One fine day in June 1091 the fleet of Count Roger set sail from Sicily bound for Muslim Malta, with their trumpets and other musical instruments loudly sounding and keeping rhythm. Helped by a favourable breeze the fleet arrived before Malta a couple of days later, the Count’s ship, faster than the rest, touching shore first. It did not take Count Roger long, with the help of twelve other knights on horseback to put to flight the numerous islanders who resisted his landing.

Next day his force marched up to the town and laid siege to it. The ‘peaceful’ townsmen asked to parley and when they discovered that they could not beguile him with empty words, they agreed to his terms namely that they would recognise him as their overlord, that they would surrender their weapons of war, pay an annual tribute and release their Christian captives. Each side swore in his own way to the conditions of peace. The Christian ex-captives thereupon streamed out of Mdina carrying rustic crosses and exclaiming Kyrie Eleison to the Count, “Lord have mercy on us.” They were then shipped out of the island, and precisely the same course of events happened in Gozo a few days later. In Sicily the Christians freed from the Maltese islands refused the Count’s offer of a free town in which to reside, preferring to accept instead free passage across the Straits of Messina (not the Sicilian Channel between Sicily and Malta!) and dispersal to their various homes, presumably in Southern Italy or, conceivably, across the Straits of Otranto, in the Balkans.

That is the picture given us by Geoffrey Malaterra in his account eulogising his heroes Robert and Roger de Hauteville and all their deeds in the reconquest of Sicily from the Muslims. That substantially is what is known to have happened with some approximation to certainty, but the Maltese historian Abela in the seventeenth century and his readers were not satisfied.

For one thing, what about the Maltese Christians who, of course, they were convinced, had refused assimilation to their cruel overlords, the Muslim tyrants? Well, Malaterra had to be amended to give a fuller picture. Abela had to posit the existence of a surviving Christian Maltese population, a population which had resisted all the terrible persecution of the horrible Muslim overlords, their credentials consisting mainly of a number of obscure Maltese words of Greek origin like liti, litanie, lapsi, cona, miru and malluta, as well as the place-names Wied ir-Rum, the ‘valley of the Christian’ and Bieb el Grekin, (Bieb l-Gharreqin), the ‘gate of the Greeks’ at Mdina. They were also reported to have used certain tattoos to show that they were Christians in Muslim times and for long afterwards.

Count Roger’s raid was a successful crusade for their liberation. Count Roger was a pious and religious prince who restored the sacred temples, particularly the cathedral at Mdina, appointing its bishop in the person of Gualterio, and endowing the church with several estates and other incomes both in Malta and elsewhere in the kingdom. Commendatore Abela was particularly irked by the suggestion of Malaterra that the Muslims were finally accepted as the allies of the Norman count. Not surprisingly, seeing the esteem in which his work was generally regarded, in 1713 a portrait of Count Roger was executed by Alessio Erardi as a benefactor of the Cathedral, where it is still to be seen.

For Abela, Count Roger’s son, King Roger, had the supreme merit of coming to the assistance of the Maltese Christians when they were threatened by a local Muslim rebellion. The disloyal Muslims left on the island by Count Roger, “according to a most ancient
tradition,’ planned a secret rising to take place during Holy Week or, ‘as others say’ during Christmas night. Issuing from their place of refuge at Qalghet il-Bahrija they planned to assault the Maltese Christians while they were at their seasonal devotions, but were overheard by a girl and ambushed at Ghajn il-Klieb near Rabat. In spite of fresh reinforcements from Barbary, the Muslims were reduced to submission and exiled completely from Malta by King Roger.

By 1841 important modifications occurred in the Norman myths of Malta. In fact. D. Miège places the Maltese Christians who actually assisted Count Roger in his conquest of Malta in the ‘village’ of Viede Rum (Wied ir-Rum), and the capitulations of the inhabitants contained terms which are not to be found at all in Malaterra’s almost contemporary account, though foreshadowed in that of Abela: e.g. that ‘the Arabs’ could stay in Malta and practise their religion, the ‘Emir’ himself and those who preferred to accompany him being free to leave the island.

The Gaito who opposed Count Roger was called Maimone according to a Bonavita manuscript (eighteenth century at the earliest). Count Roger also built a castle at Mdina and left it properly garrisoned, a structure that survived right down to its final demolition in 1455, and he also freed the Maltese and distributed land amongst them. Miège repeats the legends concerning King Roger, and adds that in 1140 he established the system of municipal government according to which the Maltese islands were to be governed and which survived all the efforts of the Knights of St. John to undermine it.

A Dr. Gaetano Laferla in an anonymous pamphlet of 1841 first suggested that the National Flag of Malta was granted by Count Roger without attributing it to any tradition, and claimed that he also granted to Malta the privileges suitable for a small nation, including a popular council. A few years later, Galanton Vassallo adds that Count Roger founded the prebends of the three major dignitaries of the Cathedral and endowed the bishopric with estates at Lentini in Sicily.

With better evidence he points out that Malta became a county under Norman rule, and the title continued to be granted to others for long afterwards. By 1871 Ferris was also to add several other ‘precious’ details. Roger gave Malta the same laws which he had given to Sicily. He established there a parliament which the Maltese subsequently called the Popular [p.38] Council. He gave them the flag and coat of arms proper for the Maltese, formed by the two colours white and red taken from the coat of arms of the Hauteville family, and the Maltese, pleased with the grant, immediately wanted to erect their standard, and they sculpted it in every public place.

