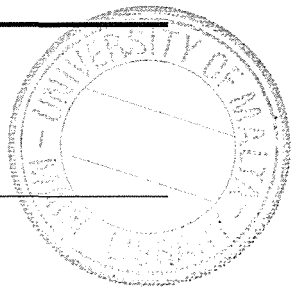


# IBN HAUQAL AND TENTH-CENTURY MALTA

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SOURCES for the history of Malta during the century and a half following the Muslim conquest of 870 are largely lacking, but two sections in the work of the geographer Ibn Hauqal, who visited Sicily at some time between 960 and 980, may stimulate reconsiderations of certain problems in Maltese historiography, though they can scarcely provide solutions since one passage seems unreliable while the other is clearly exaggerated and does not refer to Malta.

There have always been ambiguities concerning the fate of the indigenous population of Malta after 870 when there is evidence for resistance and violence.<sup>1</sup> Most of the known Arabic historians and geographers writing, or rather recopying, some centuries after 870 had little notion of what had happened on Malta or even where it was.<sup>2</sup> Only al-Qazwini's story of how in about 1040 the Muslim élite freed the dependent subjects who outnumbered them gives any picture of island society, but how far this servile or slave majority might have consisted of indigenous islanders, still Christian or converted to Islam, or of Christian or Muslim immigrants or captives remains altogether unclear; it seems unlikely that they were Christians.<sup>3</sup> After Roger the Norman's brief razzia of 1090, the chronicler Geoffroi Malaterra reported that there had been many non-indigenous Christian captives on Malta who were removed at that time, presumably leaving a population which was wholly or largely Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

1. T. Brown, 'Byzantine Malta: a Discussion of the Sources,' in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A. Luttrell (London, 1975), 82–84.

2. Texts collected in M. Redjala, 'L'Archipel maltais dans la Littérature historico-géographique d'expression arabe à l'époque médiévale,' in *Actes du Premier Congrès d'Études des Cultures méditerranéennes d'influence arabo-berbère* (Algiers, 1973).

3. Brown, 84–85; cf. G. Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta' (2nd edition), *Malta: Studies of its Heritage and History*, ed. Mid-Med Bank Ltd. (Malta, 1986), 90–92, 97–98, 104.

4. Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis Rogerii* . . . , ed. E. Pontieri, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, ns. v part 1 (Bologna, 1927), 94–96.

Yet puzzles evidently remained, and the thirteenth-century judge from Messina, Bartolomeo de Neocastro, provided a bizarre account, allegedly from Gerba, of how the inhabitants of the islands between Sicily and Africa, including Malta, were the offspring of the black Egyptian god Ammon and a group of Byzantine Greek women from Sicily.<sup>5</sup>

Modern Maltese have been aware that they spoke a form of Arabic, and early in the seventeenth century educated ecclesiastics such as Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela began to rationalize this evident fact, inventing 'ancient' traditions to comfort those who resisted the notion of a Maltese people which had for several centuries been African or infidel.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent scholars have speculated on Punic or Greek linguistic survivals and on Christian continuities. Excavations at Rabat, Tas-Silġ, San Pawl Milqi and elsewhere did produce some information, but it can scarcely be used since the early-medieval pottery was never studied or properly published. From the evidence available, recent scholars have advanced a variety of explanations, 'traditionalist' or 'revisionist', which suffer in common from a temptation to adopt single, simplistic interpretations ranging from suggestions that the inhabitants of 870 disappeared completely, which seems not impossible, to fantasies of a Maltese 'race', Christian by definition, surviving 'in the catacombs' during centuries of Muslim domination.<sup>7</sup>

Given so bleak a historiographical outlook, it seems reasonable to consider Ibn Hauqal even though he is unlikely to have visited Malta since he placed it between Crete and Sicily, perhaps as a result of some misreading of the New Testament story of St. Paul. However, he did devote a few lines to Malta which, he wrote, was inhabited only by savage donkeys, numerous sheep, and bees; visitors, presumably from Sicily, did come, bringing their own provisions, to collect honey and hunt the sheep, which were scarcely marketable, and the donkeys, which were exported and sold.<sup>8</sup> If this disconcerting account presented a correct, or even an

5. Bartolomeo de Neocastro, *Historia Sicula*, ed. G. Paladino, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, ns. xiii part 3 (Bologna, 1921), 63–65.

