St Paul’s departure from Malta

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An old tradition holds that St Paul left Malta from Cospicua. At a local level, this tradition is backed by a special devotion to the Apostle of the Gentiles that developed in this town.

In 1990, Francis Micallef, wife of one of the most important maestri of Cospicua, donated the land for a church to be built dedicated to the saint. The church was built in a site known as Le Corcifé Remle and such a nomenclature, meaning the cross of Cospicua, shows that the area carried special religious reverence. It is also of particular interest that the second notarial deed, by Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan, mentions that the church was being erected a big stone to commemorate the膦arrival of this ship. This reference shows the association that this place had with the overlying shore.

During the 17th century, this church became a place of popular devotion while a cemetery developed next to it. Besides the main painting with showed the figure of St Paul with martyred saints, it also had a votive painting offered to the saint. The presence of this painting indicates that this small church was assuming the status of a Pauline sanctuary.

As a result of the increased number of devotees, the old church was pulled down in 1735 and replaced by a bigger church, built in Doric proportions. The church was finished in 1740 and blessed by Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan on October 22, 1741. Francesco Zahra and Rocco Buhagiar were both commissioned to paint for this new church. Unfortunately, the main pala of St Paul depicting the conversion of St Paul is now missing. Bishop Vincent Labini did not appreciate Zahra’s painting and, in 1781, ordered its removal. Buhagiar was commissioned to execute a fresh painting.

Around 1796, Francesco Spiteri erected a big statue of St Paul on the façade-corner of his house, which, according to the records, was situated in one of the busiest streets of the town. This statue became one of the town’s landmarks. The imposing figure of the saint overlooked the entrance of the mandragia, a back­door that two streets and sailors saw on embarking or disembarking at Cospicua. It is a great pity that the statue was destroyed during World War II. What is of interest is that Geoffrey Richmond, who visited this town, described this statue as being featured in a watercolour painting that was reproduced in one of the mod­ern books to be published in France. In 1935, for tourism pur­poses, written by André Maurus and entitled Les Grandes Escapes Malte, this book aimed at helping French tourists discover Maltese towns and villages. Cospicua featured prominently in this book.

Concurrently, a story began to circulate that according to an old tradition, St Paul had left Malta from Cospicua. The origins of this tradition is not clear. It could have been fabricated in the 19th or early 20th century, if not earlier. The presence of this tradition exposes a serious lacunae with the modern reading of the story of St Paul. A lot of importance was still being given to the localities where the saint landed and stayed while completely ignoring the existing historical information concerning the saint’s departure from the island.

In fact, in the reading of St Paul’s story, little attention is paid to the lines discussing his departure. In his article, The Creation Of Mare Nostrum: 300 BC-500 AD, Geoffrey Rich­man explains that the arrival in Malta of St Paul, and his departure, came about through the use of two Roman ships used for the trans­portation of corn. Richmond uses these references to show that Malta was on the Roman grain trade route. This commercial reality explains why the biblical text emphasises the important fact that the ship, which would transport Paul to Rome had, in the meantime, spent the winter here.

In fact, she remained for three months in one of our harbours and may have arrived after St Paul’s shipwreck.

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The arrival of this ship could either be linked to the fact that, like the ship of Paul, she was caught in the same storm but succeeded to make harbour or else she was entirely blown to the island due to Malta’s sheltered harbours. What is of particular interest to this story is that corn ships were rather bulky. They were 180 feet long, had a hold of about 15 feet and a beam of around 45 feet. Each ship was capable of carrying a crew of 276 men and had a tonnage of about 810 tons.

Expensive to build, this type of ship had very few harbours where to anchor in the Mediterranean and could only stay for such a long period of time off an island if good natural harbours were available. Normally, small islands lack good harbour facilities. Malta was one of the few exceptions. I have my doubts whether the other islands in the Mediterranean, like Malta where the ships of Paul landed, had good harbour facilities to offer anchorage to these big ships for the duration of the winter months.

There should be no doubt that Grand Harbour was, at the time, the only natural port in Malta that could offer such a facility. Since it had a wide mouth, the ideal berthing would be either in the inner part of the harbour, that is Marsa, or in one of the inlets. Inci­dently, some years ago, it was reported that a Roman quay was discovered at Marsa, thus proving that the Romans had used this area and its harbour.

Another natural inlet that guar­anteed safe haven in all types of weather was the inlet between Senglea and Vittoriosa. The man­ner of Cospicua, as the mean­ing of this word itself implies, offered one of the ideal harbouring places.

There is no information about the origins of this Pauline tradition in Cospicua. It could easily have been hatched during the early modern period when this cult took root. However, this narrative indi­cates that it may have had an ear­lier origin.

Ironically enough, of all the tradi­tions related to the story of the saint, this is the only one that can be correctly associated with a pre­cise and correct geographical loca­tion provided one accepts that the biblical Melita is indeed Malta.

The 1590 contract Francesca Micallef made in front of Notary Albano.

The statue of St Paul before the war. A photo taken by Geo Fürst and published by Giovanni Bonello in the book Nostalgias.