

COMMENTARY

What should History teachers do when Historians do not agree?

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Introduction

Actually, historians not agreeing is not such a problem. History teachers are accustomed to historians hardly ever agreeing! By its very nature history is not a quest to find the ultimate truth but it is a never ending investigation and the most a historian can hope for is to provide a valid interpretation based on reliable evidence. However, there are then those moments in history academic studies where historians do not just provide mildly different interpretations but they disagree in a spectacular way, and that is when history becomes terribly interesting and exciting. This is what makes history special and these strong disagreements provide great learning opportunities in the classroom which good history teachers use to their full potential.

An example of good teaching: Battalion 101 exercise

Before writing about the controversy in Maltese history I would like to give an example from European history. One World War 2 incident provides such a situation and it has been turned into a school history activity. I particularly enjoy going through Battalion 101 ¹ exercise with my teacher trainees because it provides excellent pedagogical approaches on how to deal with historians' disagreements. Battalion 101 was a troop of German soldiers who were like the German home guard in many ways, middle aged men who took care of low key military tasks during World War 2. They were definitely not the SS troops however on one fateful day they came across a village and massacred all the villagers because they were Jews. Historians have longed asked 'why did they do it?' It is also similarly a good idea to have a question when teaching history in schools, it helps to create an inquiry and focus pupils' thought. In this case why did a group of German men most of them just ordinary policemen, teachers, postmen, milkmen and tailors in their everyday

lives murder a whole village? Historians give very opposing reasons for an answer. One historian Christopher Browning says that they did this because they were ordinary men. Like most people they took the easy option, doing what everybody else did to protect themselves. The men of Battalion 101 were not evil, or even Nazis for the most part. They were victims of an extraordinary situation. On the other hand Daniel Goldhagen's interpretation of this event strongly disagrees with Browning's. Goldhagen vehemently asserts that it is rubbish to excuse them. You cannot blame the circumstances they were in. They knew what they were doing and did it willingly because at the time they believed it was right to kill Jews.

A clear case of historians being poles apart in their interpretation of the same event. In such cases a history teacher needs to provide the class with evidence on the event. Primary sources from the time of the incident like photographs, eyewitness accounts, the diary of their Major and interviews with the soldiers themselves many years later after the war. The same evidence the historians Browning and Goldhagen present in their books. What is significant? What is not? Abstract discussion needs to be backed with concrete physical aids to become meaningful to pupils, so it is important to introduce the pupils to the historians by putting a picture of Christopher Browning with his interpretation at one end of the classroom and a picture of Daniel Goldhagen at the other end. Pupils have to physically place themselves along a line on either Goldhagen's side or Browning's side or somewhere in the middle. It is very important that pupils explain why they have taken that position. Who the historians are and what are their agendas is vital information pupils need to be aware of, if they are to decide how valid the historians' interpretation is. I have seen this exercise in action in real classrooms and it is wonderful to watch as new evidence makes pupils rethink their position and move from one side to another, a few often decide they will stand in the middle since they cannot decide and this is perfectly fine too. There is no 'correct' answer but different positions are perfectly acceptable in history as long as the argument is based on evidence, although of course not both interpretations are equally valid, normally one side will get more support from pupils because of its stronger claim.

The Maltese Christian continuity debate

Now in the case of Malta we have a number of historical incidents and explanations where historians are not in agreement, but perhaps none so strongly as the one on whether Christianity continued uninterrupted from the 1st century right up to today or whether there was a time in history from the 1st century to today when the Maltese islands were not Christian. For hundreds of years Gan Francesco Abela's idea that Maltese Christianity can be traced back directly and continuously to the 1st century, from the coming of St. Paul right up to today prevailed. However, medieval historian Godfrey

Wettinger dropped a bomb shell in the 1970s when he started to put forward his interpretation, which basically said that there is nothing to indicate the continuity of Christianity from the late 9th century to the 11th century on the Maltese Islands. In all probability Christianity died out during Arab times except for the occasional captive and the local Maltese integrated with the Arab newcomers and became Muslim. It is difficult to up root one strong paradigm and replace it with another especially when there is strong emotional investment behind one or the other. It is inconceivable for religious Catholics to even contemplate that their own country men and women converted to another Religion and to top it all became Muslim! So this interpretation was resisted and up to quite recently no history teacher ever tackled the issue in the classroom and for almost 40 years all history teachers opted to ignore Wettinger's interpretation and continued to teach the 17th century paradigm offered by Gan Francesco Abela and countless others.

