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'Greek', 'Arab' and 'Norman' Conquests in the Making of Maltese History¹

My present contribution does not seek to replace existent works on Malta's history from the fifth century to the eleventh. T. S. Brown's contribution on 'Byzantine Malta', published a quarter-century ago in the seminal collection of essays edited by A. T. Luttrell, stands as an excellent exemplum of historical scholarship. Mario Buhagiar's contributions in the fields of early Christian archaeology, the evaluation of different forms of written and non-written evidence across the whole period are well-known. Godfrey Wettinger's re-evaluation of the 'Arab period' in Maltese history, published around twenty years ago, marked a turning point in the writing of Malta's past. Anthony Luttrell's various contributions help focus the scholar in a context fraught with dead-ends, overshadowed by many an unanswered (and possibly unanswerable) question. The publication by Joseph M. Brincat of the fourteenth/fifteenth century text on Malta compiled by the geographer al-Himyari, is certainly to be credited with creating a new opportunity for reassessing the interpretation of this distant period of Maltese history. Last but not least, Nathaniel Cutajar's research into the early medieval archaeology of Malta promises to provide indispensable new insights on centuries where written records are, at best, slight and fragmentary.²

A painstaking reassessment of the available documentary evidence, which forms as central an aspect of history as the laborious unearthing of new facts, lies well beyond the scope of this paper. My present objective is to discuss (and, at times, question) the way medieval Maltese history has been traditionally reconstructed around the concept of conquest. This device has enabled a view of the past through a peculiar 'looking-glass', magnifying the initial (and inevitably violent) contact to epic proportions; by contrast, the long centuries of community-building which follow, lack the same dramatic vibrancy.

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As expected, the mundane fails to attract the chronicler's attention, and pales into insignificance. A look at the first half of Malta's 'Middle Ages' should prove this point; the first five hundred years or so are largely composed of two monolithic and mutually exclusive time-blocs, the 'Byzantine' and 'Muslim' eras. The chronology is punctuated by a handful of dates which record conquests, or would-be conquests; dates such as 870 and 1091 would seem to set the whole tone for the 'foreign dominations' in between.

The whole period extending from the AD 530s to 869/870 is traditionally referred to as the 'Byzantine period' in Maltese history. By contrast with this massive and undifferentiated period of more than three centuries – forming roughly a third of the islands' 'Middle Ages' – each political/dynastic succession from 1091 onwards, covering Malta's long association with 'Latin Christendom', is painstakingly differentiated.

The early modern historians who first reconstructed and classified Malta's Middle Ages, especially G. F. Abela, knew no more about the island's 'Angevin period' (1266/8-1283) than they did about Malta's long centuries as an outpost of the Eastern Roman empire, except for the fact that the short period of 'French domination' in Malta confirmed the island's alignment with Sicily – and, therefore, Christian Europe. This is not to deny that there are plausible reasons which might justify taking the 'Byzantine period' as one whole, including the central factor of uninterrupted imperial rule. Nonetheless, the effort to 'align' Malta's past with the (perceived) paths of 'western Christian European' history was a central historiographical choice, while alternative viewpoints were discarded. An alternative approach could encompass the wider Maltese experience from late Roman Antiquity to the establishment of Muslim rule. Another perspective, wider still, might reassess the 'Roman' and 'Byzantine' (that is, Eastern Roman) periods as two chapters in Malta's 'Roman millennium' stretching from the third century BC to the ninth century AD.

The Muslim period of Maltese history, the other broad 'non-Western' chunk of Maltese medieval history, has remained equally undifferentiated, despite political discontinuity marked by the rise of the Fatimid empire from 909, not to mention the century or so of virtual independence Sicily enjoyed under its Kalbite emirs in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. The identification of 'Muslims' with the 'rulers', neatly closed the chapter of Islam in Malta with the Norman intervention in 1091, thus effectively banishing from history the thousands of

Muslims who remained subjected to Christian rule in Malta and Gozo at least until the mid-thirteenth century.

