

Lifestyle & Culture

Christians in Arab Malta (6)

The unedited account

■ Simon Mercieca and Frans X. Cassar

The fact that Al Athir's version about Al Samsam and Ibn al Thamna is repeated by at least two other medieval Arab chroniclers contradicts the impression European scholars sought to share in this story: European historians described it as somehow far-fetched, and the presence of such a strong community of Christians is also exaggerated. Abu Al Fida and Al Dhahabi give us a different opinion and their historical judgment goes beyond the debate on whether the place from where the Christians came was Malta or not. Unfortunately, neither Abu Al Fida nor Al Dhahabi are ever mentioned in reference to the history of Malta and their account is not even used when studying Arab rule in 11th century Sicily. This first of a two-part series looks at the writings of Abu Al Fida.

Abu al Fida

(أبو الفداء) Abu Al Fida lived between the years of the Hegira 672 and 732, which is equivalent to AD 1273 and AD 1331. He was a Syrian Muslim who, to this very day, is considered by Muslims as a geographical historian. He also wrote books on philosophy, medicine, poetry and other subjects.

Through his writings, Al Fida confirms the importance in which Al Athir was held by medieval Arab historians and geographers. This author has done nothing different to what western scholars are doing today, which relies on Al Athir's work *al-Kamil fi l-Tarikh* to recount the history of Islam.

It should be emphasized that Al Athir's work covers events from the period considered in his times as the beginning of the world to the Islamic year 628, which equates to AD 1231. He is often criticized for being remote in both time and space from the events that concern the history of Islamic Sicily, but his story is still considered one of the most reliable that we have covering the 11th century. Perhaps the reason why western historiography tends to discredit the presence of Christians in Malta is due to the fact that this account is one of those instances where there is an "occasional anachronism" and "an ironic literary touch". This is used as confirmation that such types of accounts go against what is known as an event-based history (Metcalf, 2003, 9).

Clearly Abu al Fida disagrees with such type of historical rationale. For Al Fida, this "ironic literary touch" does not undermine the fact that Malta was Christian to the extent that he

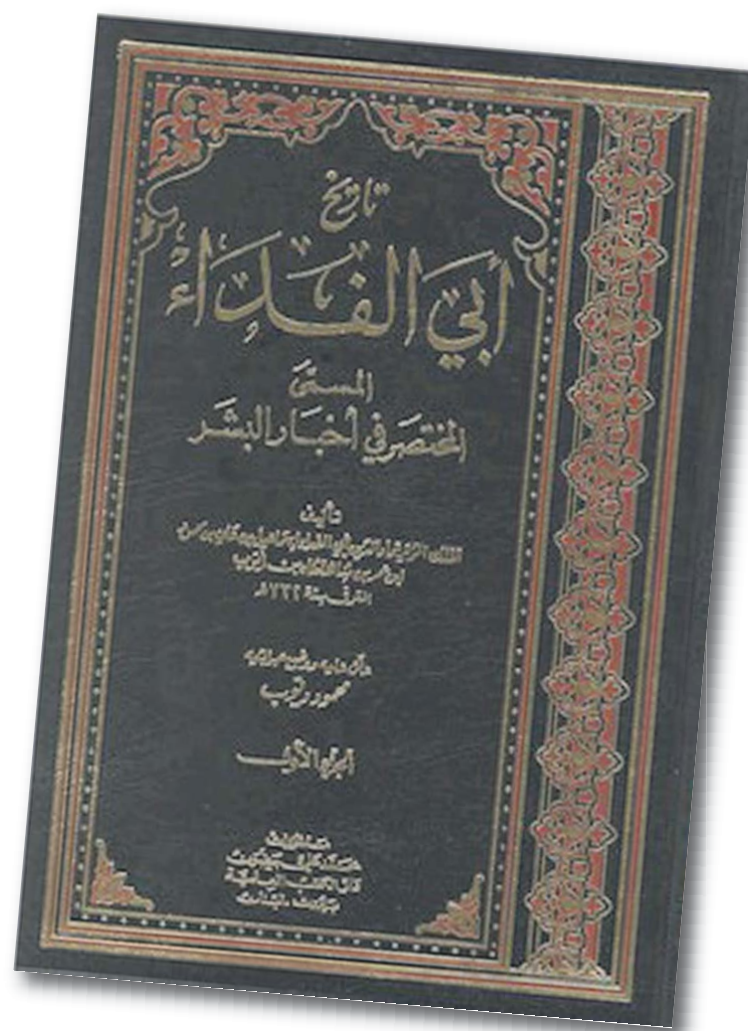
The people of Sicily appointed the brother of Al Ahkam whose name was Al Samsam Ben Yusuf. The conditions of the people of Sicily became confused at the time. Al Aradhil took over. Then they banished Al Samsam and everyone withdrew to a city. Qa'id Ghabd Allah Ben Mankub withdrew to Mazara, Trapani and other places. Qa'id Ghali Ben Nighma, known as Ben Al Hawwash in Enna and Girgent and other places and Qa'id Ben Al Temna withdrew to the cities of Syracuse and Catania. They quarrelled and Ben Al Temna asked for the assistance of the Franks who were in the city of Malta whose King's name was Roger.