Battalion 101 exercise gave me the idea to try and tackle the problem in a similar way and I produced a pack ² published by the History Teachers' Association. In this pack similarly to the Battalion 101 exercise pupils have to analyse the evidence and take a stand as to which historian is the most reliable and has the strongest claim. This pack also presents pupils with the problem of change and continuity in history. History hardly ever moves in episodic jumps as most school children and as well as some grownups think but rather historical periods fade in and out. In this pack "The Author found that although some of the pupils struggled and could have done with more time and reinforcement, several were able to show an appreciation of historical change as the gradual change as the gradual transformation of a situation." ³ If you are interested in reading more about the research behind this pack a more detailed explanation may be found in *Teaching History* ⁴

The debate takes on a new direction and historians dig in their heels

But the work for this pack was carried out in 2009 and published in 2010 precisely the time when *Tristia ex Melitogaudio* came out. This book by Stanley Fiorini, Horatio Vella and Joseph Busuttill challenged for the first time Wettinger's interpretation. I remember I excitedly attended the first presentation of the book where the now famous poem by the 12th century exiled poet in Malta and written in Greek, was presented by Stanley Fiorini and Horatio Vella. I was very curious to see what the authors had found in this poem for the poster announcing the event boasted a title which no less claimed "Evidence of Christian continuity during Arab times"! Wow what an amazing declaration, for up to that point in time, it had been just opinions and extrapolations of what might have happened and no hard evidence as such. Apart from possibly Joseph Brincat's work which linguistically showed there were no sub-stratas in the Maltese language apart from English,

Romance and Arabic languages. Very strange considering our history goes back thousands of years.

In any case I found Stanley Fiorini's presentation a bit strange too for it was a talk on how byzantine words can still be found in our Maltese language today. He was mentioning a number of religious words. He talked for almost an hour on this and I was getting impatient yes, yes we know all this and we also know that there are various reasons which show that these few words (I believe 6 in all) do not prove continuity from before Arab times. Any school history secondary pupil will tell you that the arrival of 400 Rhodians with the knights in 1530 together with the slow but steady influx of Christians from Sicily (who followed the Greek rite) would account for these Greek Byzantine religious terms. Definitely not hard evidence of Christian continuity from before the coming of the Arabs. I kept thinking please get on with it, the suspense is killing me what have you found in the poem? Finally in the last 20 minutes of the talk Horatio Vella stood up and started to read parts of the poem in Greek. It was magical to hear the original Greek being spoken by a Greek scholar and then finally fleetingly the following was mentioned in translation,

"he banished from the country their sheikhs,
With all their households and black slaves, not indeed a few.
He, on the other hand, brought out into the open the pious inhabitants of the
place together with their bishop"

The evening was over and I have to admit it took me quite a few weeks to grasp the significance of this sentence, since the speakers had not seemed to give it that much importance. But several presentations later not least the one at the Curia some months after, made it clear that the writers believed the poem clearly said that a Maltese bishop had come out together with a Christian community to greet Roger. I asked as part of the audience who the 'he' mentioned in the poem was, and Fiorini answered that it was actually Roger the 2nd, King Roger not his father Count Roger who came in 1091. I wish they had explained that before because I thought Roger 2nd came to Malta more than 30 years after the first coming of the Normans, so it is not as significant as Roger the Count being greeted by a Bishop. But still, maybe this was evidence that a Christian community with a Bishop had survived although the fact that this is after all a fictional poem posed another challenge. How far can we say it is historically accurate? Can one say there are ghosts in Denmark because Shakespeare wrote about them in Hamlet? Maybe. After all, we do know a lot about the Ancient Greeks from what Homer wrote in his poems.

Wettinger was not to be outdone and in December 2010 he gave a paper at Castille where he made what he famously called an 'agonising reappraisal' of

his own work. But if people thought he was going to say the Maltese might not have become Muslims they were in for a shock. On the contrary he said he had made a mistake in saying the Maltese under Arab rule had probably become Muslims, because there were no Maltese left! After the battle the Arabs had killed everybody and left the island empty, a complete genocide! The evidence he presented seemed quite solid and holds up to scrutiny. He quoted from an array of Arab historians and geographers Al Baqri, Al Himyari, Ibn Hauqal, Qazwini etc who all seemed to be in agreement that “the island of Malta remained after that a ruin without inhabitants”. To me that sealed it, in my view balancing that avalanche of evidence against one line in a poem tipped the scale completely in favour of Wettinger’s new claim, that is, that there was absolutely no continuity whatsoever Christian or otherwise of the Maltese prior to 870 and after. It also fitted in quite nicely with Joseph Brincat’s explanation of no further sub-stratas beyond Arabic in the Maltese language, a very rare occurrence in languages unless there was a drastic sudden cut from one period to another.

