

## **RELIGION: A PERSPECTIVE INTO GOZO'S MYSTERY**

**Joseph Farrugia**

**G**ozo is deceptively tiny for its history. Though for the most part its history is still shrouded in mystery, it is so evident and so compelling that Gozo's past is a larger than life story of an island steeped in the events, cultures and civilizations of the Mediterranean wherein it has floated since the last ice age tied, together with its elder sister and the other smaller islands, by invisible umbilical links to the southern European continent to its north and northern Africa to its south.

Having its own story to tell does not mean that Gozo may at any point in time be seen as isolated from the other island of Malta or, indeed, that of the Mediterranean. Gozo's history is substantially patterned on that of Malta and its vicissitudes are essentially woven with those of Malta. Nevertheless archeologists and historians converge with geologists, zoologists and botanists on the view that Gozo "has a personality which is quite distinct from that of Malta" (Blouet 1963: 127). Scholars of classical epigraphy, medievalists and anthropologists are not of a different mind as to the cultural identity of the island.

It is a pity that this "personality" of Gozo is still too hidden for us to be able to say that we have an adequate portrait of the island. The pity becomes greater still with the knowledge that so much will probably remain hidden, known only to those who are now forever silent. I wonder what we would learn if our hills, valleys, terraced fields and plains were to collaborate and co-author a dossier containing their accumulated knowledge of Gozo's changing fortunes over the last eight or nine millennia! I wonder what we would hear if the archeological remains that have been unearthed and those which are still buried deep beneath our feet were to give up their secrets on the origins of our culture and its evolution into contemporary civilization! I wonder what we would come

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up with if the remains of our Gozitan ancestors were to return to their former selves and tell us about themselves and their times!

Although for the most part Gozo's history is still elusive, it is not for that less real than other better known histories. One feels this history as one walks along the ancient streets of Rabat, intriguing in their twisting iters, giving up branches leading to apparently blind ends, initially unexplainable, mysterious. The more violent side to Gozo's chequered history comes through beneath the towering walls of the town's Castello, upon its wind-swept ramparts and in the midst of its haunted ruins. And nobody can miss the feeling of wonder, at once mystic and earthy, and fail to feel dwarfed by the awesomeness of the temples of Ġgantija, especially as one steps, almost nervously, into their open arms and approaches their inner sanctuaries hallowed by the intuitive beliefs and sacred rituals of our forefathers who built them and worshipped in them.

History is man-made, and to think that tiny Gozo has been inhabited for thousands of years is to wonder about the extent to which the island must be immersed in the cultural past. There is no hilltop or valley in Gozo, no slope or plain, no wild or dale, no sea ledge or shore, no nook or cranny which does not carry some sign of human presence and activity whether remote, ancient or prosaically recent. The limestone dwellings of man and animal which have evolved into hamlets and villages constitute perhaps the more recent evidence of Gozo's past. But old rock-cut and semi-built habitations, the remains of which are sparsely scattered all over the island, and especially the medieval buildings still standing (though fast disappearing) in ancient Rabat give hint of a more remote past, going back to the times of the Arabs, the Byzantines, the Romans, the Phoenicians and still earlier to the prehistoric ages of the island.

Wandering about Gozo it comes across that this island's history is indeed more, far more than what we know. It dawns that Gozo's history is more than just the chronicle we often read of assaults, sieges and conquests and such like dramatic events, however much these must feature in any mediation of the Gozo mystery and in any analysis of the island's traditional self-perception. It comes across that the history of Gozo is, more than anything else, plain man's ordinary "story": that of his probably undisputed first settlements here over 7000 years ago, that of his generally uncontested and ever more sophisticated enjoyment of the

island's natural resources, and that of the inevitable modification and adjustment of some of Gozo's landscape according to his changing material needs and successive cultures.

