ibn al-Ġazzār (who died in 1004): “Every cut slab, every marble column in this fort was brought over from the church of Malta by Ḥabaṣī ibn ‘Umar in the hope of meriting the approval and kindness of Allāh the Powerful and Glorious” (my translation from Prof. Talbi’s French version reproduced in Brown 1975: 84 who suggests Saidi’s reading, *kabsa*, as more likely than Talbi’s *kanīsa*, and consequently the word “church” should be substituted by “raid”). Although the word “church” could be taken as a direct reference to religious persecution, the action of dismantling temples or other buildings itself would still be proof of the conquerors’ harshness. Prevaes (1993: 19) remarks that al-Ḥimyarī’s information is supported by two facts first mentioned by Talbi and Brown respectively. On the one hand Theodosius’ letter describing the Arab occupation of Syracuse and mentioning the imprisonment of the Bishop of Syracuse (not the Archbishop of Palermo, as erroneously stated by Prevaes) in Palermo where the latter met the bishop of Malta who had already been there eight years; on the other hand the archaeological evidence of the sudden destruction of an important church at Tas-Silġ discovered by the Missione Archeologica Italiana in 1964 (Cagiano de Azevedo 1975: 89-93). As to Wettinger’s doubts about the authenticity of Theodosius’ letter, based on [p.18] G.M. Columba’s article of 1910, since I have not read the latter, nor have I traced G. Rossi-Taibbi’s edition announced by Lavagnini, I will have to rely on Lavagnini (1960: 267-279). Anyway the archaeological evidence of destruction still stands, and so does the total and abrupt change of language proven by the lack of a linguistic substratum.

Besides the demographic movement suggested by Brown (1975: 84, “much of the population fled before or soon after the Muslim invasion, more out of fear of a new regime than because of any specific acts of repression”) and considered “highly probable” by Wettinger (1986:91), the conquerors’ ruthlessness as described by al-Ḥimyarī (“they captured the fortress of Malta and took its ruler ‘Amros prisoner and they demolished the fortress, and they looted, and desecrated whatever they could not carry”), could not have failed to drastically reduce the indigenous population. The Byzantine period was apparently not very prosperous, and the inhabitants could not have been more than 5,000. No wonder, then, that al-Ḥimyarī reports that Malta remained uninhabited for the greater part of the Arab period, actually for almost 180 years. This statement virtually suggests a complete ethnic break between the Byzantine and the late Arab settlement. It also fits in with the lack of linguistic substratum and the absence of archaeological evidence from the Arab period (see Mahoney 1988: 51-53). It is also in line with the Muslims’ military policy of those times. Brown warns that “there seems no justification for the argument that the Muslims must, for strategic reasons, have attempted a conquest, as distinct from mere raids, at such an early date; their earliest operations were launched from Susa in Tunisia against the nearest, western part of Sicily in the zone of Mazara and Palermo, and they were not concerned with the area as far to the east as Malta” (1975: 82). What Brown wrote about the earlier period could be extended to cover the later period as well. When Redjala unflatteringly pointed out that Arab authors saw Malta as only “un morceau obscur détaché de la Sicile, qui ne méritait donc pas une attention particulière,” he was echoing what the Arab military leaders would have said about Malta’s strategic importance. This was nullified once the Arabs possessed the whole North African coast and Sicily itself. They would only [p.19] have been interested in keeping it neutralized, making sure that it would not fall again into the hands of the enemy. For this purpose a small garrison to raise the alarm in the case of a Byzantine attempt at reconquering the islands would have been sufficient. A full-scale settlement must have seemed useless when there was the larger and richer island of Sicily to exploit. This is also the tactic the Arabs employed regarding Sardinia. No serious attempt was made to control it or people it. Eduardo Blasco Ferrer writes that although the chapter of the Arab presence in Sardinia has not been written yet, the conviction is growing among historians and archaeologists that some territories in the south around Cagliari and on the eastern coast must have experienced lengthy stays of groups of Arabs following the series of raids against the Byzantines and later against the autonomous Sardinians (1992: 61). But the Arabs never really made Sardinia their own.

Although al-Ḥimyarī’s passage confirms what has always been suspected, that “the Arab domination seems to have represented a complete break between the Byzantine and the later periods” (Brown 1975: 86), it also raises a few questions. A large-scale massacre was possible in the only city (formerly Melita later Mdina), in the areas around the harbours and along the roads which linked them, but as Dr. Mark Brincat (1990) has pointed out it is difficult to imagine a relentless hounding of the small farming communities spread in the outlying hills and valleys, who may have been living or hiding in caves. Considering the demographic patterns of the age (since Roman times Malta only had one city), destruction of the capital meant the wiping out of an organized, civilized way of life, and the aim of the Arab raid of 869 or 870 must have been the neutralization of Byzantine Malta rather than its development or exploitation. We must not forget that at that time Malta was the easternmost part of the Arab domain, and as long as the Byzantines remained a Mediterranean power Malta was still exposed to threats of reconquest. Therefore some form of ethnic continuity may have been maintained throughout the period when the Arabs came over occasionally seeking fish, honey and wood for their ships, but the survivors of the raid must have been too

few, helpless and primitive, and consequently their influence on the new civilization which flourished after 1048-49 remained imperceptible.

#### [p.20] 4. The new colony

The most surprising conclusion arising out of al-Ḥimyarī's text is that throughout most of their rule the Arabs were not interested in Malta. They exploited what it could readily offer, fish, honey and wood for shipbuilding (cfr. Mack Smith 1968: 7) but did not effect any social or economic development. Then in 440 AH / 1048-49 AD there was a sudden change of policy, and al-Ḥimyarī records a deliberate attempt at colonizing the island. Why, and where did the colony come from? It was not a garrison, for al-Ḥimyarī mentions women and daughters and says that only about 400 men were able to fight. Therefore we can presume a Muslim community of roughly 2,000 people. Then he adds that the Muslim fighters were outnumbered by their slaves (500? 600?). If these had their families with them we can add another 3,000 people. The total of about 5,000 inhabitants in AD 1053-54 is a reasonable figure, well within the limits of Blouet's estimates for 1241 which was a period of steady development (1984: 38).