Wettinger’s Vindication at Jeremy John’s presentation

It might have sealed it for me but it was not the case for a lot of other people. For the next four years the debate raged on. Despite Wettinger’s strong position Stanley Fiorini et al could be right and it is true there was room for doubt. I thought I would just update my teaching pack for school children to include the new evidence: mainly Wettinger’s Arab historians and more parts from the poem. But then another earth shattering event occurred in the world of Medieval Maltese history and that was Jeremy Johns’ talk on May 20th this year. Jeremy Johns is an archaeologist at Oxford university with special interest in the history of Islamic Mediterranean world. Johns’ presentation was based on two parts, one part dealt with Constance of Sicily while the second part focused on the book *Tristia ex Melitogaudio* and the poem which had been used to challenge Wettinger’s explanation. According to Johns the translation from Greek was incorrect and the statement on which Fiorini et al’s whole interpretation rested did not say what the authors claimed! Jeremy Johns also referred to a Marc Lauxtermann’s paper published in 2014. Marc Lauxtermann is a professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek Language and his paper entitled *Tomi, Mljet, Malta Critical notes on a Twelfth-Century Southern Italian Poem of Exile* does not beat about the bush. Lauxtermann says that while the poem is ‘an admittedly difficult text’ the translation lacked ‘philological rigour’ and what it was wrongly translated. What it actually said was the following:

“he selected pious settlers for this place together with a bishop, who, moved by the Hand of Heaven, turned the hateful (mosques) where they called upon Mohammed into most holy churches and installed, in place of the most

despicable mu'addibs, holy and good priests who worship the Holy Trinity in the ways of the Fathers".

The atmosphere in the Old Aula Magna University hall on that fateful evening of the 20th May was electrifying. The audience became fidgety and people glanced at each other and as my teenage children would say OMG. Now there was no longer a shred of doubt Wettinger had got it absolutely right! The one sentence that had stood as the only evidence against his theory no longer existed but had been transformed into further evidence to consolidate his interpretation! After the Norman take over a bishop with a Christian community had been sent to Malta to convert it to Christianity!

But back to history teachers

What do history teachers do now? At this point in time I do not think it is any longer possible to present an 'either' 'or' scenario, at least not until other evidence, if ever, comes to light. Getting your facts right is not interpretation and it is unfair for history teachers as well as pupils to start to query whether a translation is done well or not. As E.H.Carr says "To praise a historian for his accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building. It is a necessary condition of his work".

There is a lot of emotional baggage behind this story and it is undoubtedly true that people will try to censure the version they do not like or else try to nit-pick, and try to find some error in the work of Jeremy Johns and Marc D. Lauxtermann in desperate attempts to prove them wrong. Not an easy task for their scholarship is impressive. I think this is like beating your head against a brick wall, now the only way Wettinger's interpretation will be challenged is if some awesome new evidence comes along, until that happens as the Disney song goes 'let it go'.

I understand perfectly Stanley Fiorini's complaint in his article *Christianity controversy* published in the Times on June 19th when he writes about his surprise that without warning their book *Tristia ex Melitogauda* was removed from competing in the Book Prize of the year, alleging it was done by supporters of Wettinger's interpretation. I also experienced something similar but of course from those who I allege support the Christianity continuity theory promoted by Fiorini et al. I was very disappointed when a book I wrote for school children on St.Paul was suddenly refused publication by a Maltese publication house which had commissioned the work in the first place! I have no doubt including one small page in the whole book casting doubt on uninterrupted Christianity by mentioning Wettinger's work played not a small part in my work being rejected with no explanation ever given. The book is long finished but still to this day lacking a publisher.

I have no allegiance to either interpretation, my only allegiance is to History. History is based on evidence and it is a sacrosanct rule that your interpretation is based as much as possible on sources and their correct translations, hidden agendas should not be the driving force and censoring people's work is not the way forward. So I think as a nation despite our possible religious or nostalgic feelings we should be honest and my advice to history teachers is to present all available correctly translated primary sources and let their pupils come to their own conclusion.

Notes

1. <http://www.keystagehistory.co.uk/free-samples/battalion-101.html>
2. Vella, Y. (2010) *Teaching Change and Continuity in History; Religion in Medieval Malta Teaching history Pack for 11+ . HTA Publication.*
3. Harris, R., Burn, K. & Woolley, M. (2014) *The Guided Reader to Teaching and Learning History.* Oxford: David Fulton, p.150.
4. Vella, Yosanne (2011) "The gradual transformation of historical situations: understanding 'change and continuity' through colours and timelines" in *Teaching History* Issue 144. The Historical Association U.K.

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- Browning, C. (1998) *Ordinary Men.* New York: Harper
- Carr, E.H. (1961) *What is History?* Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican
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