It is indeed on culture, after all, that historians must pause in their compositions of Gozo's history. Culture basically refers to the complex whole of meanings and values peculiar to a given group of people and emerging in that given people's attitudes and activities. It evolves into civilization at the very moment that a people's meanings and values give rise to some kind of cohesion in social organization, government, economy and especially religion. Indeed, there seems to be a majority opinion among anthropologists, archeologists and historians that religion is the first component to emerge in any cultural composition and is also one of the first constituents of civilization. Fernand Braudel goes farther and identifies religion with civilization as such. Writing about medieval Spain he points out that prior to the unity which was forged in the nineteenth century, the peoples of Spain "felt truly united only by the bonds of religious belief; in other words by civilization" (Braudel 1972: 824). It is a fact that religion invariably emerges in the history of civilizations as the earliest symptom of the latter and also their most constant one. This is especially true of the civilizations of the Mediterranean which are substantially those that followed closely on each other's heels in the islands of Malta and Gozo.

Referring more specifically to Gozo, and without hereby ignoring that the same pattern obtains for Malta, I perceive five ages or eras as forming the history of religious belief and activity here. Each one of these ages corresponds to a particular civilization, or group of civilizations, which visited and dominated this island and modified the religious beliefs and practices of its inhabitants. Each one of these civilizations or groups of civilizations, moreover, has left behind it, though not in equal measure, archeological and other evidence which serves as testimony to its presence here.

### **The Goddess of Life**

The earliest testimony of this kind is that given by the still partially standing temples of Ġgantija, by a nearby giant stone burial site known as the Stone Circle as well as by the ruins of other neolithic sites of

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worship and burial dotting the entire island. These prehistoric remains, thanks to which incidentally tiny Gozo makes a most creditable appearance on the cultural map of the world, testify to the earliest civilizations that flourished on this island. They also testify to the fact that religious belief and religious ritual emerge as primary constituents at the very dawn of our cultural history.

The religious culture of the peoples which occupied Gozo over the extensive paleolithic and neolithic ages of the island cannot be other than merely attested to and can only be tentatively articulated on the bases of the archeological finds dating mostly from the temple period. The accumulated evidence, however, points to an awareness on the part of the prehistoric people that their human life was rooted in another which was larger than their own and superior to it. Death was an instance of life rather than its negation. It was a passage to new life which some kind of overwhelming but potentially friendly power or deity guaranteed and promised. On this conviction they sought the favour of this "motherly" power wherein they saw their source of life and sought to accede to its core as to the womb where the seed of life is received, preserved, nurtured, transformed and given. Hence the feminine symbolism permeating the Ġgantija temples in their form of a flowering female, in their recessed altars, libation holes, fertility figurines, sacred carvings and especially in the adjacent grave site, expressive of the vital link perceived between the dead and the "mother goddess" of life.

Colin Renfrew states that he lacked any clue "as to how and why the temples came to be built" (Renfrew 1973: 167). While the "how" remains substantially a mystery, the "why" may in fact have its basic answer in the human spirit which has never been known to exist *in puris naturalibus* and has always manifested itself to be imbued with a transcendental dimension or existential (Rahner 1961; Rossano 1975).

The religious beliefs and customs of peoples, including those that settled on Gozo about 5000 years B.C. and inhabited the island over the subsequent prehistoric ages, are none other than expressions of this transcendental dimension. Insofar as every human artifact manifests an idea, or at least an intuition, the religious artifacts of prehistoric Gozo are sure evidence of religious beliefs and values pertaining to the people who sought to express them in material objects and customs ranging from the

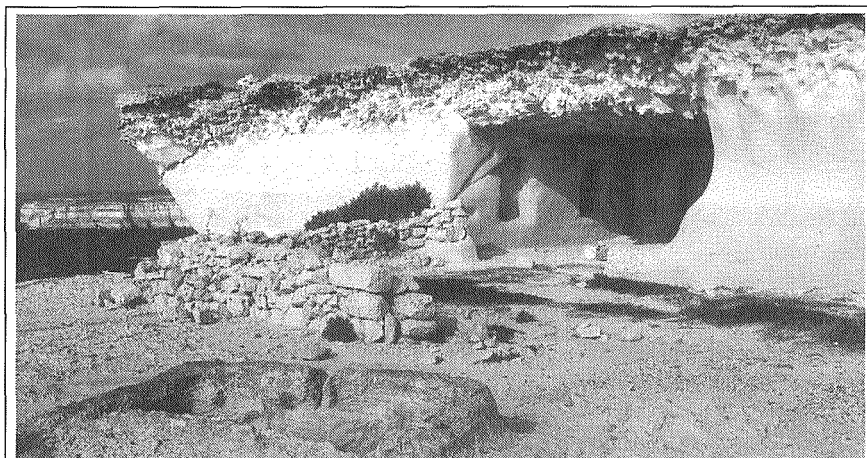
tinest clay figurine placed beside a corpse in a ritual burial to the most stupendous of the megalithic temples of Gozo.