What follows is a discussion of accounts of conquests, and would-be conquests, of Malta from AD 533/5 to 1091. It is also, in a sense, an effort to 'rehabilitate' the fourteenth century compiler of *Kitab al-Rawd al-Mi^ctar fi Habar al-Aqtar*, ^c*Abd al-Mun^cim al-Himyari*, as the earliest historian to structure a coherent account of medieval Maltese history around the concept of conquest.

'An Ancient City inhabited by the Byzantines'

What traditionally has been regarded as the 'Byzantine', or Eastern Roman, period in Maltese history, that is, the whole period extending from around AD 533 to 869/70, is unquestionably the longest political time-bracket in the last two millennia of Maltese history. Malta formed part of the Eastern Roman empire for more than three hundred years, much longer than the British, Hospitaller, Catalan-Aragonese, or indeed the Arab periods. The emperor Justinian's conquest of the Vandal kingdom of 'Africa' heralded the beginning of the Byzantine 'reconquest' in the central Mediterranean region. The Byzantines depended on access to Sicilian ports granted them by the Ostrogothic rulers of the island, to replenish their ships with vital provisions and thereafter set out against the Vandal kingdom.³ The reference to the Maltese islands in Procopius's *Bellum Vandalicum* states that 'the fleet touched at (or 'put in') the islands of Malta and Gozo' on its way to Africa.⁴ The Byzantine passage to Africa captured Gibbon's imagination:

'At length the harbour of Caucana, on the southern side of Sicily, afforded a secure and hospitable shelter. The Gothic officers who governed the island in the name of the daughter and grandson of Theodoric, obeyed their imprudent orders, to receive the troops of Justinian like friends and allies: provisions were liberally supplied, the cavalry was remounted, and Procopius soon returned from Syracuse with correct information of the state and designs of the Vandals. His intelligence determined Belisarius to hasten his operations, and his wise impatience was seconded by the winds. The fleet lost sight of Sicily, passed before the Isle of Malta, discovered the capes of Africa, ran along the coast with a strong gale from the north-

east, and finally cast anchor at the promontory of Caput Vada, about five days' journey to the south of Carthage.⁵

Considering that the Vandals were busy subduing a revolt fuelled by the Byzantines themselves in Sardinia, Belisarius gave order for a hasty departure from Sicily southwards to Africa. The fleet anchored at Ras Kaboudia, and the army started its long march north towards Carthage. In a short but intense campaign, marked by the celebrated battles at Ad Decimum and Tricameron, King Gelimer's Vandal forces were resoundingly defeated and his lands integrated into Justinian's domains.

By 535, Justinian was determined to remove the Ostrogothic regime from Italy and Dalmatia, and the remarkably rapid conquest of Sicily that year opened the way for the Byzantine invasion of the Italian peninsula from 536 onwards. The Maltese islands were probably garrisoned and integrated into the Byzantine domains as a result - if not in the wake - of success in Sicily. Evidently the Byzantine expedition had no time, and no need, to carry out any operations in the Maltese islands in 533. Yet Abela characteristically inflated the reference in Procopius into a Byzantine conquest of Malta, underscoring the island's strategic role in any future attack planned against Sicily:

*'sciolte le vele, si conduce con l'armata à Malta, & al Gozo, le quali ritolte dal poter de' Goti e restituite al dominio dell'Imperadore, come luoghi molto importanti à quella spedizione, non meno altresì, che all'acquisto della Sicilia, parte alla volta d'Africa, espugna, e debella Cartagine con Gilmerio allora Re de' Vandali.'*⁶

'An Uninhabited Ruin'

The expansion of Islam across the Mediterranean world placed Byzantine Sicily on the warfront. The island suffered at least ten major Muslim attacks between 720 and 753. This pressure stimulated a coordinated response from the Byzantine military administration, which organized a large-scale regrouping of Sicily's population into strategically-located, well-fortified settlements (what is referred to as the process of *incastellamento*). The virtually unprovenanced seal referring to Nicetas *archon kai droungarios* of Malta, as well as the Gozitan seal

bearing the name of the archon Theophylact, probably date from this period.

