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[p.47] The Norman Conquest of Malta: History and Mythology

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The Historical Background

In 1091 the Maltese Islands were raided by the Count of Sicily, Roger de Hautville, who freed the Christian slaves and carried away rich booty after having exacted from the Muslims a peace pact which bound them to be his *confederati* and pay him a yearly tribute. The significance of this event must be considered in the wider context of a shift in central Mediterranean balance of power, in the second half of the eleventh century, which witnessed the eclipse of Byzantine influence, the rapid expansion and consolidation of Latin hegemony in the area, and the temporary decline of Muslim power. In this sequence of events the Norman conquest of South Italy and Sicily had decisive consequences.

The Normans first came to Italy, in the second decade of the eleventh century, as mercenary soldiers in the service of the Apulian Lombards who harboured political and military plans for the complete dominance of the peninsula large areas of which were still provinces of the Byzantine Empire. The Normans, however, had ambitions of their own and by craftily fomenting discord among the various Lombard principalities and barons they succeeded, in a short while, to dominate their former masters and start to conquer the country for themselves.¹ By 1030, they already had a principality of their own at Avers, and, by 1046, they had established their authority over most of Apulia and the Calabria. An important breakthrough was achieved in 1059 when their leader, Robert Guiscard, was invested with the title of Duke by Pope Nicholas II, who made him his vassal. This was in open defiance to the Emperor who claimed the suzerainty of Italy.

The Pope's gesture gave the Normans the ultimate stamp of respectability and inspired them with new ambitions for the reconquest of Sicily which had been in infidel hands for over two centuries. Its conquest was, therefore, something more than a mere southward extension of their dominions. It is possible that the papacy saw in the enterprise an opportunity to outrace the Byzantines in winning over for Latin Christianity a once important province of the Patricarchate of Constantinople. The atmosphere of mutual mistrust which characterised the relations between Greek and Latin rite Christians appears to have been a key factor in securing the support which the Normans received from the papacy at the onset of their Sicilian adventure.

In spite of the fact that the Sicilian Muslims were reputed to be divided among themselves the war proved more difficult than anticipated. It dragged on for thirty years and Robert's difficulties were complicated by the insubordination of his Norman vassals in Apulia. Robert's chief lieutenant was his youngest brother Roger who, in due course, assumed the title of Count of Sicily and became directly responsible for the campaign. The final victory, achieved in 1091, is largely a tribute to Roger's military genius and [p.48] farsightedness. It won him universal acclaim among the Latin Christians while his policy of religious tolerance secured him the confidence of the Muslims.

It has been proposed that the Normans appreciated the strategic value of Malta which was considered essential for the security of Sicily.² That Malta was never far from their thoughts is suggested by the events of 1071 when, during the siege of Catania, they tried to trick the Arabs into thinking that their real objective was Malta: *finges se Maltam debellatum ire*.³ It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Roger started preparations for the attack on Malta

immediately after the fall of Noto, the last Sicilian stronghold, in February 1091.⁴ Anthony T. Luttrell has pointed out that the Muslim position in Malta had been weakened by the destruction, in 1087, of the great pirate base of Mahdia, in Tunisia.⁵ The timing of the attack on Malta might, therefore, have been the result of sound tactical thinking.

The Malaterra Account

The false impression that the raid on Malta came quite unexpectedly is largely due to Roger's chronicler, the French monk Geoffroi Malaterra whose narrative of the Sicilian campaign, *De rebus gestis Rogerii ...* reads like a romance of chivalry. He relates how, after the whole of Sicily had been conquered, the good Count, who was accustomed to an active military life, and was anxious for new adventures across the sea, on being told that Malta was the nearest landfall immediately ordered the fleet "to hasten to capture it by assault, enjoining his soldiers to do their utmost to secure the success of the undertaking."⁶

The attack had, however, to be delayed on account of (a) the insubordination of Mainerio of Gerenzia, one of the Count's vassals, and (b) a peasant uprising in the mountains of Cosenza. The final preparations for the expedition were made in July 1091 when the fleet berthed in the bay of Capo Scalambri and a sizeable army (*plurimo exercito*) was assembled from Sicily and the Calabria.⁷ Roger's son, Jordanus, wished to command the expedition himself, but the Count ordered him to remain in Sicily and insisted that it would be unbecoming of him to expose himself, or indeed anyone else, to unknown dangers.