Prehistoric Gozo possesses ample testimony to an evolved Gozitan civilization which had at its core a religious culture that expressed and socially mediated the meanings which the peoples of these ages gave to their itinerary of pregnancy, birth, sexuality, happiness, fear, pain and death. It marks the first - and the most obscure - stage of mankind's voyage down this island's history. This voyage was, as Peter Serracino Inglott aptly describes it (Serracino Inglott 1992: vii), essentially "a pilgrimage" which took the inhabitants of Gozo through various epochs, each of which had its own peculiar religious beliefs, priorities and expressions. The memorials of these first steps are here, in our midst, for all to see. They are of two kinds. The material ones are the most immediately evident, awe-inspiring and tourist-captive. The spiritual ones are the more elusive, buried now as they are in our cultural soul but constantly re-emerging in other forms and dynamic expressions.

### **Phoenician Polytheism**

The indigenous religious culture of prehistoric Gozo gradually got caught in the emergent influence of a foreign people - the Phoenicians who planted their settlement on the Maltese islands some time before 800 B.C. The Phoenicians, hailing from the Syro-Palestinian coastal strip of the eastern Mediterranean, brought over with them not only their material possessions, specialized craftsmanship and commercial acumen but also their cultural baggage, including their peculiar deities and religious customs. Their settlement here marked also the settlement on our islands by their numerous divinities and elaborate beliefs and practices.

This was not different from what at the same time was happening elsewhere on the Mediterranean shores. In fact from the moment the political turmoils amongst their maritime city-states dictated that it was in their commercial interest to take to the western sea, the Phoenicians soon became a prominent feature of the Mediterranean. As a result the Mediterranean gradually acquired a hitherto unknown unity not only as a commercial area but also as a cultural zone. The Phoenicians started the phenomenon of colonization in the Mediterranean and through them



**The Phoenician open air sanctuary at Ras il-Wardija. Photo: John Cremona.**

much flowed into its hinterlands and islands: men, industrial skills, language and writing techniques, customs and indeed religions. In their seafaring along with their goods they carried with them the deities of their native cities and wherever they set up their settlements they also established their sanctuaries there to worship their divine triads and perform their cultic rituals.

Apart from the various names of deities we know very little about the religious beliefs and customs which the Phoenicians possessed and exported with them. Sabatino Moscati concludes that these were essentially of Canaanite attribution transfused by Syro-Babylonian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian and other components (Moscati 1968: 36). Nor do we know to what extent their religious culture penetrated or rather substituted that prevalent in these islands down to the late prehistoric age. What we know for sure is the information which is to be found in the Phoenician-Punic inscriptions that have come to light in both Malta and *Gwl*, the name which the Phoenicians gave to Gozo and from which the modern name itself derives (Lipinski 1993: 1185).

The Gozitan remains which testify to the presence on this island of the Phoenicians and their religious culture are noteworthy. They range from the open air sanctuary at Ras il-Wardija, high on the western edge of the island, to the numerous tombs unearthed outside the boundaries of

ancient Rabat, especially along Il-Vajringa, containing specifically religious, ornamental and other artifacts. Of no less importance are the coins struck in Gozo showing a female head surmounted by the crescent moon, probably representing the goddess Astarte, who seems to have had a temple on the island (Lipinski 1993).