The ethnic composition of that community is not clear. The text establishes a distinction between *Muslims*, who are free, socially superior and well-defined from the religious point of view, and the *slaves* ('*abīd*') who are socially inferior and presumably not Muslim, otherwise the term *Muslim* would have been applied to them as well. The difficulty arises because the text pits a religious definition against a social definition, however since the term slaves undoubtedly implies that the other group was not composed of slaves, similarly the attribute *Muslim* should imply that the other group did not embrace the Muslim faith. Probably they were not Arabs ethnically, though apparently they were Arabic-speaking. It is also unlikely that they were Berbers since the latter had been well integrated with the Arabs since the conquest of Ifrīqiyah. In Sicily the Berbers had improved their position with the advent of the Fatimids (910-947 AD), and even rivalled the Arabs for local supremacy. Besides these, any Maltese survivors from the massacre of 869/870, must have increased and, unless they had offered resistance (which would have been unlikely) they would have been integrated with the new settlers, probably among the slaves. Since we have no clues [p.21] about the latter's race, creed and language, we must take into account what was happening in Sicily, the nearest territory, towards the end of the Arab domination.

After 40 years of struggle between the 'Abbāsids' Sunnism and the Fatimids' Shi'ism, Ifrīqiyah was dominated by the latter and as a result Sicily became the haven for the more orthodox exponents of Islam. With the Kalbites, between 947 and 1050 AD, a higher standard of living prevailed in Sicily and there was progress in the arts, accompanied by a decline in the political and military spheres. A possible reason for the foundation of the new colony in Malta could have therefore been expansion due to demographic growth resulting from prosperity. Something similar had happened in Sardinia in 1015, when a colony was founded by Muğāid in Assémini (Blasco Ferrer 1992: 61).

However, the date of the settlement in Malta is rather late (1048-49) in the Kalbite period, which in the meantime had run into trouble under the last governor Ḥasan as-Samsām. Therefore a different reason for establishing the colony could have been the civil war which broke among Arab rulers of Sicily in 1038. However, fear of the Normans cannot be ruled out either, because although their invasion of Sicily started in 1061, and Palermo was not conquered before 1072, the Normans had already begun raiding Southern Italy as allies of the

Byzantines in 1024. The Basileus had even launched two unsuccessful punitive expeditions on Sicily in 1025 and 1035 in order to stop Saracen corsairs from ruining maritime commerce in the eastern Mediterranean. More significant still is the Byzantine attempt to reconquer Sicily by means of an expedition headed by the general George Maniakes with a heterogeneous army which included hundreds of Normans under three Hauteville leaders. Between 1038 and 1040 they took Messina and the castle of Rametta and besieged Syracuse (Jean Béraud Villars, 1951: 80-81). Such raids must have provoked a migratory movement towards the south, though North Africa would have certainly been a safer haven than Malta. Otherwise the settlement could have been intended as a defensive move in view of the new strategic importance of the island for [p.22] control of the central Mediterranean. Whether the community which settled in Malta came from Southern Italy (Apulia?) or Sicily is difficult to establish, due to the lack of written evidence, but in such cases it is the language which gives the most reliable testimony and a thorough comparative investigation will be necessary to confirm the impression that Maltese has stronger contacts with Sicilian Arabic than with any other Arabic dialect (see p. 27).

## 5. Slaves, religion and language

If the move to Malta was primarily strategic, the composition of the community was far from ideal. The number of Muslims able to fight, about 400, would hardly be a deterrent, and these free men were rather unsure of their slaves' loyalty and support in battle. Mayr (1896) had overlooked this fact when he argued that the slaves could not have been Christian because otherwise they would have rebelled against their Muslim masters. This argument is not illogical and it has been supported by Luttrell and Wettinger. Otherwise one can presume that the Byzantine attackers, rather than liberation, only had booty and women in mind, and therefore threatened both lords and slaves (Cutajar 1976). But then one can also ask why was it necessary for the Muslims to woo their slaves with promises of freedom and special privileges? Why should these 500 or 600 slaves be tempted to support the Byzantine force if they were Muslim and Arab? Were they all imported into the island, accompanying the free Muslims? Why were they so many?

Al-Ḥimyarī and al-Qazwīnī, who both express the fears of the Muslims about the reaction of the slaves, suggest that there was little cohesion among the different strata of the community. After all only five years had passed since their arrival on Malta. The mistrust could further be explained by the hypothesis that, like the Knights later on, the settlers needed a lot of manpower to rebuild the city of Malta and make it "a finer place than it was before." That is why the Muslims were outnumbered by the slaves. These had not been engaged to fight, and therefore fresh terms needed to be contracted in order to win them over.

[p.23] The question of religion and language must be seen in the socio-political context. The entry on slavery (*'abd*) in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* reveals that Muslim slaves did exist but the Coran reserved special rights for them. They should always be treated with kindness and it was even permissible for Muslim slaves to marry free Muslims. Their manumission was strongly recommended. Another important direction was expressed in *ḥadīṭ* forbidding the keeping of male Arabs in slavery. At this point it is useful to reproduce the following passage: "Apart from the occasionally operative distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim slaves, Muslim law recognizes only one category of slaves, regardless of their ethnic origin or the source of their condition. The institution is kept going by only two lawful means: birth in slavery or capture in war, and even of these the latter is not applicable to Muslims, since though they may remain enslaved they cannot be reduced to slavery. Legally

therefore, the only Muslim slaves are those born into both categories or who were already slaves at the time of their conversion to Islam. Their number tends to diminish both through emancipation ... [and through the provision in favour of children born of a free man]. What this amounts to is that slavery could scarcely continue to exist in Islam without the constantly renewed contribution of peripheral or external elements, either directly captured in war or imported commercially, under the fiction of the Holy War, from foreign territory (*dār alḥarb*).” (1960: 26).

In view of the above we can see that the slaves in question were quite likely neither Muslims, for they could not marry Muslim women, nor Arabs for they were men and able to fight. Varvaro has shown that the question of religious tolerance has to be seen in its historical and geographical context, and sometimes it depended on the whims or character of the particular emir who happened to rule the place. There is no doubt that in the early phase of the Arab domination of Sicily, the attitude towards Christians was very harsh. Arab chroniclers testify to an exodus of Christians from the West to the East of Sicily, especially to the Val Demone (only the privileged classes made it to Calabria) and accounts of the conquests of Malta and Syracuse in 870 and 878 speak of massacres. However, conditions [p.24] under the more easy-going Kalbites were different and Rizzitano explains that in Sicily Christians could belong to four different categories: independent, tributaries, vassals and slaves. By converting to Islam, Christian slaves gained religious equality but they were still considered as socially inferior. Besides these, during the period of prosperity in the ninth and tenth centuries, the Arabs imported slaves from the Slav countries.