The fleet left harbour on the evening of an unspecified day. After the Count had boarded his galley,

"... Signal was given to the trumpeters and the players of various other musical instruments who each played according to his skill. The anchors were lifted and ... the sails unfurled to the wind. Aided by a favourable wind, they arrived near Malta on the second day ..."

Roger's ship raced past the other ships and, immediately it touched land, the Count disembarked with thirteen picked knights. Then,

"mounting his charger, he surprised a great multitude of natives who came to meet him on the shore to prevent him from disembarking. He struck many of them to the ground and routed the rest pursuing them for a long time and killing them all. Then, in the evening, after returning from the pursuit, he spent the night on the beach with his army.

The following day, at dawn, he moved close to the city, laid siege to it and sent his soldiers to pillage the island. Thereupon the Kaid, who was the supreme magistrate of the city and the island, and the inhabitants (who being less used to [p.49] war were filled with fear at the presence of the enemy) asked leave to present themselves freely to the Count to negotiate peace. The request being granted, they presented themselves at the tent of the Count to parley with him on the terms of the peace. After a lengthy discussion, realising, at long last, that they could not deceive the shrewd prince with their words, they offered, in the first place, to surrender to him the Christian slaves whom they kept in great numbers within the city (*captivos christianos, quorum plurimam multitudinem infra urbem tenebant*), as well as the horses, the mules, and all the weapons which they possessed, besides an inestimable quantity of money and treasure. An annual tribute having also been agreed upon, they pledged their fealty to

the Count and, having taken an oath, according to their custom, they entered into an alliance with him. Seeing, then, the Christian slaves coming out of the city, filled with joy at their unexpected freedom, he (the Count) shed tears from the innermost recesses of his heart. They (the slaves) carried in their right hand crosses of wood or reeds, whichever material they found handy, and with exclamations of *Kyrie eleyson*, they cast themselves at the feet of the Count. At such a touching sight our men were moved to tears of affectionate joy. Therefore the Count, having thus annexed the city to his domains (*Comes ergo, taliter urbe sibi confoederata*), welcomed the slaves on his ships. As he fastened to depart on the return journey, he was, however, troubled that the excessive weight of the new human cargo (i.e. of the slaves) could cause the ships to founder. But the hand of God, in whom we trust, manifested itself. Lifting the ships with the waves, it made them race on the waters.

In spite of his fears, while he was speeding back home in this fashion, the Count, observing in the distance an island which bears the name of Golsa (i.e. Gozo), ordered the sails to be directed towards it, so that he might attack it. Upon alighting there he pillaged (the place) and carried away booty (*Quo applicans praedis aggrediens, devastat*), and, desiring it under his rule, he annexed it to his domains ...”

On his arrival in Sicily, the Count divided the great booty among his faithful companions and enfranchised the slaves whom he treated with magnanimity. He gave them the option either to return to their place of origin, or to remain in Sicily in which case he offered to build them a house at his own expense and to provide them with work to earn a living. All slaves freely chose to return to their several homelands.

The Myth of Count Roger

Count Roger is one of the great popular heroes of the Maltese. Ever since the publication, in 1647, of G.F. Abela’s *Della Descrizione di Malta*, whose account of the Norman period has been described by A.T. Luttrell as “a scientific disaster,”⁸ he has been revered in popular legend and serious histories as a great benefactor of, and a father to, the Maltese whom he “freed from the cruel yoke of Muslim tyranny.” The grateful Maltese church still celebrates an annual mass for his repose at Mdina Cathedral which he allegedly founded and richly endowed. The attitude of Maltese historiography is crystallized in the ecclesiastical history of Mgr. Arturo Bonnici, a respectable academic, and founder of the [p.50] Malta Historical Society, which was published as recently as 1967.⁹ “The Maltese people,” wrote Bonnici,