Of remarkable importance is a Punic inscription which came to light in 1855 (Caruana 1882: 39-41). This inscription discloses the deep attachment which "the people of Gozo" must have had for their divinities if, well over a century into Roman rule (Bonanno 1990:34), they were still forking out money for the upkeep and restoration of their Punic temples. A section of the text is missing but two names of Canaanite-Phoenician deities can still be deciphered: Sadambaal, a god unknown from other Phoenician or Punic inscriptions and Astarte, the famous Phoenician-Punic goddess who was generally associated with Baal, the protective god of the maritime city of Sidon, as his female companion and symbolizing the fertile earth. In Phoenician mythology Baal and Astarte headed a divine triad which also included a "divine son" whose annual resurgence to life was perceived in the seasonal cycle of vegetal life. Phoenician religious myth saw the deities manifesting themselves in the annual cycle of nature. In this there was a resemblance to neolithic religious belief. But Phoenician-Punic religion was more articulate in that it multiplied and personalized its gods and goddesses, each of whom had a name and a function related to their respective protective or destructive powers.

Religion, which permeated through all dimensions of ancient society so as it was impossible to distinguish between the religious and profane aspects of it, was undoubtedly a cultural focus in the life of Phoenician-Punic Gozo. The successive generations living on the island gradually grew into its polytheism, practised its cults and drew on its superstitions. With the arrival of the Phoenicians, and then the Carthaginians, Gozo's indigenous culture had come into contact with a new source of enrichment. It also knew for the first time the phenomenon of colonization and experienced its commanding role in the culture of the peoples it dominates. It is said that the local custom of having the protective eye of the Egyptian Osiris on the bows of the *luzzu*, the local traditional fishing boat, knows its origins in the Phoenician era. The Phoenician polytheistic experience has undoubtedly left enduring effects which are still traceable in contemporary Maltese as well as other Mediterranean

cultures. Couldn't it be, asks Braudel, that our attachment to the cult of the saints - a specifically Mediterranean characteristic of Christianity which is in contrast to that of the Protestant north - knows much to an ancient substratum of Mediterranean polytheism? (Braudel 1972: 768).

## **Roman Ruler Worship**

Next after the Phoenician-Punic civilization, in the line of civilizations which dominated Gozo and modified its culture, including its religious traditions, came that of the Romans. The Romans colonized Malta and Gozo in 218 B.C. and ruled over the islands for just over 750 years. They had taken these islands during the second Punic war and added them to their expanding Mediterranean domination.

It is impossible to speak of Roman civilization simply as a homogeneous entity especially as regards its root cultures. These differed from one region to another and evolved deeply over the classical period. After all one of the secrets of the Roman colonizing success was its capacity to tolerate and absorb provincial cultures and religions, deities and cults. But Roman civilization did, in the long run, romanize much of the indigenous culture of the Mediterranean coastlands.

The Roman archeological remains surfacing in Gozo, on which our knowledge of Roman Malta and Gozo relies so much, indicate an initial passiveness by the indigenous inhabitants of the island towards their new rulers. These, on their part, allowed their subjects to retain their cultic sites, worship their familiar deities and practice their religious customs. Indeed the Phoenician-Punic temples continued to flourish. Nonetheless the Roman colonisers brought with them their own divinities. For many years the religious beliefs of the inhabitants co-existed with those of the newcomers. We do not know to what extent the deities of the Romans eventually substituted those of the natives but we have indications which seem to tell us that they must have become fairly established. In fact we have eighteenth century testimony of several statuettes of Roman idols such as Hercules, Apollo, Flora and Romulus and Remus being reportedly discovered at Żebbuġ and Nadur and especially in the environs of Rabat.

What we know for sure, and have ample archeological proof of, concerns



the introduction on the island of Roman official ruler worship. A rather large number of Latin inscriptions carved in hard stone or marble give us a wealth of information about this semi-religious cult which was carried out by the Gozitan *municipium* in the *oppidum* of *Gaulos*, the Roman town of Gozo. These inscriptions, most of which were originally reported or found beneath or in the immediate vicinity of the basilica of St George at the very heart of ancient Rabat, make mention of gods, priestesses and high priests. They allude to the worship of the emperors which, as T. Ashby writes, was “carried out in a temple or temples within the city” (Ashby 1915: 70). This means that, apart from the Punic religious buildings pertaining to the native population, the town of Gaulos must have contained also Roman temples adorned with statues of emperors and imperial consorts deified as classical gods and goddesses with inscriptions carved in their pedestals justifying and detailing the honour due to them. Bonanno states that “such inscriptions (as those unearthed in Gozo) were normally commissioned to celebrate the erection of a monument, often a statue” to the emperor or to some important personage.