It is quite possible that the slaves brought to Malta by the Muslims in 1048-49 were of three types: Sicilian Christians, Sicilian ex-Christians and Slavs (again these could have been Christians or converts). Most probably they would also have been Arabic-speaking and they would have assimilated the local inhabitants, the few indigenous descendants of the pre-870 Maltese population. In the present circumstances proof of this hypothesis could only be found in the language. The first significant term is the Maltese word for ‘slave’ *ilsir* which derives from the Arabic *al-’asīr*, a term sometimes used for “slave,” properly “captive.” Although by no means conclusive, for we do not know whether it was adopted into Maltese with the establishment of the colony or later, this term might indicate that the slaves in Malta were of the “captive” type, not through birth in slavery. Another important indication is the etymology of the religious terms in Maltese. I have not yet succeeded in tracing a good comparative study of this important lexical field, but the fact that the fundamental Christian terms are of Arabic origin evidently shows that Christianity was introduced into Malta at a very early age and through the Arabic linguistic medium. It is interesting to note that the equivalent terms of our *knisja*, *qassis*, *qaddis*, *gaddisa*, (cfr. *Santa Marija*), *nisrani* are attested in the Arabic-Greek *ḡarā’id* edited by Salvatore Cusa: *k.nīs.yah*, *qasīs*, *qiddīs* / *qiddīsah*, (cfr. *Sant Māriyah*), *naṣrāni*, and were therefore still in use in the Norman period (see Caracausi 1983: 186 and De Simone 1979: 7, 26, 55, 57).

In this light the hints about the slaves of 1053-54, the Christian prisoners set free by Count Roger in 1090, and the Christian community reported to be present in Malta under Roger II (that is between 1130 and 1154) in the royal document of 1198, will no longer seem to be isolated cases but rather markers of continuity in the relatively short period of a [p.25] century. Al-Ḥimyarī’s account can be taken as a hint that the very complex ethnic and religious situation which Varvaro describes as a “melting-pot” in Sicily between 1060 and 1230 characterized also the population of the Maltese islands (Varvaro, 1981: 137-138, 211-212). As regards the slaves’ shifting of loyalty from the Byzantines to the Muslim masters,

which Mayr, Luttrell and Wettinger base rigidly on religious terms, it is well to keep in mind what Varvaro writes about the situation in Sicily at the time of the Norman conquest: “alla fine del periodo di formazione, le differenze di razza, di religione e di diritto saranno affatto marginali ed esisterà, per quasi tutta la popolazione dell’isola, un solo criterio di classificazione, quello di status” (1981: 138). Earlier on Varvaro had explained how the Normans had found Christian communities in Sicily, but the latter had not always supported the Normans (p. 106).

As to the hotly-debated point of the survival or not of Christianity in Malta (Aquilina 1973, Luttrell 1975a, 1977, Cutajar 1976, Wettinger 1986, 1989-90, 1990, Mark Brincat 1990), there is no doubt that the traditional viewpoint that Roger I had liberated the Christian population of Malta (conceived as a homogeneous majority) from the oppressive rule of the Muslims (conceived as a detached minority) was a hasty and biased interpretation which Luttrell has attributed to a “process of maintaining a Maltese national consciousness” (1975: 30). But it has to be admitted that Malaterra only mentions Christian prisoners who were actually foreigners and wanted to return home (“recedunt, per diversa regnorum spatia, prout nationis erant,” Malaterra p. 96). He does not say anything about any Christians who wanted to stay on, who considered Malta their home, which is not an impossible assumption if the same religious tolerance was practised here as in Sicily. Luttrell’s deduction that “society on Malta may well have consisted of a few thousand inhabitants varying greatly in origin, status, speech and belief” (1987: 160) will still be valid after al-Ḥimyarī’s evidence if we substitute “after 870” by “after 1048.” In Sicily, had there not been a racial and religious *modus vivendi* before, it would hardly have been possible for the Normans to allow peaceful coexistence after the conquest. And had it not been for this policy, the Arab period in Malta would have practically [p.26] shrunk to just over 40 years, from 1048-49 to 1090 or 1091 (the most authoritative publications, Luttrell 1975 and Wettinger 1986 give the date of the Norman conquest as 1090, but Wettinger in a newspaper article in 1990 vaguely mentioned “the consensus among historians” and Luttrell, 1992: 97, advised in a footnote that “the Norman invasion should be dated to 1091 and not to 1090” without giving any details or references; Prevaes retains 1090).

Ironically, therefore, Arab influence in Malta flourished mostly under the Normans because Roger I was apparently only interested in reducing “the Muslims of Malta to tributary status” (Luttrell 1975: 31) and left them in complete control of the administration (Wettinger 1986: 97). In fact Roger II had to reconquer it in 1127. In Sicily persecution of Muslims started only after the revolts of 1190, and a systematic military campaign against the Muslims in Sicily and Malta was only effected between 1222 and 1249. In fact, according to Ibn Ḡubayr, Islam still flourished in Sicily in 1185, the economy was sound and religion respected, and it was absolutely dominant in the region between Palermo and Trapani, even demographically. It was only after the general revolt of 1243 that Islam was extinguished in Sicily. In 1245-46 the Muslims were forced to surrender and deported to Lucera, and only those who converted and were assimilated were allowed to stay (Varvaro 1981: 164-166). Therefore Bishop Burchard’s observation that Malta was inhabited by Saracens in 1175 and Giliberto Abate’s report on the demographic situation in Malta in 1241 have to be seen against this background, not in isolation from conditions in Sicily, and will thus appear less surprising. This will also help to explain the survival of Arabic in Malta during the Sicilian centuries (see Cremona, 1994).

Regarding the problem of the language spoken by the settlers in 1048-49, the lack of documentary evidence is made up for by internal evidence, because the language has been in

use uninterruptedly to this day. Early research into the origins of Maltese, apart from the Punic aberration, consisted mostly of comparative investigation with Classical Arabic, although the Maghreb strain was recognized quite early. This was inaccurate (see [p.27] Prevaes 1993: 6-8, 34) but perhaps inevitable because the study of Arabic dialects was notoriously neglected. The historical and geographical factors now decidedly point to Sicilian Arabic as the basic source of the Maltese language, and a lot can be done now because some truly scientific and comprehensive publications in this field have appeared in the last decades: after Pellegrini's fundamental *Gli arabismi nelle lingue neolatine con particolare riguardo all'Italia* (1972) came De Simone's *Spoglio antroponomico delle giaride arabo-greche dei Diplomi editi da S. Cusa* (1979), Varvaro's *Lingua e storia in Sicilia. Dalle guerre puniche alla conquista normanna* (1981), Caracausi's *Arabismi medievali di Sicilia* (1983), Tropea's *Lessico del dialetto di Pantelleria* (1988) and Pellegrini's *Ricerche sugli arabismi italiani con particolare riguardo alla Sicilia* (1989), which give a fuller picture. This year an extremely useful work has been published by Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic* (1995), and in the near future it will be complemented by Adalgisa De Simone's dictionary of Sicilian Arabic.