“were freed from the Arab domination by Roger the Norman, Count of Sicily. A new lease of life was given to the Church and a Catholic revival followed.”¹⁰

Bonnici repeats all the old legends: the landing at a place called *Migra l-Ferha*, the granting of the national red and white colours, the reorganization of ecclesiastical institutions and the reinstatement of the episcopal see, the repair of the dilapidated cathedral, and the founding of canonries, benefices, and other endowments. He paints a largely counterfeit portrait of the Count which borders on hagiology, and, arbitrarily appropriating Norman legislation in Sicily, he wrote:

“Count Roger issued laws to safeguard the sanctity of marriage by insisting upon the priest’s blessing in every Catholic marriage and by prohibiting clandestine marriages,

under the penalty of forfeiture of the dowry ... This legislator, however, permitted the repudiation of the adulterous wife; nay he allowed the husband to kill in some cases his adulterous wife ... Other laws condemned to death those who damaged churches, robbed sacred things or violated consecrated virgins. The same punishment was meted out to those who produced false witnesses ...”¹¹

Such and other bogus material completely falsified an important chapter in Maltese history and they so distorted the true sequence of events that, as in the case of the Pauline traditions,¹² to most Maltese it is inconceivable that things could actually have been different. The myth of Count Roger has become as much an element of national identity as the apostolic origin of Maltese Christianity.

Abela, who was painfully aware that the Malaterra account was the only available primary source, tried valiantly, none the less, to vindicate his belief in a strong Christian presence by arguing that Malaterra did not feel it necessary to make a specific reference to it because it was too obvious a fact! Any how, Malaterra was not entirely trustworthy.¹³ He therefore found it necessary to correct Malaterra’s presumed inaccuracies by the writings of other authors – foremost among them T. Fazello¹⁴ and R. Pirri¹⁵ – and by the traditions of the Maltese:

“Onde non sia meraviglia, se dall’Istoria del Malaterra noi ci allontaniamo alquanto, accostantoci in questo discorso piú ad altri autori, e alle provate traditioni havute da nostri Maggiori ...”¹⁶

It was from these and other dubious sources, such as placenames, which he misinterpreted, that Abela fabricated his romance of a kind hearted, chivalrous Count who through valorous deeds of arms, earned the eternal gratitude of the Maltese by drawing them into the mainstream of Christian European culture. Malaterra’s embarrassing story had to be rectified to fit into his picture of an essentially Christian and European Malta.

The only Christians on Malta mentioned by Malaterra were the *captivi christiani* who were obviously not Maltese because otherwise they would not have departed with the Count to return to their several homelands. The chants of *Kyrie eleyson*, with which they welcomed their unexpected liberator seem to indicate either that they mistook him for a Byzantine lord, or else, that some of them, at least, came from a Byzantine background, presumably from the surviving central European outposts of the Empire. Their number might have [p.51] been considerable although the *plurima multitudo* mentioned by Malaterra is perhaps hyperbolic. These *captivi* were responsible for maintaining a Christian presence in an otherwise Muslim environment. With their departure Malta must have become more exclusively Islamic. Count Roger does not seem to have been at all concerned with religious matters and no attempt was made to re-introduce Christianity. Of the defeated natives he asked only a solemn oath of allegiance without apparently interfering with their established customs and traditions.