Whatever the nature of the political-military set-up in the Maltese islands, it would seem incredible that they were spared from Muslim attack until AD 869-70. Pantelleria was lost, and apparently retaken for a time, by the Byzantines in the same period.⁷ The Muslim conquest of Sicily, which was started in earnest under Aghlabid leadership in the summer of 827, was only concluded in 902 with the fall of the Byzantine stronghold of Taormina.

Malta could serve as a naval base for backing up Byzantine defence efforts in Sicily. It lay in the logic of conquest that the Muslims would try to take this island base sixty miles south of the val di Noto and use it to harass Byzantine shipping, as well as to launch attacks against the southern coastline of Sicily. There was nothing in the early phase of the conquest (say, up to 848) to suggest that the Muslim successes in Sicily could not be reversed by a concerted Byzantine effort from their two main strongholds of Enna and Syracuse; the latter fell eight years after Malta, in 878.

The best account of the Arab conquest of Malta (but not Gozo, which does not get a mention) is provided by al-Himyari, who compiled his text from several earlier sources in the early fourteenth century.⁸ Al-Himyari dated the Muslim conquest of Malta to 255 (the Muslim year which ran from 20 December 868 to 8 December 869); similarly, Ibn Khaldun placed the conquest of Malta in 869. However, the Cambridge Chronicle dated it at 29 August 870. The chronicler Ibn al-Athir maintained that in 256 the Muslims of Sicily relieved Malta then besieged by a Byzantine force. The Byzantines (or 'Rum'), he claimed, fled at the news of the Muslim arrival. The *Kitab al-Uyun* located the conquest of Malta on 28 August 870.⁹

Al-Himyari's detailed account of the conquest of Malta mentions how Khalaf al-Hidim attacked the island and died whilst besieging it. The Muslim forces in Malta requested their Sicilian commander to send them a new leader (*wali*) to take charge of the siege, and Sawada Ibn Muhammad was duly dispatched to the island. The Muslims 'captured the fortress (*hisn*) of Malta and took its ruler 'Amros (possibly Ambrose¹⁰) prisoner and they demolished its fortress and they looted and (desecrated) whatever they could not carry'. It is clear from this account that the Arab siege of Malta was a protracted affair, not a rapid conquest. Successes gained by the time of Khalaf al-Hadim's death,

as well as the approach of wintertime, kept the Muslim siege going. It is certainly significant that the loss of leader, which was at any rate a severe blow, was not enough to rob the Muslims of their victory, so to speak.

Both the *Kitab al-Uyun* and al-Himyari highlight the role played by the Muslim naval commander, Ibn al-Aghlab, nicknamed al-Habashi ('the Abyssinian'), mentioning an inscription recording how the sea-castle at Susa was built from stones and marble columns carried all the way from Malta. Although it is virtually impossible to tell what happened in the immediate aftermath of Muslim conquest, if the Muslim victors indeed took the trouble to transport hewn stones and marble away to Africa, it is reasonable to assume that a number of inhabitants were led away into captivity. The contemporary sources are silent on this point, as they are about the fate of those who were possibly allowed to stay on.

Al-Himyari's early fourteenth century text (extensively revised, it would seem, by an erudite relative in the fifteenth century) detailed the Muslim conquest of Malta, which is corroborated by several other sources in its main points. Not so his passage describing what happened to Malta after the Byzantine defeat:

'After 255 (=868-9) the island of Malta remained an uninhabited ruin, and it was visited by shipbuilders, because the wood in it is of the strongest kind, by the fishermen, because of the abundance and tastiness of the fish around its shores, and by those who collect honey, because that is the most common thing there. After 440 (=1048-9) the Muslims peopled it, and they built its city, and then it became even more perfect than it had been'.