A key figure in this field is Abū Ḥafs 'Umar ibn Ḥalaf Ibn Makkī who was born in Sicily and emigrated to Ifrīqiyah when the Normans came (he died in 1107). In his *Tatqīf al-lisān* he denounced the deviations of the Arabic spoken in Sicily, and his importance in research into the origins of Maltese will be comparable to that of Probus who in his *Appendix* denounced his students' most common errors (under the influence of spoken Latin) in the III century AD, and so left us written testimony of the early changes in Vulgar Latin which ten centuries later were recognized as characteristics of the Italian language. Agius and De Simone's preliminary communications have appeared in the proceedings of the conference on "Languages of the Mediterranean" held in Malta in 1991 (Brincat, ed., 1994). All this material is waiting to be tapped by Maltese scholars for a deeper understanding of our language and it is comforting to note its introduction into the popularizing level thanks to J. Felice Pace 1995. Other works like the University of Oviedo's *Glosario de voces aljamiado-moriscas* will extend comparative investigations to the Iberian peninsula (Galmés de Fuentes, 1994).

[p.28] A quick look at any map of Sicily will show some curiously familiar placenames: *Bagheria, Favara, Girgenti, Marsala, Racalmuto, Salemi*, will bring to mind our *Baħrija, Fawwara, Girgenti, Marsa, Raħal, Sliema* and suggest that Maltese and Sicilian toponyms share the same relationship that placenames in ex British colonies have with the United Kingdom. British settlers often gave nostalgic names to the towns and villages they founded in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as shown by New York, New Hampshire, New South Wales, New Jersey, New Brighton, Birmingham, London, Norfolk, Perth, Washington, Wellington, Windsor and an infinite number inspired by lesser-known localities. This first impression is confirmed by a look at the much more numerous Medieval Sicilian placenames mentioned by Caracausi (1983) amongst which one finds *Aynisseytun, Cuddia, Fadeni, Machaluba, Misida, Musta, Muxaru/Monshar, Raiscanzir, Sebugia, Scala di la Targia, Rabato/Rabbato, Sciara*, which recall *Għajjn Żejtuna, Gudja, Fiddien, Maqluba, Msida, Mosta, Munxar, Ras Ħanzir, Żebbuġ, (San Pawl) tat-Tarġa, Rabat, Xagħra*. There are also various compound placenames beginning with *Algara (L-għar)*, 'Ayn (*Għajjn*), *Balata (Blata), Burgiu (Borġ), Handac/Chandec (Handaq), Dachala (Daħla), Daura/Addaura (Id-dawra), Galca (Għalqa), Gebia (Ġiebjja), Fondaco (Fondoq), Knisyah (Knisja)*, together with the more common *Gebel, Marsa* and *Uadi*. To these one must add the 45 placenames listed by Varvaro beginning with *Rachal/Raħal*, which include *Rachalsaphy, Raħalamrun* and *Raħalgidit*, as well as the fact that Palermo, the capital, was simply called *Medina* (cfr. Catania, *Madīnat al-Fīlah*). Naturally some of these placenames also occur in

Spain and various Arab lands, but their number suggests a special relationship between Malta and Sicily, such as that expected of an offshoot community. This impression can further be proved by deeper comparative studies between Sicilian Arabic and Maltese such as the one initiated by J. Felice Pace (1995: 36-37) who illustrates a few significant phonological and morphological contacts and states that over 160 out of Caracausi's 309 Medieval Sicilian Arabic lexemes correspond in root and meaning with Maltese words. A fuller treatment of the topic is forthcoming.

## [p.29] 6. A philological appraisal

There are two compilations of ancient Arab authors' references to Malta. Paolo Minganti (1965) reproduced the relevant passages from Amari's *Bibliotheca arabo-sicula* (1857, Italian version 1880-81) while Mbarek Redjala (1973) presented a fuller series of quotations in two sets, one historical and one geographical, but unfortunately his approach was not critical. All these texts are very short and consist mainly of two or three lines, the longest one being al-Idrīsī's in eleven lines. The information is scanty and often suspicious, and they can never be compared to al-Ḥimyarī's, which is by far the longest and the most detailed, and therefore deserves respect. Godfrey Wettinger's initial scepticism was apparently based on the fact that al-Ḥimyarī "wrote four centuries after the event" (1990) but in textual criticism a late manuscript with correct or plausible details carries more weight than earlier ones with manifestly erratic or dubious particulars. A case in point is al-Qazwīnī's mix-up of Malita with Ġālita as reported in Redjala. One must keep in mind that Ġālita is a tiny island less than 50km NNW off Tunis and was never Byzantine. The error is palaeographic not one of substance (see pp. 41-43). As regards the latter, these minor texts agree on only one point, the essential notion that Malta was uninhabited (and consequently did not deserve attention), and here the modern critic's viewpoint has to be inverted: instead of being undermined by their various flaws, al-Ḥimyarī's text is confirmed by their common factor.

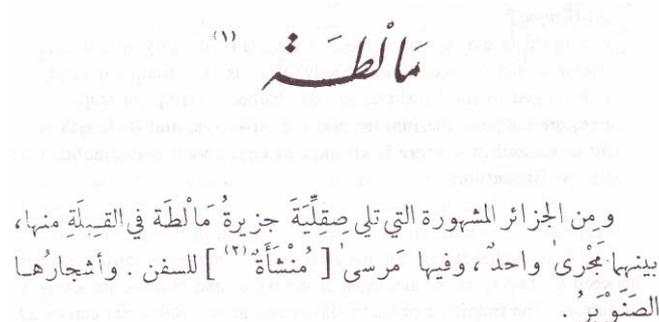
Whoever quotes uncritically Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Andalusī and al-Dimašqī merely confounds the issue. One should check the date and place of composition of these works and consider the judgement of authoritative scholars on them before using them to contradict al-Ḥimyarī's. Admittedly this is a very difficult exercise, especially since the field does not seem to be highly developed, but a sufficient amount of reliable information can be found in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* which has been compiled by experts. Al-Dimašqī died in 1327 and D.M. Dunlop judges his standpoint "conspicuously uncritical." Al-Andalusī (Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī) wrote his works in Baghdad and Mosul in 1155, and E. Lévi-Provençal defines his two books "full of [p.30] interesting and exact records, but also of legendary and marvellous accounts." Ibn Ḥawqal travelled between 943 and 973 but, according to A. Miquel, he plagiarised more or less closely the text of al-İṣṭiḥrī who wrote around 940. Moreover Ibn Ḥawqal is credited for describing places in the state and at the time he had seen them, not for his "occasional references to the distant or more recent past." His work on Kalbi Sicily is also noted for his Fatimid slant.