Malaterra gives the impression that Roger’s primary concern in the conquest of Malta was the rich booty which it would bring him. This is not entirely correct because the strategic interest of the island was, as maintained above, known and appreciated by the Normans. It is, however, likely that booty was also an important reason. The apocryphal Maltese *gesta* of Count Roger, as elaborated by Abela, are rooted in the misinterpretations of Tommaso Fazello and, more especially, Rocco Pirri. Fazello had maintained, on no evidence, that after the capture of Malta, the Count undertook the restoration of the castle, by which he presumably meant Mdina.¹⁷ Pirri’s falsifications were more serious. Unscientifically appropriating for Malta documents which almost certainly concerned Mileto in the Calabria, he maintained that the Count chose a certain Gualterius to be bishop of Malta and that the latter was

subsequently consecrated by Pope Urban II. He also invented the story of how the Count restored and handsomely endowed the cathedral church.¹⁸ Abela, therefore, found material for his fantastications in the works of authors he particularly esteemed, and he elaborated on their fiction by fabricating a few fables of his own. He thus relates how the Norman victory was facilitated by the native Maltese Christians who swelled the ranks of the Count's army, and how the Count, before leaving the Island, appointed a wise governor (*un prudente capo*) to govern it in his name.¹⁹

The Miġra l-Ferħa Story

Abela argued that the survival of Christianity under the Muslims could be proved by such placenames as *Wied ir-Rum* ("Valley of the Greek Christians") and *Beb el Grekin* ("Greek's Gate"). A similar fascination with toponyms induced subsequent historians to elaborate further the apocrypha of Count Roger. The most important illustration of this myth-making process is the *Miġra l-Ferħa* story. *Miġra l-Ferħa* is name of a little inlet in the north-west of Malta, near the rural settlements of Mtahleb and Bahrija. It is surrounded on all sides by precipitous rocks which are almost impossible to scale. The name probably means "the streamlet" or "the little water course,"²⁰ but since the word *miġra* can also be a derivative of the verb *ġera* ("to run") and *ferħa* can also mean "a joyful tidings," the toponym has, since around the mid-nineteenth century been repeatedly interpreted as *corsa del giubilo*,²¹ or "the race of joy," because of the jubilant welcome which Roger and his knights were supposedly given by the native Maltese upon their arrival in Malta.²² Some authors even corrupted the toponym to *Miġja l-Ferħa*, which means "joyful arrival."²³

The Malaterra account does not provide any hints on the whereabouts of the Norman landing, but if it is true that Roger did not know about Gozo and only noted the island on his return journey, a cove along the south coast would appear probable. The most likely possibility is Marsaxlokk Bay. The Grand Harbour seems unlikely because of the possible presence there of some form of fortification on the site now occupied by Fort St. Angelo. The *Miġra l-Ferħa* story was first told in the Gio Antonio Vassallo's history of Malta, [p.52] published in 1854.²⁴ Its origins are unknown. Caruana claims that it was based on a local tradition which Vassallo misunderstood: *una tradizione locale forse non ben intesa*.²⁵ He (Caruana) was of the opinion that *Miġra l-Ferħa* was not the site of the landing but the place of Roger's first encounter with the Maltese. As to the landing site, he suggested, without stating why, that the Norman fleet anchored at Ġnejna Bay.

The National Colours

The deeply implanted tradition that before taking his leave of the Maltese, Count Roger granted them the privilege of the Hauteville red and white colours to adopt as their own armorial device, is the nineteenth century fabrication of Gaetano Laferla.²⁶ Laferla was a medical doctor, with an active interest in politics, who moved in the circle of the Comitato Generale Maltese, the ardently nationalistic movement founded by Camillo Sciberras and Giorgio Mitrovich to fight for a liberal constitution. He distinguished himself as an outspoken defender of the rights of the Maltese which he championed both as a member of the Council of Government, to which he was elected in 1855, and as a pamphleteer who expounded the myth of a *consiglio popolare*, or popular council, which dated back to Norman times.²⁷ The story of the origins of the Maltese flag, which he told in a thoroughly unhistorical pamphlet called *Cenni storici sullo scudo e stendardo maltese*, composed in 1841,²⁸ forms part of the same political fiction. Laferla's only interest was to enhance his thesis that Malta had been a nation with a constitution and a flag of its own, centuries before the coming of the British who

humiliated her by dismissing the *consiglio popolare* and relegated her to the status of a colony. Although entirely undocumented, the story took root and soon became an undisputed element of Maltese history even though Caruana took pains to point out that Laferla had nowhere indicated his sources: *Laferla non ha detto d'onde ne ha ricavato la notizia*.²⁹ Themistocles Zammit was equally sceptical and made no reference to the “tradition” in his history of Malta.³⁰