In the old cathedral church the national colours could be seen not only on the throne but sculpted or painted in several other places as well as in several paintings. Among the churches which were repaired or re-erected by the Maltese on regaining their freedom as a result of the invasion of Count Roger were the Cathedral, the church of St. Salvator at Mdina, the chapel at Birgu which immediately became a parish church, the chapel of Hal Tartarni, the church of St. Paul at Rabat, the chapels of Bisquallin and San Ġwann tal-Ħereb, that of St. Matthew at Tal-Maqluba, and several others in Gozo. On the alleged rising of the Muslims in the 1120s Ferris informs us that a light vessel was sent to Sicily with the news, and King Roger came over in person, executing the rebel leaders and expelling their followers. He ends up by expressing the opinion that the annual procession of St. Gregory’s was most probably founded as an expression of thanks to Our Lady for the freeing of the island from the tyranny of the Saracens.

Predictably, the legends continue to grow and acquire ‘substance.’ Thus at Birgu not so long ago a monument in marble was erected at the time of the visit of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the asserted ninth centenary of the erection of the parish of Birgu in 1090 (sic) by Pope Urban II, and a stamp was issued by the postal authorities celebrating the supposed
origin of the Maltese Flag in the alleged grant by Count Roger in the same year. Had this been correct, of course, it would make the Maltese National Colours the oldest such colours in the world were it not for the fact that a couple of other little countries also have similar myths to invoke.

Need we say that historians reject the whole series of legends, and all accretions that have grown up around the relatively simple account left us by Geoffrey Malaterra. The National Colours could not have been granted to Malta by Count Roger because such things did not yet exist. Count Roger could not have founded the parish of Birgu or even restored any of the churches because his invasion in Malaterra’s account has all the features of a mere razzia not that of a permanent occupation of the Maltese islands. And one may add, there is no independent evidence of any sort for the existence in 1091 (the real date of the invasion) in the Maltese islands of a surviving indigenous Christian population. King Roger’s invasion of 1127 was the one that brought about a permanent political change in the islands, the establishment of a Christian regime, the immigration of a number of permanent Christian settlers, mostly garrison members, administrators, traders and clergymen, none very numerous or their language [p.39] would have replaced the Arabic dialect which eventually evolved into the Maltese language. Islam was predominant among the islanders for long after 1127, and survived down to c.1250.

It may be objected that the style of several surviving medieval buildings at Mdina has been described as Siculo-Norman. These include the so-called Norman House, Palazzo Gatto-Murina and Palazzo Santa Sophia, with their ‘Norman’ windows and ‘Norman’ arches. Whatever the term means it certainly does not imply that these buildings go back to Norman times. In fact, their dates of building range from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries and they have also undergone restoration or modification in the present century. Unfortunately, no building in Malta, unlike Sicily, dates back to Norman times. The same goes for the old stone cross in Howard Gardens.

More recently it has been claimed that Count Roger’s invasion in 1090 (ie. 1091 as calculated today) marks the point in time when Malta’s (a) Europeanization, and/or (b) Latinization began. With regard to both it must be said again that that event was of a purely transitory nature and totally unsuitable to serve as a date-mark. King Roger’s definite conquest of 1127 would be more to the point. However, even then, one has to deny that King Roger’s conquest was meant as an exercise in the Europeanization of Malta; Roger at the time was merely following an expansionary policy that was eventually to lead to the conquest of Tunis itself and other points on the coast of Africa. Europe was at best merely a geographical expression, one he probably himself never used. Latinization itself probably, in a sense, did start in 1127, but one has to remember that Islam persisted in Malta for considerably more than a century after that date. In fact, a number of Saracenic tombs from the cemetery behind the Roman Villa, Rabat, are genuinely dated to Norman times. Consequently the Koran was still recited and Classical Arabic still known to a considerable section of the population until then. In fact, in 1198 the document sent to the Christian and Muslim communities of Malta and Gozo was bilingual, Latin and Classical Arabic. For long after 1127, official languages of Malta as of Sicily were probably, Latin, Classical Arabic and Greek.

Of the physical heritage of the Normans the most tangible and visible in Malta are their coins. Though the provenance from Malta of the coins in our museums is not completely established, their spread and relative amounts seem to be correct. Particularly interesting are the coins with Latin wording on one side and Arabic on the other, indicating a mixed population and culture. Of course, they were intended for use throughout the Sicilian kingdom and must have been struck there away from the Maltese shores.

Naturally, Christianity was reintroduced by King Roger (ie. in 1127 not 1091) and it has consolidated itself and flourished there ever since. Not much is known about how it
happened. Going on what happened in Sicily, and on the Byzantinesque character of the iconography of sub-Islamic times it would seem that Greek influence at first was supreme, though the Normans themselves usually favoured the Latin clergy, especially the higher clergy. The Latin church eventually won. The *Codex Evangeliorum Melitensis*, the existence of which at the Cathedral is documented from the late fifteenth century onwards, has been attributed to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, and could just qualify as a possible genuine Norman object, though again its original provenance is unclear.

One may say that the Norman legends with which our older history books and popular writings are replete represent the heritage of the religious and geopolitical situation of the later Middle Ages and Early Modern times, not directly of Norman times at all. One has to admit that the Norman heritage itself has left practically nothing to be remembered by, in fact less than the Arab or Muslim period, seeing that the latter is, after all, well represented by the existence of the Maltese language itself.

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[Illustrations at the end of this article]

[Illustration on p.34:]

Roger’s Hall, Palace of the Normans, Palermo
[Illustration on p.35]

The crowning of King Roger by Jesus Christ. A mosaic of the twelfth century in the church of St. Maria dell’Ozieretto, called ‘La Martorana’ in Palermo.

[Illustrations on p.36]

Mosaic decoration of the apse, Palace of the Normans, Palermo.