On the other hand al-Ḥimyarī, although he wrote around 1300 (see p.34), had as his basic source al-Bakrī (1010?-1094), who is acknowledged by E. Lévi-Provençal as the greatest geographer of the Muslim West together with al-Idrīsī. Unfortunately *Al-Masālik*, his main work, survives only in extensive fragments, no single manuscript is complete and the ten known mss. do not allow the reconstruction of the whole work (Leeuwen-Ferré, 1992: 13). Lévi-Provençal considers his work "of inestimable value" and traces his main source to al-

Warrāq, who had lived for a long time in Qayrawān before settling in Cordova about 970, and who therefore furnished al-Bakrī with information that goes back to the tenth century. Other sources quoted by al-Bakrī, which are now considered equally lost, are his master al ‘Udrī and, through the latter, al-Ṭurtūšī, who wrote at the beginning of the tenth century. For later events al-Bakrī could draw on verbal information from travellers and consult contemporary works by other authors and documents of the Cordoban archives. He finished this work in 1068. If al-Ḥimyarī based his references to the facts of 1048-49 and 1053-54 on al-Bakrī, who had finished writing by 1068, he passed on to us a contemporary report. If al-Bakrī’s full account on Malta can be traced it would probably provide the ideal solution, but the task appears quite difficult in the present circumstances (see. pp. 35-36).

## 7. Al-Ḥimyarī’s Sources: A Closer Look

As al-Ḥimyarī’s passage is clearly divided into three parts corresponding to the three paragraphs, it is best to examine them one by one. I shall start by reproducing the first one together with the version of al-Bakrī, first [p.31] in the original Arabic, then in Latin alphabet transcription and lastly in the English translation. The edition is the one referred to by Iḥsān ‘Abbās in his first footnote to al-Ḥimyarī’s passage: al-Bakrī, *Ḡuḡrāfiyah al-Andalus wa’ l-Urubbā min Kitāb al-masālik wa’ l-mamālik*, Taḥqīq: ad-dukṭūr ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Ḥaḡḡī, Bayrūt, 1968, p.225. I am grateful to Prof. Adalgisa De Simone of Palermo University for forwarding the original text to me, and to Martin Zammit of the Mediterranean Institute of the University of Malta for transcribing it into the Latin alphabet.



**Al-Bakrī**; ed. Ḥaḡḡī

māḷṭah

wa-min al-ḡazā’ir al-mašhūrah llatī talī siqilliyata ḡazīratu māḷṭah fī l-qiblati minhā, baynahumā maḡrā wāḥidun, wa-fihā marsā [munsa’atun] lis-sufun. wa-’ašḡaruhā ṣ-sanawbaru.

**Al-Ḥimyarī**, ed. ‘Abbās

māḷṭah

ḡazīrah min al-ḡazā’ir allatī talī ḡazīrat siqilliyah, wa-hiyā fil-qiblah min massīnah baynahā wa-bayna [siqilliyah] maḡra wāḥid, wa kānat [p.32] qabla hādā lil-muslimīn, wa-fihā marās munša’ah lis-sufun, wa-’ašḡaruhā ṣ-sanawbar wal-’ar’ar waz-zaytūn, wa-tūluḥā ṭalātūna mīlan, wa-fihā madīnah min bunyān al-’awwal, wa-kāna yaskunuhā r-rūm.

**Al-Bakrī**:

Malta

Among the famous islands which lie close to Sicily there is the island of Malta in line with it, and between them there is one strait. In it there is a harbour (set up) for ships and its trees are pines.

#### **Al-Ḥimyarī:**

One of the islands which lie close to the island of Sicily, in line with **Messina**, and between it and (Sicily) there is one strait. **Formerly it belonged to the Muslims**, and has harbours set up for ships. Its trees are the pine, **the juniper and the olive-tree**, and its length is **30 miles** and **in it there is an ancient city, and it was inhabited by the Byzantines.**

The Latin alphabet transcription clearly shows the close correspondence between the two texts because most of the words and phrases are identical or almost. The English translation shows that al-Ḥimyarī's text carries all the information which is in al-Bakrī but adds more details (in bold print, above), mentioning Messina and adding two kinds of trees, the juniper and the olive-tree, as well as stating the length of the island and referring to its one city. It also gives two items of historical information: that it formerly belonged to the Muslims, and that it used to belong to the Byzantines. All the new information in al-Ḥimyarī is plausible and the two phrases of historical information are very useful. The last one, "it was inhabited by the Byzantines," seems to imply that at the time of writing the islands were still Muslim, and the text can therefore be presumed as a summary of a fuller pre-Norman description. The former phrase, "wa-kānat qabla hādā lilmuslimīn" is not in al-Bakrī's text and must have been added by al-Ḥimyarī because al-Bakrī had concluded the *Masālik* in 1068 when Malta was still [p.33] under Arab rule. In fact van Leeuwen and Ferré omit it from their reconstructed version.

'Abbās' assertion that al-Bakrī's text is not complete (footnote 1) obviously refers to the fact that al-Ḥimyarī's text is more detailed. The differences between the two passages may be explained by one of the following alternative processes: either al-Ḥimyarī copied al-Bakrī's text integrating it with information from another source, or al-Ḥimyarī had direct access to the work of an earlier author who had been summarized more concisely by al-Bakrī. Until the fuller source is discovered, one must admit that it is quite unlikely that al-Ḥimyarī would have invented all the details, guessing correctly. This hypothesis can be supported by a painstaking philological exercise based on the texts available and the information supplied by the specialist critics.

A very serious analysis of al-Ḥimyarī's sources and technique of compilation has been carried out by Adalgisa De Simone in her annotated translation of al-Ḥimyarī's description of Italian, but mainly Sicilian, towns and villages, *La descrizione dell'Italia nel Rawḍ al-mi'tār di al-Ḥimyarī* (1984). In a brief but dense introduction (1984: 7-16) she first of all resolves the question of the identity of the writer.

Lévi-Provençal had presumed the existence of two redactions of the *Rawḍ* by two different members of the al-Ḥimyarī family, one dating from the end of the 13th century which he considered "now disappeared" and the one of 1461 represented by the extant manuscripts. This hypothesis was accepted by T. Lewicki who penned the entry on al-Ḥimyarī in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1960-), and failed to mention U. Rizzitano's conclusion that Lévi-Provençal had interpreted the place and date appearing on one manuscript copy, Djudda 866, as being the place and date of the original work. Lewicki however had supported the hypothesis of the first redaction by two facts: (1) that among the written sources used by al-Ḥimyarī, the great treatises of the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries

are lacking; (2) that the majority of the historical events mentioned in this dictionary do not go beyond the end of the 7th/13th century. This certainly supports Rizzitano's [p.34] view, and therefore De Simone rightly follows Rizzitano and quotes Ibn Ḥaḡar al-'Asqalānī's *ad-Durar al-kāminah*, which says that al-Ḥimyarī died in 727 AH / 1326-27 AD, and Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb's biography *Iḥāṭah fī ta'rīḥ Ḡarnāṭah*. Here al-Ḥimyarī is said to be a native of Sabtah (Ceuta) and is described as "uomo pio, retto, colto," well-versed in the sciences, a careful linguist and an able chess player. He practiced the legal profession and was also active in politics, and his reputation is enhanced by the titles of *šayḥ faqīh* and *ḥāfiẓ*. In his long introduction to the *Rawḍ* he declares that his main aim is the fusion of two genres, the geographical-descriptive and the historical-narrative, and on this account he proudly claims that his work is superior to al-Idrīsī's because it is richer in historical information and gives fuller geographical descriptions (De Simone 1984: 8-11).

