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[p.9] Of Greeks and Arabs and of Feudal Knights

A preliminary archaeological exposure of Malta's perplexing Middle Ages

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In 1999 the National Museum of Archaeology started developing plans to open a new wing dedicated to the medieval archaeology of the Maltese Islands. A few basic problems became immediately apparent to the curators of the new display.

The core problem lay in the paucity of available data on Malta's medieval archaeology for the millennium spanning the 6th to the 16th Centuries AD and in the resulting absence of a scientific consensus as to the actual import of Malta's medieval past.

Should Malta's Middle Ages, with its unusual mixture of Eastern and Western influences, be presented as an insular affair, a matter only of parochial/national interest? Or can it be represented as a significant phenomenon within the broader context of the medieval Mediterranean?

It is probably fair to say that most historical studies tend to picture Malta's medieval past in terms of an idiosyncratic local development. For example, the survival of Maltese as a spoken idiom is explained largely in passive terms - the language just happened to survive because of the Island's marginality. No active social or cultural reasons have been identified for the inexplicable survival of an Arab dialect through 900 years of Western Christian rule.¹

Such a passive and introverted vision of Malta's medieval past is largely due to the quality of the surviving historical evidence. Most of the documentary evidence is very late in date and almost none of it can be truly said to represent an "autochthonous Maltese" point of view. The available documentary evidence describes Malta's medieval reality through the eyes of foreign chroniclers, rulers and administrators. The Maltese themselves are voiceless in this type of archival documentation.² Hence the historiographic impression that the medieval Maltese man and woman were passive protagonists in a marginal historical drama - clearly a historical misrepresentation.

The Museum should try to present a holistic narrative of these difficult centuries, integrating the perspectives of all the relevant social, ethnic and cultural groups. This is possible because the archaeological record is objective and substantive; throwing light indiscriminately on the literate elites as well as on the non-literate masses.

Medieval Archaeology has over the last 20 years made great strides forward in the Western Mediterranean. Spain and Sicily in particular have become a focus of research into the overlapping cultures of Byzantium, Islam and the Latin West. The Maltese Middle Ages fall squarely within this pattern of overlapping cultures, with one particularity - while Spain and Sicily have over the centuries undergone a thorough process of Latinisation, Malta is unique in retaining to this day a basically mixed cultural reality. Speaking an Arab dialect but professing a Latinised ethos, Malta preserves a situation of mixed social and cultural traits that was once widespread throughout the medieval Mediterranean.

Explaining this process in the Museum display may however prove difficult on account of the lack of secure archaeological data for the local Middle Ages. Systematic excavation of medieval sites in Malta has been sporadic - the most noteworthy being the investigation of an Islamic cemetery at Rabat (1922), the excavations at Tas-Silg (1963/70) and those at Hal Millieri (1977). Beyond such episodic events, no holistic study of the local medieval heritage has been attempted.

This situation prompted the Museum of Archaeology to start a re-evaluation of the medieval ceramic assemblages kept in the reserve collection of this institution. A first stage of this initiative was conducted by the present authors on behalf of the Museum in June 1998 [p.10] and involved a rapid review of the imported medieval wares that could be identified within the Museum collection. Twenty-six such assemblages were inspected in all from Mdina, Cittadella and from various rural sites and inland harbour waters.³ All relevant ceramic pieces were then inventoried and analytically described.

Some of the conclusions drawn from this survey are described below by way of a preliminary report. These results should be treated with caution since the available archaeological data remains severely inadequate. Many important medieval sites in Malta have never been archaeologically excavated. Particularly poor is the archaeological record for the rural settlement. No data is available for the medieval township of Birgu in Malta, or for the urban suburb of Rabat in Gozo. Furthermore, some of the medieval material currently held by the Museum is drawn from poorly understood archaeological contexts.

In spite of these limitations the present study did identify a number of key characteristics regarding the importation and consumption of ceramics in medieval Malta. As more research is completed and as new medieval strata are excavated, it will become increasingly possible to confirm or review these preliminary results.

Preliminary Results

The medieval ceramics of the Maltese Islands may be conveniently grouped into four chronological periods which may in turn be broadly associated with political and historical labels. These groupings may be roughly described as follows:

- ◆the 6th to 9th Century AD (Byzantine)
- ◆the 10th to 11th Century AD (Islamic)
- ◆12th to 13th Century AD (Norman/Swabian)
- ◆the 14th to 15th Century AD (Angevin/Aragonese).

Radical changes in the distribution and supply patterns of fine ceramics have been noted to occur at every transition from one chronological group to the next (see Table). The following account will highlight the general trends observed in the changing local ceramic record and set them within a Mediterranean context.

• **Late Roman/Byzantine** - In the 6th and 7th Centuries there is a remarkably high incidence of imported wares in Malta and Gozo involving both fine tableware - Late Roman Red Slipped Wares - Hayes 104, 105, 109 - various oil lamp typologies as well as amphorae from North Africa, South Italy and from the Eastern Mediterranean. The presence in Malta of amphorae from Byzantine-held areas continued well into the 8th and possibly 9th Centuries.⁴

Byzantine ceramics have been detected at Mdina, Cittadella, Tas-Silg, and Marsa as well as in marine contexts at Marsascala and Xlendi. The evidence so far suggests that Byzantine activity is detectable mainly around harbours and in urban settlements.