What archaeological evidence has, to date, come to light, would seem to rule out a literal reading of al-Himyari's passage that Malta remained uninhabited for more than one hundred and seventy years following the conquest.¹¹ A literal interpretation would also make necessary to explain what reason the Arabs might have had in abandoning Malta after successfully concluding a prolonged siege and (according to al-Athir) keeping at bay Byzantine relief forces. It seems equally arbitrary, considering the lack of other documentary evidence, to reject outright al-Himyari's statement as simply being an elaboration by a late medieval compiler of a geographical dictionary. Evidently the author used this paragraph to link up two separate pieces, namely, an

article extracted mainly from the eleventh century author al-Bakri, and a narrative text describing a failed eleventh century attack on Malta by a Byzantine fleet derived from the thirteenth century writer al-Qazwini. It makes sense to suggest that al-Himyari exaggerated what was, in essence, a historical fact, namely, a dramatic fall in population levels and living standards; this must have seemed a perfectly logical conclusion, from the author's perspective, for an island locked in decades of warfare, suffering a long siege, the destruction or dismantling of key physical structures, the loss of community leadership, and the harsh treatment presumably meted out on the vanquished inhabitants. Presumably a surviving population nucleus reorganized itself on the island around economic activities which exploited readily available primary resources; al-Himyari listed timber-cutters linked to ship-builders, as well as fishermen and honey-gatherers, all activities which would demand a not inconsiderable level of manpower. The question might prove to be, after all, to what extent? and for how long? An urban community flourished behind the walls of the old Byzantine capital, by the second half of the tenth century; this is a good one hundred years prior to 440/1048-9, the date indicated by the author as marking the resettlement of the island of Malta by the Muslims. The eleventh century expansion might be understood in the form of rural or coastal resettlement and urban renewal, rather than a process of total colonization from scratch.

'A Quick Victory or the Triumph of the Hereafter'

The defence capabilities of this eleventh century community were put to a serious test by the Byzantines (if that is, indeed, the identity of the 'Rum' mentioned by the Arab sources) in a major attack which took place in 440/1048-9 according to al-Qazwini (or 445/1053 according to al-Himyari). The episode has been linked to the large-scale Byzantine invasion of Sicily under the command of George Maniakes, in 1038-40;¹² but a western Christian attack, possibly Pisan or even Norman, cannot be ruled out completely. The *Annales Pisani* recorded a Pisan attack on the North African city of Bona in 1035;¹³ Ibn al-Athir claimed 'Normans' were active at Syracuse in 444 (1052) in alliance with the Muslim *qa'id* of Syracuse, Ibn al-Thumna.¹⁴ It might also have been a reprisal against the attacks of the Sicilian *qa'id* al-Akhal on Byzantine possessions in Illyria, Thrace and the Aegean sea. At any rate, the incident revealed the existence of a composite society which would otherwise have escaped documentation. The large Christian naval force assaulted Malta and

drove its population to ask for a peace treaty or *aman*. According to the Arab chronicler this was refused. The Muslims in the *madina* mustered their forces, which included four hundred adult male combatants according to al-Himyari; then they turned to their slave-soldiers or *cabid*, who were more numerous than themselves. The religious or ethnic character of these slave-soldiers remains undefined; however, they were a distinct social group and were an organized community which could negotiate with its Muslim masters a highly attractive deal: promotion to free men, or *ahrar*. 'We shall raise you to our level and we shall give you our daughters in marriage, and we shall make you partners in our riches'. The slave-soldiers were clearly in a position to choose:

'If you hesitate and abandon us, your fate will be the same captivity and bondage which will be ours, nay you will fare even worse because with us one may be redeemed by a dear friend or freed by his ally or saved by the support of his community'.¹⁵

In the event, the slave-soldiers 'rushed against their enemy more promptly than (the Muslims) themselves'; al-Himyari's account distinguishes throughout between the Muslims and the slave-soldiers as though the latter did not adhere to the Muslim faith, or were deprived by their unfree status from sharing that noble name with the *ahrar*. The barrier between the freemen and their slaves was possibly only social in character, but might also have been underlined by other differences. What is certain is that any such diversity was overcome in the face of adversity. In al-Himyari's account, the battle with the enemy took the form of a *jihad*:

'they asked for the help of Allah the Almighty, and they marched and stormed around them, piercing (the Rum) with spears and striking them with swords, without fearing or faltering, confident of obtaining either of two fine goals: a quick victory or the triumph of the hereafter. And Allah the Exalted provided them with help and gave them patience, and He cast fear into the hearts of their enemies, and they fled defeated without looking back, and the majority of them were massacred. The Muslims took possession of their ships and only one of these slipped away. And their slaves reached the state of their free men, and they were given what had been promised to them.'