## 8. The technique of compilation

Writing about al-Ḥimyarī's sources in his *Histoire de la littérature géographique arabe*, I. Kratchkovski stressed the importance of the passages reproduced from al-Idrīsī, explaining "car nous nous trouvons ainsi devant un nouveau texte d'al-Idrīsī qui pourra avoir une grande importance pour établir le texte du *Nuzhat al-muštāq* et en préparer l'édition." De Simone (1984) compared parts of the *Rawḍ* with traceable sources and showed up the slavish reproduction of chunks of Idrīsī's *Nuzḥah*. This pedantic technique is even more apparent when al-Ḥimyarī draws on two or more different sources when treating the same topic. In his entry on Sardinia, for example, he says that it has three cities when he follows al-Idrīsī in the first paragraph, while in the third one, when he follows a different source, he says that it has four cities. In the fifth paragraph al-Ḥimyarī says that he has read what he refers "in another passage" and in the seventh he quotes Ibn 'Ufayr as his source. De Simone explains (p.80, fn. 1) that a certain anecdote resembles the style of al-Bakrī but it is untraceable in the *Masālik* and that the part attributed to Ibn 'Ufayr is also found in the *Futūḥ Miṣr* by Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, where it is attributed to the same Ibn 'Ufayr, and seems to point to a direct dependence of al-Ḥimyarī on this source. It is found also in Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb.

[p.35] In the entry on Sicily al-Ḥimyarī, after following al-Idrīsī, turns apparently to al-Bakrī and then to al-Idrīsī again, and then to other sources (one of which may be al-Balansi), then he describes again the Arab conquest of Sicily, but such is the loyalty to the text before him that he does not dare eliminate the facts already mentioned, and he limits his intervention to inserting the phrase "as we have said before." Al-Ḥimyarī refrains from editing even when he gives two entries on the same locality, as in the case of Segesta (where the sources are al-Idrīsī and Ibn-Ḡubayr, then al-Idrīsī again). In the latter case the description of the volcano (70 words long) had already appeared under Aci.

In al-Ḥimyarī's compilation the major geographical sources are quite clearly al-Idrīsī and Ibn Ḡubayr, but the historical sources are more difficult to disentangle. Although the name of al-Bakrī keeps recurring, De Simone seems to be of the opinion that al-Ḥimyarī did not follow al-Bakrī's *Kitāb al-Masālik* directly. In the footnotes she often observes that al-Ḥimyarī gives more details than al-Bakrī. Occasionally she even compares al-Ḥimyarī's information to passages in Ibn Šabbāt (his contemporary) where they are explicitly attributed to al-Bakrī, but there are hints that both al-Ḥimyarī and Ibn Šabbāt may have known al-Bakrī not directly but through the compendium of Ibn Ḡalandah (d. 1185-86). However some parts which are in al-Ḥimyarī and Ibn Šabbāt and are attributed by the latter to al-Bakrī are not found in al-Ḥaḡḡ's edition, one case in point being the entry on Syracuse. The logical

conclusion is that there must have been a fuller redaction of al-Bakrī, and it is extremely significant that this same conclusion was reached independently by Andre Ferré who has completed the critical edition of al-Bakrī begun by A. van Leeuwen. After quoting Kratchkovski (reproduced above), Ferré states that on comparing the manuscripts of the *Masālik* and those of the *Rawḍ*, the same can be said regarding the relationship between al-Ḥimyarī and al-Bakrī (1992: 31). He reminds us that Lévi-Provençal had noted that much of the information relating to Andalusia was derived from the *Masālik* but he adds that when one considers the whole text it is immediately clear that, apart from the borrowings from al-Idrīsī and Ibn Ġubayr, a very large part of the geographical [p.36] information in the *Rawḍ* originates from the *Masālik*. More important is the fact that the borrowings from the *Masālik* are often of a better quality and more complete than the text of al-Bakrī, especially in the description of certain Mediterranean islands like Malta and Sicily which in al-Ḥimyarī fill a page or more while in al-Bakrī they are only a few lines long. He concludes “De toute évidence, al-Ḥimyarī avait sous les yeux, pour ces parties-là du moins, un texte plus complet que le nôtre” (1992: 29, 31).

From the textual point of view, and with the passage on Malta in mind, the most interesting entries are those on Sicily and on the island of Vulcano. The information on Sicily is substantial and is evidently based on many sources. There is also a direct reference to al-Bakrī in a paragraph that begins “as al-Bakrī said,” but here again the information in al-Ḥimyarī is fuller than that in al-Ḥaḡḡī’s edition of al-Bakrī. Even more intriguing is the comparison between the two entries because a passage of no less than 115 words is included in both (De Simone 1984: Sicily 92-93, Vulcano 107) almost identically. The relevant footnote explains that the same information is given by al-Bakrī (*Masālik*, ed. al-Ḥaḡḡī 1968: 214), Ibn Šabbāt and al-Qazwīnī. The latter two acknowledge their sources; Ibn Šabbāt refers to al-Bakrī while al-Qazwīnī refers to al-‘Udrī. The next paragraph in al-Ḥimyarī’s entry on Sicily, which deals with the yellow sulphur mine on the island of Vulcano, is not repeated in the entry on Vulcano but De Simone’s footnote again points out that it can also be found in al-Bakrī’s *Masālik* (1968:215), in Ibn Šabbāt and a small part of it in al-Qazwīnī. This time Ibn Šabbāt specifies Ibn Ġalandah as his source (Ibn Ġalandah or ‘Alandah was an epitomizer of al-Bakrī), while al-Qazwīnī again acknowledges al-‘Udrī as his source. Although De Simone supposes that al-Ḥimyarī, like Ibn Šabbāt, obtained this information from al-Bakrī through Ibn Ġalandah’s version (was it a compendium or an expanded compilation?), it seems more likely that al-Ḥimyarī was drawing on a fuller text than the one available to Ibn Šabbāt (unless the latter was being systematically more concise), since he consistently gives more information. Moreover I believe that the passages De Simone traces in al-Qazwīnī, and which are then tracked down to al-‘Udrī, are of extreme importance. In agreement [p.37] with what she writes in note 35 on p. 92, it seems to me that the ultimate author of the passage may well be al-‘Udrī.

