

THE SITE OF ST. PAUL'S SHIPWRECK¹

MALTA, the *Melite* of Acts 28, 1 is a biblical land. To write on Malta as a biblical land is to write a commentary on chapter 28 of Acts which tells us the story of St. Paul's shipwreck and his three-month sojourn in the island. But such a commentary has been written over and over again, and it will be both tiresome and unprofitable to repeat what has been already said by others. But for the sake of those who have no access to great commentaries or no leisure to read them I shall give here a brief outline of the story as related by Luke and to bring out the more salient points of the narrative.

The Rome-bound ship, on which Paul and his fellow-prisoners were travelling, has long been tossed by a fierce storm which had been raging for several days over the central Mediterranean. After fourteen days of a most dangerous voyage, when all hope of surviving had been lost, the crew suspected that they were nearing land. Their suspicions were probably caused by the sound of the breakers against the rocks. On the morning of the following day they perceived a land which, however, they did not recognize. This ignorance of the crew is not a serious difficulty against the identification of *Melite* with Malta which is supposed to have been known to a sea-faring people. In fact the largest and safest harbour of Malta, where ships used to seek shelter or to unload their cargoes was the Grand Harbour. This was the harbour that was familiar to sailors not St. Paul's Bay, the traditional place of the shipwreck, which was never used for such purposes. No wonder, therefore, that the place was unknown to the sailors. But they sighted a bay with a beach and made up their minds to run the ship ashore. The wind, however, cast them on a spot which St. Luke describes as *διθαλασσος* 'two seas'. The identification of the exact site of the shipwreck depends on the meaning of the Greek word. The word does not occur in classical Greek nor even in Hellenistic Greek before St. Luke. It is by Strabo (ii, 5, 22) and is applied to the channel connecting the Bosphorus to the Black Sea. It is also used by Dio Chrysostom (Orat. v. 9) who says that the Syrtis was famous for its *brachea* and *dithalatta* (*dithalassa*) and *ταλιναι μακραι*,

¹ This paper was intended to be published on the occasion of the centenary of St. Paul's shipwreck in Malta.

where the meaning required by the context seems to be that of 'quicksand'. As the traditional site of the shipwreck has always been identified with the islet of Selmunett or with the channel separating this islet from the mainland, the meaning of *dithalassos* has been said to be 'a tongue of land jutting into the sea and washed, as it were, by two seas' or 'a channel connecting two seas' (J. Smith, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*, London, 1856, 125-142). This meaning, however, which has never been unanimously accepted, has recently been challenged by Dr. W. Burridge who has tried to locate the scene of the shipwreck in Melieha Bay, a little westward from St. Paul's Bay. He translates *topon dithalasson* by 'a double-sea beach', that is a beach washed on one side by the sea and on the other by a small lake lying about one furlong from the beach and, seen from a distance, has the appearance of sea.² Another discordant view is that expressed by L. Cutajar³ who identifies the site of the shipwreck with the headland called *tal-ghazzenin* which he considers to be a corruption or a deformation of *thalassanejn* a supposed Maltese dual of the Greek word *θαλασσα* 'sea', hence *dithalassos thalassanejn tal-ghazzenin*. According to this view the *dithalassos* or 'double sea' is the sea divided, as it were, into two by an underwater ridge producing, when the gregale blows, a long, narrow, foamy strip... Philologically, this view is unsound. The Greek word *thalassa* cannot give a Maltese dual *thalassanejn*, but *thalessejn* or, with a *te-marbuta*, *thalassatejn*. Moreover the word *ghazzenin* occurs elsewhere in Maltese toponymy, in places which have no connection with the sea.⁴

Modern translators and commentators prefer the rendering 'shallow water, reef', Thus the French translators: A. Boudou,⁵ J. Renie,⁶ J. Dupont,⁷ translate 'haut-fond'. Mgr Knox has 'cross sea'. C.H. Rieu 'a spot where two currents met' considers Burridge's arguments to be unconvincing.⁸ The Revised Standard Version 'a shoal'. The New English Bible 'cross-currents'. La Sacra Bibbia (Vol. IX, 1958) paraphrases 'una punta che aveva dai due lati il mari'. C. Lattey 'a spot open to two

² *Seeking the site of St. Paul's shipwreck*; Malta, 1952, 33-46.