Gaetano Laferla’s unscientific exploitation of Maltese History for propaganda purposes, or to rouse patriotic nationalistic sentiments, was, in the nineteenth century, complemented by other pseudo-historians such as Guglielmo Laferla who composed an epic poem called *La partenza del Conte Ruggiero dall’isola di Malta*, which was set to music by Pietro Varvaro and premiered at the Royal Theatre, Valletta, on 19 April 1860. On a more academic level Judge Paolo Debono claimed, on no evidence, that Roger introduced feudalism to the island.³¹

The Definite Norman Conquest

In the late eighteenth century, Gio Antonio Ciantar felt duty bound to expose the “mistake” of the Sicilian author Padre Sebastiano Paoli who had argued that Count Roger had not conquered Malta but only reduced it to tributary status.³² Paoli was, none the less, interpreting correctly the evidence provided by the Malaterra account, and there can be little doubt that he was essentially correct. The textual evidence and the few archaeological remains suggest an intensification of Muslim culture until around the middle of the twelfth century and provide only dubious hints of a Christian presence.³³ After Count Roger’s death in 1101, the islands seem, in fact, to have lapsed back into the African sphere of influence and they had to be conquered again for the Latin West by Roger II in 1127.³⁴

[p.53] Notice of the second and definite Norman conquest of Malta is given in the chronicles of Alberto Telesino, *De rebus gestis Rogerii Siciliae Regis*,³⁵ which mentions the invasion of the islands near Sicily among which Malta is the only one indicated by name, possibly because it was considered the most important. The conquest can be dated with some certainty because the text makes an explicit reference to the death of Duke Guglielmo which is known to have occurred in 1127.³⁶ It is also significant that at least two Arab chroniclers, Ibn-al-Athîr and³⁷ An-Nuwayri, attribute the conquest to Roger II.³⁸

A Norman garrison was presumably stationed on the island at about the same time, and it seems probable that it included a number of priests to minister to the spiritual needs of the soldiers. It might have been in this way that the work of rechristianising the Maltese Islands started. The process was, however, long and laborious and it only met with final success in the course of the thirteenth century.³⁹

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Notes

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- ¹ The three great Lombard principalities were Benevento, Salerno and Capua.
 - ² A.T. Luttrell, ‘Approaches to Medieval Malta’ in *Medieval Malta – Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A.T. Luttrell (London 1975), 30.
 - ³ G. Malaterra, *De Rebus Gestis Rogerii ...* (ed. E. Pontieri), in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, n.s. v (I), (Bologna 1927), 52.
 - ⁴ *Ibid.*
 - ⁵ A.T. Luttrell, 30.

6 Malaterra, 94-96.

7 Malaterra counts his years from the Incarnation of the Lord (25 March). The date 1090 given in most editions of his chronicle, including the standard text of E. Pontieri should therefore read July 1091. The raid on Malta took place five months after the fall of Noto in February *anno ab incarnatione* 1090. Professor Godfrey Wettinger kindly drew my attention to this important detail. It should also be pointed out that that date 1091 is suggested in several of the Arab sources cited in M. Amari (*Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*, ed. C.A. Nallino, Catania 1933-1939, iii, 133 n. 1, 180 n. 1). Details in Luttrell, "Approaches," 31n.

8 A.T. Luttrell, "Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and Invention in Maltese Historiography," in *Melita Historica*, vii/2 (1977), 108. Abela's account of the Norman period appears on pp. 259-267 of the *Descrittione*.

9 On the life and works of Mgr. Arturo Bonnici see C.G. Bonavia ed., *Mgr Prof. Arturo Bonnici 1903-1978*. A Commemoration by the Malta Historical Society (Malta 1994) and V. Borg, 'Mgr Arturo Bonnici A Commemoration,' *Melita Historica*, xi/4 (1995), 393-240.