Can the same be said of the untraced sources in the many passages in the entries on Gagliano, Sardegna, Siracusa, etc., which manifest “the style of al-Bakrī” but are not in the extant editions of the *Masālik*? Is it a coincidence that these happen to belong to the same area and to the same period, from the Arab invasion to just before the Normans’ arrival on the scene? The last dated event happened in 1068 and al-‘Udrī died in 1085 (later events narrated in the entries on Entella in 1219-20 and 1222-23, and Lucera in 1300, although the sources are equally untraced, show a different style). Can the insistence on the massacre of Christians, looting and destruction in the narration of the conquests of Enna, Palermo, Siracusa, Taormina and to a lesser extent Sardegna (De Simone 1984: 35, 42 and 63, 97, 99, 82 respectively) be taken as a revealing characteristic of the original author? After all al-Ḥimyarī



derive from al-‘Udrī, and that a lot of unattributed information may derive from the same source, Ferré states: “Et ainsi al-‘Udrī constituerait l’une des sources principales des *Masālik*, en particulier pour les notices consacrées à l’Europe (...), aux îles de la Méditerranée, à Rome ...,” and in a footnote he adds that even al-Qazwīnī quotes several passages from al-‘Udrī which manifestly derive from al-Ṭurtūšī (1992: 23). Even Maria Kowalska mentions al-‘Udrī as a possible source of al-Qazwīnī. In her very detailed study she traces that part of al-Qazwīnī’s passage on Malta which recounts the anecdote about the clock built [in 1142] by Ibn as-Samatī al-Mālīṭī and the verses extemporized by Abū al-Qāsim ibn Ramādān al-Mālīṭī, who both frequented the Court of Roger II (in *Aṭār al-Bilād*, ed. Wüstenfeld, Gottingen, 1849, p. 374) to Yāqūt’s *Mu‘ğam al-Buldān* (ed. Wüstenfeld, Leipzig, 1866-73, vol. IV, pp. 396-7). Then she suggests that the preceding paragraph, describing the 1053-54 Byzantine attack on Malta (1849: 373), “may originate from al-‘Udrī’s work,” although she adds “but the alternative that they come from the narrative of Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb (al-Ṭurtūšī) or from one of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī (al-Andalusī) cannot be excluded)” (1966: 396-7).

Let us see how far this pin-pointing of al-‘Udrī as the source of both al-Qazwīnī and al-Ḥimyarī can be illustrated by comparing the two versions of the 1053-54 Byzantine attack on Malta. Because of the length of the passage I will only give a translation of al-Qazwīnī’s, which the reader can easily compare with al-Ḥimyarī’s on pages 11-12. The length itself shows that al-Ḥimyarī’s version is fuller, and the details are also obviously more precise, but I am also giving the transcription of both Arabic versions to point out the extent of textual correspondence (in italics).

#### **Al-Kazwīnī, *Aṭār al-bilād*:**

*(English translation by Martin Zammit)*

The Byzantines invaded it after 440 / they waged war against them and sought from them [their] property and [their] women. The [p.40] Muslims assembled and counted themselves, and the number of their slaves was greater than that of the free-men. And they said to the slaves: Fight with us, and should you be victorious, you shall be free, and whatever is ours will be yours. Should you hesitate, we will be killed and you will be killed. When the Byzantines arrived, they attacked them together [lit. the attack of one man], God helped them and they defeated them, killing a great number of the Byzantines. The slaves were joined [to the ranks] of the free-men and they were strengthened. After that the Byzantines never overpowered them.

*(Latin alphabet transcription by Martin Zammit)*

*ğazāha r-rūm ba‘da l-‘arba‘īn wal-‘arba‘umī’ah ḥārabūhum wa-talabū minhum al-‘amwāl wan-nisā’ w-iğtama‘a l-muslimūn wa-‘addū ‘anfusahum wa-kāna ‘adadu ‘abīdihim ‘aktara min ‘adadi l-āḥrār fa-qāla li-‘abīdihim ḥāribu ma‘ana fa-‘in zafartum fa-‘antum ‘aḥrār wa-mā lanā lakum wa-‘in tawānaytum qutilna wa-qultum fa-lammā wāfā r-rūm ḥamalū ‘alayhim ḥamlata rağulin wāḥidin wa-naşarahum allāhu fa-hazamūhum wa-qatalū min ar-rūm ḥalaqan kaṭīran wa-laḥiqa l-‘abīd bil-‘aḥrār w-iştaddat şawkatuhum fa-lam ta‘uzzhum ar-rūm ba‘da dālīka ‘abadan.*

## Al-Ḥimyarī

(Latin alphabet transcription by Martin Zammit)