6. A. Luttrell, 'Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and Invention in Maltese Historiography,' *Melita Historica*, vii no. 2 (1977).

7. The best treatment is now that in Wettinger; see also A. Luttrell, 'The Christianization of Malta,' *Malta Year Book 1977* (Malta, 1977).

8. 'On compte au nombre des îles connues, quoique inhabitées, l'île de Malte, située entre la Sicile et la Crète, où vivent jusque de nos jours des ânes qui sont devenus sauvages, ainsi qu'une immense quantité de moutons, et qui produit du miel: aussi des étrangers

exaggerated, picture of a desert island, then it might follow that Malta was largely, or even wholly, depopulated after the upheavals of 870. Later, in the eleventh century, it could have been resettled with Arabic-speaking Muslims and miscellaneous slaves and captives. In this case, there would be no continuity of a Maltese 'race' or of an indigenous Christian or Pauline tradition; only bees, sheep and donkeys could claim uninterrupted occupation. Al-Idrisi wrote in the twelfth century that Malta 'abounds in pastures, sheep, fruit and honey,'<sup>9</sup> so it may be that Ibn Hauqal's description not only reflected the obscurity of tenth-century Malta but even contained elements of truth; however, it can scarcely have been an accurate account of Malta and quite possibly it referred to a different island.

Ibn Hauqal held extreme views about the rural inhabitants of Western Sicily, which he did know, considering them stupid and ignorant, their intelligence ruined by eating onions.<sup>10</sup> He described them as 'bastards' who held it permissible to marry Christian women and raise Christian daughters as long as their sons were brought up as Muslims. These depraved males did not pray properly, make pilgrimages or donate alms. The peasants had become 'similar to the inhabitants of certain islands,' crude barbarians who lived like deaf-mutes in bestial conditions; their human feelings had been extinguished and they neglected their rights and duties, hated merchants and treated foreigners badly.<sup>11</sup>

Western Sicily was not naturally in close contact with the Maltese islands and there is no reason to suppose that Malta was one of Ibn Hauqal's 'certain islands', though a low level of civilization there might explain the absence of Muslim remains outside Mdina and Rabat; and if many women on Malta did grow up as Christians that could account for the continuities dear to the 'traditionalists'. There may in fact have been considerable intermingling of peoples with resulting conflations between 'race', language and religion. In twelfth-century Sicily it was to be the Latins who ended a situation of confusion by installing an occupying Christian élite rigidly distinguished

y abordent-ils avec des provisions pour recueillir ce miel et faire la chasse aux ânes et aux moutons. Les moutons n'ont guère de débit, mais les ânes peuvent être exportés, vendus et mis en service ailleurs.' Translation in Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration de la Terre* (*Kitab Surat al-Ard*), ed. J. Kramers — G. Wiet, i (Beirut-Paris, 1964), 198.

9. Cf. Wettinger, 97.

10. Ibn Hauqal, i. 117–130.

11. *Ibid.*, i. 128–130.

from the indigeneous Muslims it exploited.<sup>12</sup> In Malta the inhabitants apparently remained Muslim until the thirteenth century, when many of them changed their religion but not their language.<sup>13</sup>

Ibn Hauqal's work cannot be considered a reliable source for Maltese history in the tenth century, but it is one of very few contemporary accounts of the island to survive. If few are likely to credit the notion of an abandoned island providing honey, sheep and donkeys, or a society in which generations of male Muslims married Christian women, Ibn Hauqal's text may serve at least to remind historians that simple, clear interpretations may be far from the truth. In the decades after 870 society on Malta may well have consisted of a few thousand inhabitants varying greatly in origin, status, speech and belief. Such intermixtures did, after all, occur in most other countries.<sup>14</sup>

12. J. Johns, 'The Monreale Survey: Indigenes and Invaders in Medieval West Sicily,' in *Papers in Italian Archaeology*, iv: *The Cambridge Conference*, part 4 – *Classical and Medieval Archaeology*, ed. C. Malone – S. Stoddart (Oxford, 1985), 220–221, discussing Ibn Hauqal.

13. Luttrell (1975), 36–40.

14. For just one example, see J. Vicens Vives, *Aproximación a la Historia de España* (2nd ed.: Barcelona, 1960).