10 A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, Vol. 1, Malta 1967, 61.

11 *Ibid.*, 61-63. Bonnici's source is P. Debono, *Sommario della storia della legislazione in Malta* (Malta 1897).

12 On the Pauline traditions: M. Buhagiar, 'The St. Paul Shipwreck Controversy. An Assessment of the Source Material,' in *Proceedings of History Week 1993* ed. K. Sciberras (The Malta Historical Society) 1997.

13 Abela, 263: *Vien il Malaterra in questo luogo da noi seguito in alcune cose, ma non gia in quelle che non hanno molto del probabile ...*

14 T. Fazello, *De Rebus Siculis Decades Duae*, 1st ed. (1558).

15 R. Pirri, *Notitiae Siciliensium Ecclesiarum*, 2 vols, 1st. ed. (Palermo 1641). Reprinted as *Sicilia Sacra*, (Palermo 1733).

16 Abela, 260-261.

17 Fazello, 438.

18 Pirri (1641 ed.), 592-593. Pirri also provided a list of the other presumed Norman bishops of Malta but, as in the case of Gualterius, he was apparently unaware that the *Melitensis* of the documents he consulted meant *Mileto* not *Malta*; and, in any case, the names of the bishops occur in false or dubious diplomas. Details in Luttrell, "Approaches," 33.

19 Abela, 261-262.

20 J. Cassar-Pullicino, 'Norman Legends in Malta,' in *Medieval Malta*, 98.

[p.54]

21 A. Ferris, *Storia ecclesiastica di Malta raccontata in compendio* (Malta 1877), 96.

22 Abela, 23, was presumably the first to explain the toponym as *corso allegro o di gioia* but he does not associate it with the Count Roger story.

23 Cassar Pullicino, 98. For a recent argument in favour of Migra l-Ferħa see M.P. Brincat, "Count Roger and the dream: Was there a landing at Migra l-Ferħa?," *The Sunday Times* (Malta), 27/12/1998.

24 G.A. Vassallo, *Storia di Malta* (Malta 1854), 64.

25 A.A. Caruana, *Frammento Critico della storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romana e Bizantina, Musulmana e Normanna-Aragonese delle Isole di Malta* (Malta 1899), 450.

26 The Hauteville chequered red and white ensign appears on the shield carried by the page in Alessio Erardi's early eighteenth century painting of Count Roger in the vestry of Mdina Cathedral. This suggests that the Town Council of Mdina might have

associated its red and white colours with Count Roger long before Laferla. It was, however, Laferla who craftily wove the tale into the nationalistic propaganda story which earned it subsequent historical currency.

27 His political writings include: *Raggionamento sul Consiglio Nazionale – uno degli articoli compresi nella petizione dei Maltesi presentata agli Onorevoli i Comuni del Regno Unito della Gran Bretannia ed Irlanda radunati in Parlamento li 7giunio 1836* (Malta 1838) and *Copia di una lettera spedita al Segretario di Stato per le Colonie Sig. Laboucher dall’ Onorevole Dottore Gaetano Laferla* (Malta 1857).

28 The ms of the pamphlet is in NLM ms. 1403.

29 Caruana, 455.

30 T. Zammit, *Malta – The islands and their History* (Malta 1926).

31 P. Debono, *op. cit.*, (Malta 1897), 94-96.

32 G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata ovvero Descrizione di Malta*, I, Malta 1772, 698.

33 M. Buhagiar/S. Fiorini, *Mdina The Cathedral City of Malta: A Reassessment of its History and a Critical Appreciation of its Architecture and Works of Art*, i (Valletta 1996), 46-51.

34 Details in Luttrell, “Approaches,” 31.

35 L. Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, v (Milan 1724) 617.

36 The text is published in Luttrell, “Approaches,” 31n.

37 M. Amari, *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, 3 vols (reprinted in 1982 with appendix of 1889), I. 450; II, 146.

38 Details in M. Buhagiar/S. Fiorini, i, 45-47, 272-280.

39 **[Text of footnote missing].**