A striking feature of al-Himyari's account is the reversal of roles

– the besiegers and defenders of 870 exchange places in 1048/1053. The one crucial detail is that the Muslims were successful in both roles, as God was on their side.

**'The enemy feared them,
and none of them showed up for some time'**

The Hilali invasions have long marked a watershed in North African history; Ibn Khaldun described the devastating effects of the bedouin invaders, falling like 'swarms of locusts' on the prosperous cities of the Maghrib. Perhaps they were more a symptom of Muslim decline, than a cause of it; nonetheless, the unfair vantage point of hindsight should not obscure the fact that Dar al-Islam had witnessed and overcome many a crisis similar to the civil wars undermining eleventh century society in al-Andalus and Sicily.

Yet what George Maniakes failed to achieve in 1040, Robert Guiscard and Roger of Hauteville proceeded to carry out two decades later. The Norman conquest of Muslim Sicily was not as long drawn-out an affair as the Muslim one had been; a crucial factor was, perhaps, the fall of the capital city, Palermo, in 1072. According to the chronicler of the Norman conquest, Geoffrey Malaterra, soon after Palermo opened its gates to Norman troops, Guiscard descended on Catania and demanded port facilities from its Muslim *qaid* with the pretext that his fleet was on its way to attack Malta. By this ruse Guiscard's forces were allowed in port, and they duly proceeded to take the town. It is of some relevance that Malta was considered significant enough a diversion to misguide the Muslims of Sicily and their Zirid allies in North Africa.

When the Norman conquest of Malta and Gozo did take place, in July 1091, it came at the end of a thirty-year-long conquest of Sicily; the last Muslim stronghold, Noto, was granted a peace treaty in February, 1091.

Against the insistence of his son Jordan, the elderly Roger led the expedition to Malta in person, clearly desiring to underscore his leadership. 'A great multitude of natives' tried to prevent the Norman forces from landing onshore, but they were no match for Roger and his knight-companions, who killed some of the fighters and chased the rest inland. The next day, the Normans besieged the town and pillaged the countryside. At the head of a frightened, unwarlike population, the local *gaytus*, or *qaid*, asked for a peace treaty. Malaterra carefully recorded the terms of Malta's surrender. The 'clever' Roger left them with little

room for negotiation; they were forced to surrender all their Christian slaves, whom they retained in great number within the town, together with their beasts and weapons, and a colossal indemnity. Having pledged their fealty towards Roger and become his *confoederati*, or allies, they agreed to pay him an annual tribute. The Christian slaves were 'welcomed' on board the Count's ship (emphasizing the fact they were his war-prize and booty). That the ship did not founder under their added weight, but rather race across the sea, exclaimed Malaterra, was only due to the miraculous 'hand of God'. The Norman force made stop at Gozo, pillaging the island and annexing it by force to the Count's lands. Upon his return to Sicily, Roger enfranchised the slaves he had fetched from Malta; the Count offered to establish a free town for them, but they preferred to return to their various lands of origin.

A post-colonial postscript

As in the history of Sicily and several other Mediterranean islands, one is struck by the neat categorisation of the past in terms of a series of political age-brackets or eras, which are little more than cultural constructs characterized by the subject 'Maltese people' (or, what is worse, 'nation') versus the 'foreign' overlord. Historians would hardly get away with grouping indiscriminately the whole sequence of dynastic rules in Malta's later medieval centuries ('Norman', 'Swabian', 'Angevin', 'Aragonese', 'Castilian', even 'Spanish') as 'the Latin Christian era'. This contrasts with the way the Byzantine and Arab periods are handled. The reason cannot simply be that the textual basis on which the whole edifice of Maltese history from the fifth century to the twelfth stands is extremely narrow. For how is one to 'discover' the loyal Syrian, trustworthy African or faithful southern Italian servant of Constantinople in the 'Byzantine', the native Berber or sub-Saharan subject of Qayrawan or al-Mahdiya in the 'Muslim'? And did the 'Normans' really exist?¹⁶ It would be nothing less than anachronistic to extend, across the ages, the modern colonial dichotomy of the dominated native versus the foreign dominator. The attempt to refashion whole 'millennia' of the 'Maltese past' in terms of the colonial experience of the past two hundred years or so is not nearly outfashioned four decades into national independence. The labels used to refer to periods or epochs are as arbitrary as any other name; except that, with time, they become part and parcel of the historian's toolbox, to the point that they might easily be mistaken for historical realities.