Evidence for Byzantine settlement in the rural areas is so far restricted. Only a small ceramic scatter has been recorded at San Pawl Milqi. This negative datum is probably due to insufficient archaeological fieldwork.⁵

Nonetheless, the hitherto unsuspected presence in significant numbers of ceramics from the Byzantine period in Malta is a feature of regional significance, providing important new data on the little understood transformation of Mediterranean commerce in the era going from the fall of the Roman Empire to the rise of Islam (6th/9th Centuries). The evidence from Malta for the 7th/8th Centuries appears to be exceptionally rich, particularly when compared to the scanty recovery of Byzantine wares throughout the Western Mediterranean.

In mainland Italy the importation of Byzantine wares in the Late 6th and 7th Century is restricted to a few urban and military centres - such as Rome, Naples, Otranto and St. Antonino di Pertini (Liguria). By the 8th Century even this trickle of Byzantine supplies to mainland Italy seems to have run dry.

The record for the Maltese Islands (as for Sicily) is substantially different. The Islands seem to gain strategic importance for the Byzantine Empire and consequently continue receiving a steady flow of supplies (in amphorae and tableware) from other areas of the Empire right into the 8th Century. The attested presence of a *drungarios* (governor of a naval base) in 7th/8th [p.11] Century Malta further strengthens the idea that the Islands occupied an important position within the Byzantine strategy for the Central Mediterranean.⁶

Very few ceramics have been recovered for the 9th and early 10th Centuries, with the possible exception of some amphorae shapes belonging to a late Byzantine tradition, discovered at Tas-Silg and Mdina. It should however be acknowledged that the ceramic production of this period is little understood even in Sicily.

- **Islamic** - Ceramics pertaining to the Late 10th and to the 11th Centuries have been identified at Mdina, Cittadella, Tas-Silg and at San Cir.

The imported ceramics of this period include glazed wares (typologically attributable either to North Africa or to Sicily) and amphorae (probably Sicilian productions). The commerce in edible goods within amphorae, as attested in Malta, is a sparsely documented occurrence in the Central Mediterranean at this period.

The imported wares - both amphorae and fine ceramics - appear to be reaching both the urban and the rural settlements of the period. However the presence of Islamic wares at Mdina is so far more plentiful.

The evidence seems to indicate that in the 10th/11th centuries, Malta was fully integrated within the cultural and economic systems of the Islamic Mediterranean. Contrary to what some Arab chroniclers maintain, Mdina is clearly occupied throughout the 11th Century, and possibly in the Late 10th Century as well. It is, however, still not possible to say whether the Islamic urban and rural settlements followed closely on those of the preceding Byzantine one.

• **Norman and Swabian** - Ceramics from the 12th to the first half of the 13th Century appear to be rather numerous and widely distributed, being documented at Mdina, Cittadella, Tas-Silg, San Gwann Tal-Gharghar and at Marsa.

In this period the Islands are supplied with fine table wares from a variety of locations throughout the Mediterranean. In the 12th Century the main bulk of glazed wares appears to be reaching Malta from Sicily together with minor contributions from the Campania region and from an unknown site in the Eastern Mediterranean. No North African wares appear to be reaching the Islands during this period.

As from the end of the 12th Century the provenance of fine table wares becomes even more varied, partly as a result of the decline in production of the Sicilian kilns. This period is characterised by the presence of Tunisian majolica (**Cobalto e Manganese**), one shard of early Spanish lusterware, **Protomaiolica Brindisina**, **Ramina Manganese e Rosso (RMS)** from South Italy, **Spiral Ware** from Campania, **Gela Ware** from SE Sicily, together with a possible continuation of Eastern Mediterranean **Slipped and Glazed Wares**.

Glazed cooking wares appear to be imported throughout this period from the Messina area, as well as Sicilian amphorae.

As with the preceding period, the entire range of imported ceramics was still reaching both the urban and the rural sites.

The spread of ceramics identified so far in Malta is highly compatible with the situation existing in this period in Sicily - at such sites as Segesta, Entella, Marsala and Mazara - indicating that the Maltese Islands were heavily integrated in the economic patterns established throughout the Tyrranean region.

• **Angevin and Aragonese Malta** - Fine table wares from this period have been documented at Mdina, Rabat, Cittadella, and Tas-Silg.

This period is characterised by a drastic restriction in the range of fine table wares available for local consumption, while the trade in amphorae stops altogether. The main body of imported fine wares originate from Sicily (**Maiolica Decorata in Bruno**), while rarer pieces of lusterware testify to the importation of ceramics from Spain (**Late Valencian Lusterware** and **Tipo Pula**). The only exception to this pattern are so far a few shards of possibly Calabrian slipped ware, and a single shard of **Graffita Archaica Tirrenica** from Savona (probably found at Rabat, Malta).