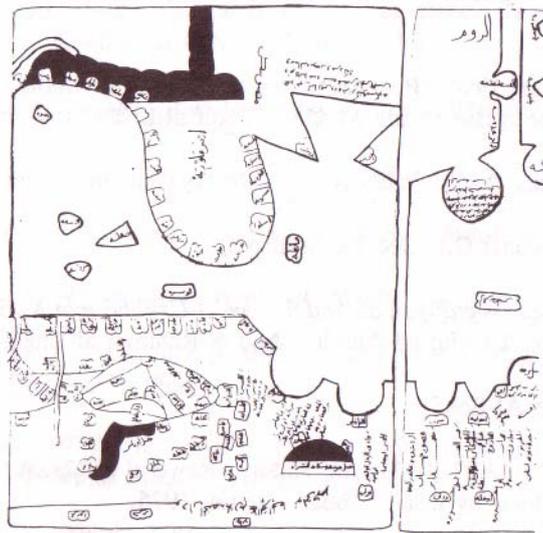
fa-lammā kāna *ba'da l-'arba'in wal-'arba'umi'a* min al-ḥiğra 'ammaraha al-muslimūn, wa-banaw madīnatahum, tumma 'ādat 'atammu mimmā kānat 'alayh, *fa-ğazāhā r-rūm* sanata hamsin wa-'arba'in wa-'arba'umi'a fī marākib kaṭīra wa-'idad. fa-ḥaṣarū *l-muslimīn* fī al-madīna w-ištadda l-hisār 'alayhim wa-tami'ū fihim. wa-sa'alahum al-muslimūna l-'amāna fa-'abaw 'illā '*alā n-nisā'* wal-'amwāl. *Fa-'aḥsā l-muslimūna* 'adada l-muqātīla min 'anfusihim [p.41] fa-wağadūhum naḥwa 'arba'umi'a. Tumma 'aḥsaw '*abīdahum fa-wağadūhum* 'aktara '*adadan minhum*. Fa-ğama'ūhum wa-qālū lahum: 'innakum 'in nāsaḥtumūna fī- qitāli 'aduwwina wa-balağtum min dālika mablağan w-intahaytum ḥaytu ntaḥaynā, *fa-'antum 'aḥrār*, nulḥiqukum bi-'anfusina wa-nunkiḥukum banātina wa-nuṣārikukum 'amwālana. *wa-'in 'antum tawānaytum* wa-ḥadaltumna laḥiqakum min al-sibā' war-riqq mā yulḥiqunā, wa-kuntum 'aṣadda halān minna. Li'anna 'aḥadana qad yufādīhi ḥamīmuḥu, wa-yuḥallīshuḥu min-al-'asri waliyyuḥu, wa-yatamāla'u 'alā stinqādihi ḡamā'atuhu, fa-wa'ada l-'abīd min 'anfusihim bi-'aktar mimmā zannū bihim, wa-wağadūhum 'ilā munāğazati 'aduwwihim'asra'a minhum, fa-lammā 'asbaḥa l-qawm min al-yawm iṭ-tāni ḡādāhumu r-rūm 'alā 'ādatihim, wa-qad tami'ū dālika l-yawm fit-tagallub 'alayhim wa-'asrihim, wal-muslimūna qad 'ista'addū fī 'akmal 'idda li-liqā'ihim. Wa-'asbahū 'alā baṣīra fī munāğazatihim, w-istanṣarū llāha 'azza wa-ğall 'alayhim, fa-zaḥafū wa-tārū naḥwahum da'san bir-rimāh wa-darban bis-suyūf ḡayra hā'ibīn wa-lā mu'riğīn, wāṭiqīn bi-'iḥdā l-ḥusnayayn min az-zafri l-'ağil 'aw al-fawz al-āğil, fa-āmaddahum 'allāhu ta'ālā bin-naṣr, fa-'afrağa 'alayhim aṣ-sabr, wa-qaḍafa fī qulūbi 'a'dā'ihim ar-ru'b, fa-wallaw munhazimīn la yalwūn. W-ista'sala al-qatlu 'aktarahum, w-istawlā l-muslimūn 'alā marākibahum fa-mā'afatahum minha ḡayru wāḥid. *wa-laḥiqa 'abīduhum b-'aḥrārihim*, wa-wafaw lahum bi-mī'ādihim. Wa-hāba l-'adū *ba'da dālika* 'amrahum, *fa-lam* ya'tariḍhum 'ahad minhum 'ilā ḥīn.

## 10. Mālīta and Ġālīta.

In a different and earlier work entitled *Ağā'ib al-maḥlūqāt wa-ğarā'ib al-mawğūdāt* ("Prodigies of things created and miraculous aspects of things existing," known as the *Cosmography*), al-Qazwīnī had quoted al-Andalusī who had seen "in the sea of the Byzantines this island filled with mountain sheep like a swarm of locusts; they are so numerous that they can't run [p.42] away from men, who go there on ships and take as many of them as they like" (my translation of Redjala's French version). Al-Qazwīnī had introduced this description with the words "Among the islands of the Mediterranean, one finds the island of Hālīta." Redjala who includes this passage among the geographical texts mentioning Malta (1973: 203-4) explains in footnote 6 that in the manuscript the name of the island started with an H but the editor (G. Ferrand) corrected it with a G to obtain Ġālīta, the name of a tiny island 30 km off the coast of Cape Serrat, Tunisia. Redjala does not explain why he arbitrarily changed it to Mālīta, but it seems that he was influenced by a marginal error in Ibn Ḥawqal.

The latter had mentioned Malta in a short list of Mediterranean islands in *Surat al-Ard* (Redjala quoted J. Kramers' edition, Leiden 1938, p. 64), but the longer description (quoted from p. 203 of the same edition) presents palaeographic problems. In Redjala's French translation the name of the island is "Malte" but in footnote 2 he informs us that in one manuscript it is given as "Hālīsa" and in another one it is "Ĝālīta." It is not clear whether Redjala himself arbitrarily corrected the text to read "Mālīta" or whether he simply followed Kramers' preference. He does point out however that the map of the Mediterranean accompanying the text shows the island of Malta "situated between Sicily and Crete" as the text says. It seems therefore that the contradiction between the text and the illustration (reproduced hereunder) is responsible for the confusion between the description of Ĝālīta and the position of the island of Malta. This passage was rightly not included in Minganti (1965), but Anthony Luttrell (1987: 158) followed Redjala and although he quotes a more recent edition (Kramers-Wiet, 1964), which is actually G. Wiet's translation and revision of Kramers' work, he quotes the passage which attributes the description to "l'Ile de Malte," but he does not refer how and why the editors preferred reading "Malta" instead of "Ĝālīta." More interesting is his interpretation of its essential data producing a hypothesis anticipating al-Ḥimyarī's information in support of his stand that there is "no continuity of a Maltese 'race' or of an indigenous Christian or Pauline tradition." However the truly "prodigious" parts of the text, about "savagely donkeys and numerous sheep" [p.43] suggested cautious reservations: "it can scarcely have been an accurate account of Malta and quite possibly it referred to a different island" (1987: 159). Wettinger too has given it undeserved weight in his initial reactions (1990, Aug 26 and Sept. 30).

The descriptions of Ĝālīta by Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Andalusī, al-Qazwīnī and al-Dimašqī belong to a different manuscript tradition, the information being practically limited to the abundance of sheep (except Ibn Ḥawqal who adds the wild donkeys) and to the fact that it was uninhabited. Al-Dimašqī's work, written before 1327, has been described by D.M. Dunlop in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* as a compilation "closely resembling" the *Aġā'ib al-mahlūqāt* of al-Qazwīnī. The latter explicitly quotes al-Andalusī, with whose text there is substantial agreement. Ibn Ḥawqal's is the oldest of these texts and may have been the source of the tradition. However, what counts is that all four authors were perfectly conscious that they were writing about Ĝālīta. Consequently it is actually the mix-up between the text and the map in Ibn Ḥawqal which reflects the obscurity of tenth-century Malta, not the descriptions of Ĝālīta (cfr. Luttrell 1987: 159).



*The Central Mediterranean in Ibn Hawqal's map, showing the islands (from top left) Genoa, Corsica, Sicily, Sardinia, Cossyra (Pantelleria), Malta and Crete. Note that Malta is "situated between Sicily and Crete" exactly as the text says.*

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