¹ An early version of this paper was delivered by the author as the

annual Professor Andrew Vella Memorial Lecture, 2001.

² T. S. Brown, 'Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources' in A.T.Luttrell (ed). *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights* (The British School at Rome, London, 1975); Mario Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Other Related Burial Sites in the Maltese Islands* (B. A. R., International Series, 302, Oxford, 1986) and 'Early Christian and Byzantine Malta: Some Archaeological and Textual Considerations', in V.Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Library of Mediterranean History* (I, Malta, 1994); Godfrey Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta', in *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History* (Malta, 1986); A.T.Luttrell, 'Ibn Hauqal and Tenth Century Malta', in *Hyphen* V, 4 (Malta, 1987) and 'Slaves and Captives on Malta: 1053 and 1091', in *Hyphen* VII, 2 (Malta, 1992); Joseph M.Brincat, *Malta 870-1054. Al-Himyarī's Account and its Linguistic Implications* (Malta, 1995); Nathaniel Cutajar and Alessandra Molinari, 'Of Greeks and Arabs and of Feudal Knights', in *Malta Archaeological Review* (Malta, 1999); Nathaniel Cutajar and Brunella Bruno, 'Archeologia bizantina a Malta: primi risultati e prospettive di indagine', in M.Liverani and P.Matthiae (ed.), *Da Pyrgi a Mozia. Studi sull'archeologia del mediterraneo in memoria di Antonia Ciasca ed M.G.Amadasi Guzzo*, (Vicino Oriente – Quaderno 3/1, Rome, 2002).

³ It has been pointed out that the Byzantine failure to use the excellent Maltese harbour in the campaign against the Vandals, shows that the Maltese islands were certainly not Byzantine up to that point: Brown, 73; Buhagiar, 'Early Christian and Byzantine Malta', 101-2.

⁴ Procopius, *Bellum Vandalicum*, I, 14, 15-6.

⁵ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, II, chapter XLI.

⁶ G.F.Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta* (Malta, 1647), 245.

⁷ See the edition of the Typikon of John for the Monastery of St John the Forerunner on Pantelleria, in J. Thomas and A. Constantinides Hero (eds.), *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 35, 2000), 59-66.

⁸ Arabic text and translation in J.M.Brincat, *Malta 870-1054*.

⁹ See the discussion of these dates in Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta'.

¹⁰ As suggested by J. Brincat, 'Malta e Pantelleria: affinità e diversità storico-linguistiche' consulted at <http://www.pantelleria-isl.it>.

¹¹ See the summary of findings in N.Cutajar, 'Arabes et Normands à Malte', in *Dossiers d'Archéologie*, 267 (2001), 76-81.

12 Luttrell, 'Slaves and Captives on Malta'.

13 *The Annales Pisani* K.Pertz (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum*, 19 (1861/1963).

14 However, this date in al-Athir has been dismissed as an error: J. Johns, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily* (Cambridge 2002), 32 and note 7.

15 The translated text is quoted from Brincat, *Malta 870-1054*.

16 R. H. C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (1976); Hartmut Hoffmann, "Die Anfänge der Normannen in Süditalien," in *Quellen und Forschungen*, 49 (1969), pp. 95-144; Graham Loud, "How 'Norman' was the Norman Conquest of Southern Italy?," in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 25 (1981), pp. 13-34 and "The Gens Normannorum, Myth or Reality?" in *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 4 (1981), pp. 104-16; T. S. Brown, "The Political Use of the Past in Norman Sicily," in *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Paul Magdalino (London, 1992), pp. 191-210.