³ *Fejn niżel San Pawl*; Malta, 1953.

⁴ G.P.F. de Soldanis, *Ghawdex bil-grajja tiegħu* translated by Dun Guzepp Farugia, Malta, 1936, p. 23.

⁵ *Actes des Apotres in Verbum Salutis*; Paris, 1933.

⁶ *Actes des Apotres in La Sainte Bible*; Paris, 1949.

⁷ *Les Actes des Apotres in La Bible de Ierusalem*; Paris 1953.

⁸ *The Acts of the Apostles* (The Penguin Classics), 1957.

seas'.⁹ To these we may add A Breusing¹⁰ and F. Blass¹¹ who prefer 'shoal'. One might also remark that the traditional site, with its rocky shore, is the least probable place of the shipwreck as it offers no safe landing when high winds are blowing from NE. All that one can confidentially say is that the ship was grounded in some sandbank not far from land and that the men of the ship landed safely on a beach not on a rocky shore. All this points to Mellieħa Bay as the most probable site of the shipwreck.

Against this conclusion it may be objected that tradition from time immemorial has always looked upon St. Paul's Bay as the real scene of the shipwreck. The appellation itself *San Pawl il-Baħar* is a clear indication of this tradition. But the appellation has no marks of antiquity, on the contrary it looks too modern to lay any claim for recognition as a witness of an ancient tradition. The construction *San Pawl il-Baħar* is absolutely non-Maltese, and it sounds rather like a literal translation of its Italian equivalent *San Paolo a Mare*. True it is that even the Italian name *San Paolo a Mare* may bear evidence of a tradition existing at the time of its first appearance in Maltese toponymy. But again one may ask: How old is that tradition to be of any value? In the same way we can dispose of other objection drawn from the name *Għajn razul* 'the Apostle's fountain'. The name is purely Arabic, therefore not earlier than 870-1090, perhaps later, though older than *San Paolo a Mare* or St. Paul's Bay. The tradition therefore is not such as to command our attention. Another tradition of a non-probative character is that connected with the small church of St. Paul Milqghi 'Sanctus Paulus receptus' built on Ward-ija hill overlooking St. Paul's Bay. The church is naturally meant to perpetuate the memory of the place where St. Paul and the rest of the crew were welcomed by the Maltese. But, once more, this tradition is not older than the time when the church has been built, that is the 16th or 17th century. And so we see that all tradition in favour of St. Paul's Bay, in spite of its comparative antiquity is not such as to compel our assent and to dispel all possible doubts about other probable sites of the shipwreck. Nor does the name *Pwales* offer any support to the tradi-

⁹ *The Acts of the Apostles in The Westminster Version*. London, 1933.

¹⁰ *Die Nautik der Alten*, 1886. An adaptation of this work in French is: *L'Art nautique dans l'antiquite*, Paris. 1887. A very good description of the whole voyage is given by R. Ricard S.J. in *Les navigations de saint Paul. La temoete de quatorze jours en Mediterranee; Etudes*, tom. CXC (1927) 448-465.

¹¹ *Acta Apostolorum*, Göttingen, 1895.

tion of St. Paul's Bay, as if the name were a corruption as it is popularly believed of Paulus. As a matter of fact the two names Pwales and Paulus are completely unrelated to each other.

In conclusion we may say that the tradition in favour of St. Paul's Bay and particularly of the islet of Selmunett as the site of St. Paul's shipwreck stops far from the date of the event which it records and consequently it has not such a demonstrative force as to compel the assent of scholars. A different identification of the site of the shipwreck is possible and probable.

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