The Gozo inscriptions testify that an official cult was practised in honour of Iulia Augusta, the consort of Augustus (63 B.C. – 14 AD) the first Roman emperor under whom Jesus of Nazareth was born, Hadrianus who reigned between 117 and 138 and who had at least one priest - *flamen divini Hadriani* - in charge of his cult in Gozo, Iulia Domna, wife of Lucius Septimus Severus (193-211) and styled by the Roman Senate as *mater castrorum*, Diocletianus (284-305) and Galerius (293-305 as Caesar and 305-311 as emperor of the East). It was during the time of the last two mentioned that the great persecution of 303 A.D. was launched against the Christians whom Diocletian saw as constituting a deadly threat to the gods that guaranteed the unity of the empire.

The inscriptions, moreover, give incontrovertible evidence that the official cult to the “divine” emperors was still being carried out well into the fourth century A.D.

### **The Dawn of Christianity**

The account given by St Luke of the misadventure of the Apostle Paul on the north eastern coast of the island of Malta (Acts 28) takes us to 60 A.D.

when the Romans had already been occupying the Maltese islands for 278 years. If anything transpires from the Lucan account it is the articulate if credulous religiosity of the friendly natives who had welcomed the shipwrecked party. The attack that Paul suffered from the viper which fastened itself to his hand evoked for them the power of "divine" justice or vengeance. Paul's survival despite the attack of the viper on the other hand is perceived by them as indicative of some extraordinary power which he possessed and it induced them to hail him as god.

It is to this event that the dawn of Christianity in the Maltese islands is traditionally attributed. Indeed there is no doubt that Paul's advent in Malta probably meant the very first contact of these islands with the nascent Christian Church and with a new civilization which in a few hundred years would prevail over all the lands bordering the Mediterranean. But we have no firm evidence that Paul met with any immediate success in his missionary endeavours here and much less that he established any sort of organised Christian community. It is probable that most of the natives who had met Paul soon forgot about him and his party and carried on with their long-standing pagan religious practices and emperor worship.

This should come as no surprise. Notwithstanding the much more vigorous preaching of the Christian gospel in many places around the Mediterranean and notwithstanding the numerous conversions and the ever-increasing Christian baptisms, the pagan religions and mysteries throughout the empire continued to thrive for many years and the official cult to the Emperor continued to be carried out for several centuries into what eventually came to be counted as the Christian era.

Despite a Pauline tradition in Gozo patterned on that of Malta we can make only very dubious statements concerning a Christian presence in Gozo before the third century. The earliest undisputed evidence of Christianity in Gozo takes us back only to the late fourth century. This evidence consists of three Roman lamps, allegedly of north African provenance, two of which are adorned with Christian symbols (*Malta Archeological Report*, 1961: 5). These were found on the southern side of It-Tokk (officially known as Independence Square), in the vicinity of St George's church in the centre of Rabat. Apart from these artifacts, the

caves known as Għar Gerduf on the outskirts of the town have been traditionally identified as Christian burial places and mentioned as very early evidence of Christianity in Gozo. Mgr G. Farrugia takes this view (Farrugia 1915). Nevertheless Buhagiar (1986: 373) states that Għar Gerduf “is of doubtful date and has been quarried beyond recognition” so that no secure statements can be made on it.

There is no doubt, however, as to the Christian identity of Gozo during the Byzantine period (Id 1994: 80 ss). This classical period (535-870) marks another significant stage in the unfolding of the religious history of our people. Its heritage cannot be ignored since it saw the Maltese islands into an entirely novel religious experience, foremost in it the organization and perception of unity. The political unity of the Roman Mediterranean evolved into the religious unity peculiar to the Christian Church. This period, moreover, saw the integration of Gozo’s religious experience with a world religion based on a claim to a supernatural revelation. It tied our people to two “foreign” religious centres, Byzantium and Rome. But, perhaps its most peculiar characteristic was the introduction (or was it the re-introduction) of monotheism, namely belief in one God and the practice of one cult.