In spite of this restriction in the range of suppliers, the presence of fine ceramics is plentifully attested for the 14th Century. [p.12] In contrast, there is a marked lack of imported fine wares from the second half of the 15th Century to the 16th Century.

The evidence so far suggests that this period witnessed an increase in the production of handmade decorated ceramics, often covered with red or white slips and paints, or with appliqué and painted geometric motifs. The presence of such decorated wares appears to be higher in Gozo than in Malta - at such sites as Cittadella and at Mixta. Local decorated wares are also attested in 14th and 15th Century strata at Hal Millieri.

The lack of imported fine table wares together with the possible increase in hand-made productions seems to indicate that the late Aragonese era was a period of radical economic

change. The archival documentation of the 15th and early 16th Century attest to the existence of a growing economic strain on late Maltese feudal society due to the insufficiency of existing agricultural resources to meet the demands of the local population.⁷

This situation of economic duress is clearly illustrated in Table 1, where the presence of imported wares is noticeably much more scarce in the lower end of the matrix - particularly in Gozo and in the countryside. Mdina still retains a fair scatter of largely Spanish fine wares indicating its leading economic position within Late Feudal Malta.

Synthesis of the Data

This review of Malta's medieval archaeological record has highlighted some of the ways in which the Islands' relationship with the rest of the Mediterranean region changed, often drastically, during the millennium going from the 6th to the 16th Centuries AD.

Up to the 8th and 9th Century the Maltese Islands' role appears to have been strongly dictated by the Byzantine Empire's political, economic and military interests. A substantial amount of resources from Byzantine-held lands - represented by a heavy presence of commercial amphorae - transited through the Maltese harbours between the 6th and the 8th Centuries, and possibly even later. Some of these transiting amphorae were utilised to supply the local inland strongholds (as suggested by the Mdina and Cittadella scatters). However it is yet to be understood what exactly these large numbers of Byzantine amphorae in Malta signify in political and economic terms.

In the Islamic period the military/strategic role of the Islands appears to be less predominant than in the Byzantine period. During the late 10th/11th Century the Islands appear to have become fully integrated in the prosperous economic situation enjoyed by the Maghreb and by Sicily under the Kalbid Dynasty's rule. The considerable presence of both Sicilian and Tunisian fine wares in 10th/11th Century Malta could indicate that the Islands were involved in the heavy trade that was then transiting through the Central Mediterranean area.

Under Norman/Swabian rule the Maltese Islands still received considerable amounts of imported wares that reached both the urban and the rural settlements. The major difference lies in the cutting off of commercial links with the Maghreb area in favour of a Tyrranean connection. The documented political ascendancy of the Maltese Islands by Genoese mercantile and military interests during this period may explain in part this switch in trading strategies.

The lively commercial activity detected for the Islamic and Norman periods is overtaken during the 14th/15th Centuries by an apparently rigid autarchic economy and by the virtual truncation of importation of Sicilian, Italian and Maghrebi ceramics. The mass of the ceramics consumed in this period consist of local, hand-made productions.

Furthermore, a distinction appears to have grown between the material lifestyle enjoyed by the largely Spanish feudal families residing at Mdina and the remainder of the Maltese population. This situation could indicate that Aragonese Malta had over a relatively short period transformed itself into an inward-looking, economically impoverished community. The ravages of war resulting from the Sicilian Vespers and the possible visitations of the plague may account in part for this economic inversion. However a social explanation for this decline may be equally valid, particularly when one [p.13] considers the considerable drop in consumption levels noticed between Mdina and the rest of the Islands.

The above reading of the Maltese Middle Ages is in some respects close to what we already know from archival sources. In many other ways, however, the archaeological and the archival sources are at variance. For example, the prosperity noted in the archaeological record for the 10th to 13th Centuries is nowhere indicated in the surviving documentation. On the other hand the prosperity that must have been generated in the 14th and 15th Century by the trade in cotton and cumin is simply not reflected in the archaeological data so far available.

Clearly much remains to be done. The above observations can only hint at the complexity of Malta's Medieval archaeology and what sort of issues need to be most urgently addressed. Continued study of the available assemblages, the development of topographical surveys and the excavation of new sites will allow us to better define the dynamic economic, demographic and cultural changes that characterised this period. This confident approach towards the study of Malta's unwritten history will, it is hoped, be reflected in the new Medieval display being planned for the National Museum of Archaeology.

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Notes

¹ Notable exceptions may however be found, as in Brincat 1991 and Wettinger 1993 which describe the development of the Maltese language within a specifically historical and cultural context.

² This point is brought out clearly in Dalli 1994.

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- ⁴ The information on Byzantine ceramic imports draws heavily on the as yet unpublished research of Dott.ssa B. Bruno of the Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta.
- ⁵ In fact recent fieldwork on Late Roman funerary hypogea - as at the Tal-Barrani - suggests that a number of rural funerary sites were still active right into the 6th and 7th Centuries.
- ⁶ See Pertusi 1977.
- ⁷ See Wettinger 1982 for the resort to usury practices due to the drastic rise of land prices in the 15th Century.