### **Islam and the Muslims**

The end of the Byzantine period in 870 A.D. marks also the beginning of the Muslim occupation of Malta and Gozo, hitherto occupied by Christians and some Jews. This happened in the course of the Islamic conquest of the eastern and southern Mediterranean. Most of the Mediterranean lands conquered by the Arabs between the seventh and the eleventh centuries are today still dominated by Islam. These are the North African lands where the Christian faith once flourished and enriched the Christian Church with some of the finest minds and glorious martyrs that it boasts of. Only Spain, Sicily and tiny Malta and Gozo have reverted to their former faith. But much cultural residue from the Arabic experience remains. The most manifest instance of such cultural residue in our case is the language that we speak.

The Maltese language, which is basically Arabic in structure and morphology, is certainly one of the most significant components of our

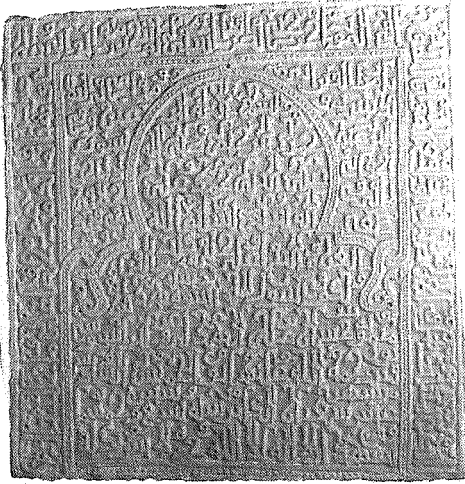
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cultural heritage and identity. Apart from its ordinary function as a means of communication, it serves also as a vessel and expression of the influences that constitute and shape our history, especially during the years of Islamic domination between 870 and 1249, that is until the practice of Islam was prohibited by the new Norman overlords and its surviving adherents were constricted to conversion or exile.

The Maltese language nevertheless retains its intrinsic link to Islamic religious culture and betrays it. With the suppression on these islands of the Islamic religious faith which provided the cultural location of its origins, the Maltese language indeed lost much of the original conceptual content of its religious vocabulary but its substitution by Christian concepts and notions did not entirely eclipse the Islamic elements. Thus today the Maltese language betrays the presence and relationship of two faiths, two different creeds, two universal and historically mutually hostile religions which respectively, but also in their mutual hostility, have shaped in no small measure the cultural identity of the Maltese and Gozitan people. Our language testifies to our Arabic and Islamic past. This paper permits only a few remarks about our Islamic past as this transpires in the Maltese language.

The Maltese language, as any other language, counts within its vocabulary words which mediate specifically religious ideas. Two such words which have religious meanings and are of Arab-Islamic derivation are *Alla* and *Insara*. The Maltese word *Alla*, meaning God, certainly derives from the Arabic *Allah*. *Allah* is a word which transmits an Islamic notion of God, that notion of God mediated by the preaching of Muhammad, the seventh century Prophet of Islam. But with the suppression of Islam in these islands, the word *Allah* - now *Alla* - was destituted of its Islamic conceptual content and infused with a notion of God which is proper to the Christian faith. Nevertheless the word itself continues to evoke the faith which it originally expressed and to remind us of our Islamic past.

The same happened in the case of the word *Insara* which derived from the Arabic term denoting "the followers of the Nazarene". Originally this Arabic term was used by the Muslims as a means of identification of the Christians but it also denigrated them by defining them merely as disciples of the "Nazarene." This derisive sense notwithstanding, the Arabic word survives in the Maltese *Insara* and remains the term by



**The Maimuna tombstone, said to have been discovered some time after 1760 in the vicinity of Xewkija and Ta' Sannat.**

which the local Christians identify themselves. In the meantime it has overcome its negative character. The point being made here is that the language which we use today as a means for expressing our Christian faith originally emerged as the vehicle of Islamic thought and of Muslim religious belief. Therefore it does stand as testimony to our past.

The Gozitans, however, may boast of other and more specifically Gozitan evidence of their island's Islamic past. This evidence consists of two Islamic tombstones discovered at Xewkija and Rabat respectively. The former (Bonanno 1990: 44; Wettinger 1990:50), said to have been discovered some time after 1760 in the vicinity of Xewkija and Ta' Sannat, speaks of Maimuna, daughter of Hassan ibn 'Ali al Hudali, known as "Is-Susi" who died c.1169. It gives testimony to Maimuna's belief that "there is no god but God alone, who has no companions". These words almost constitute a kind of indirect evidence of the presence of Christians since they are an obvious refutation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, described by the Qur'an as Tritheism.

The other tombstone (*Daily Malta Chronicle*, 1901) was discovered at Rabat in August 1901 during excavations which were being made in the square known as *Fejn Savina* (Victoria) in connection with the rebuilding and enlargement of the little church which stands there. Engraved like that of Maimuna in Kufic Arabic, this stone inscription, which was much

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corroded, was deciphered at the British Museum and was found to consist also of a profession of belief in *Allah* “the compassionate” and “the merciful” who created the sun, the moon and the stars and who commands them, since he is “Lord of all creatures” and has “ascended his throne” and to him we are all “humbly” subject. It is a pity that the whereabouts of this tombstone are unknown.

Both inscriptions testify to a Muslim presence on the island of Gozo, a presence which eventually diminished until it was totally suppressed in the middle of the thirteenth century when the Arabs were expelled by the new Christian European rulers of these islands.

What, one asks, remains of the Islamic civilization which dominated Malta and Gozo for about 400 years? Very little as far as religious belief as such is concerned, and the little which remains arrives down to us deeply permeated by a long history of anti-Arabic, anti-North African and anti-Ottoman hostility which reached its culmination during the time of the Knights of St John who transformed Malta into a forward bastion of Christian Europe.

### **The Catholic Faith**

The fifth cultural age which deeply modified the religious history of Gozo coincides with the advent of Christianity in Malta and Gozo. Indeed this cultural age traces its origins to the distant past of Rome and Byzantium, but it could be safely said that its influence on the cultural identity we have today became effective with the re-Christianization and Latinization of Malta and Gozo under the Normans and the other Christian European powers.

So many testimonials stand to the importance of the Christian faith in our cultural identity. Indeed so much material and spiritual evidence testifies to Christianity's contribution to our peculiarly Maltese and Gozitan cultural consciousness, our value system, our customs and folklore, our social institutions and our human socialising, our vernacular and artistic heritage, our apprehension of time, family relationships, our educational objectives and priorities, and one may go on. For better or for worse our contemporary cultural personality is imbued with the Christian

faith and exudes it. Our attachment to the Christian faith, and more specifically to the Catholic religion, may today be rejected but it cannot be denied without thereby denying our roots. And denying our roots would amount to wounding our present and consequently ourselves.

The “story” of Gozo is still for the most part buried beneath several layers of rubble and soil as well as more subtle layers of indifference, prejudice and at times mediocrity. But on the other hand it is also true that the number of skilful scholars who, within their chosen fields of scholarship are exploring and unravelling the enigmas of our ancient and more recent past is also thankfully growing. The history of Gozo, however, should not be reduced to a mere chronicling of persons and events in the traditional manner. The story of Gozo is a “mystery” which finds expression in the island’s chronicle of events indeed, but also in its ecological evolution, in the cultural currents and watersheds which for better or worse modified it as well as in the different religious beliefs and cults which successively visited and established themselves on the island.

Today’s relatively pluralist Gozitan society was until recently preceded by a staunchly Catholic population which was itself preceded by men and women who believed and worshipped in the manner of the Muslims, the Jews, the Byzantines, the Romans, the Phoenicians and, way back beyond them, the neolithic and paleolithic peoples. Tiny Gozo provides a microcosm of “macro” Mediterranean religious history and moreover offers itself as a mysterious testimonial to the inherently transcendental nature of the human being. The mystery of Gozo calls upon the effort of many students and scholars: historians, anthropologists, archeologists, art critics, sociologists, and not least also scholars of religion and religious history.

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