وولى أهل صقلية عليهم أبا الأكل واسمه الصمصام بن يوسف، واضطربت أحوال أهل صقلية عند ذلك واستولى الأراذل، ثم أخرجوا الصمصام وانفرد كل إنسان ببلده، فانفرد القائد عبد الله بن منكوت بمازر وطراينش وغيرهما، وانفرد القائد علي بن نعمة المعروف بابن الحواش بقصريانة وجرجنت وغيرهما، وانفرد ابن التمنة بمدينة سبرقوس وقطانية، فوقع بينهم، واستنصر ابن التمنة بالفرنجة الذين بمدينة مالطة، واسم ملكهم رجار،

considered it worth recounting in his book so that their story would be remembered in posterity.

Al Fida is the most faithful of all medieval Arab chroniclers regarding Al Athir's story about Al Thamna. The only variation is the way he spells the name of some of these Arab leaders. But for the purpose of consistency, we will continue writing Al Thamna as Al Athir wrote his name. **See table above**

Unlike the impression that some western scholars wished to promote, these medieval writers took these events as gospel truth. They removed any reference to what, in their eyes, appeared to have been bizarre actions, such as how the drunken Al Thamna sought to kill his wife by bleeding her to



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death. We do not think that this was a coincidence. Indeed, this is extremely significant as women are rarely mentioned in Arab history of the period and their stories are rarely told. Al Athir's version about al Thamna's wife is one of those rare instances where we find a woman's story being mentioned in relation to the political history of the Arabs in Sicily. This explains why there is a debate in western historiography that this might be a literary piece rather than a historical account.

But this absence can be easily linked to Al Fida's religious beliefs. What is important for us is the association with the Christian population. Al Fida kept the references to the presence of Christians in Malta including the help they gave al Thamna's Muslim faction in Sicily. Whether this story is true or not goes beyond the purpose of this analysis. Undoubtedly, this story was the one of the most important that was being retold by Arab scholars and Al Fida too felt the need to preserve it for

posterity.

Al Fida also associated this Christian population with King Roger. By King Roger, Al Fida had in mind Roger II rather than his father Roger I. We shall return to the figure of King Roger II when, in a separate study, we will be explaining how medieval Arab chroniclers identified Roger II with the end of Arab rule in Malta, and how one of these authors related these events with those of Al Athir and the latter's description of the end of Arab rule in Sicily. Such identification explains why Roger II remained important in the Arabic psyche of the 13th century and why Al Fida continued to associate Roger with the island of Malta, even if the events that he was recounting did not happen in Roger II's time.

But until we explore this point further, which as we said will be in a separate study, it is important to note that Al Fida, like Al Athir, spoke about the city and not the island of Malta. Therefore, both authors were using the same format that the Arabs

Ants of Abu Al Fida



This explains why they started to write Malta, which is the Arabic rendition of the Latin place name Melita, with the long vowel "alif". It should be remembered that in Arabic such a long vowel has the same value of a consonant. Therefore, Arabic scholars were making sure that the names of this island and its city are not mixed with any other city or place. Long vowels, like the consonants, have a stronger linguistic presence. Thus, except for one instance, it was always written in the same way in Arabic, irrespective of the period when the Arabic texts referring to Malta were written.

More importantly, Abu al Fida and Al Dhahabi were men of Islamic faith. The name Imam Al Dhahabi means he was a minister of the Islamic religion. Therefore, the fact that these two staunch Muslims affirm the presence of Christianity in the city of Malta should not be taken lightly. For sure, they cannot be accused of having a vested interest to defend the Christian heritage and the Pauline tradition of Malta. On the contrary, such a reference shows the importance these events had all over the Arab world during late medieval times concerning the Christians of Malta. Their importance lies in the fact that a Muslim ruler had sought the help of Christians to solve issues related to internal feuds.

by the term 'Medina'. Therefore, the Arabs continued the Roman tradition of naming their city after the name of the island, a fact which strengthens our previously mentioned conviction since the Romans called this

town Melita and the island was also known by such a name. Actually, what the Arabs did was to keep the radical consonants of this place-name.

The Arabs wanted to bring this confusing situation to an end.

started to use when referring to our island.

One needs to remember that Malta as a place-name is Arabic. The fact that the Muslims introduced the long vowel "alif" indicates that they wanted this place not to be mistaken for any other place that could resemble it. Whereas short vowels in Arabic are not often included in writing unless an ambiguous possibility arises by the change in vowels such as 'rigel' [رِجْل leg] and 'ragul' [رَجُل man], the same cannot be said for long vowels. Their inclusion forms an intrinsic part of the word adding additional specific meaning to the roots of the word and cannot be left out. Notice the long vowel 'ā' represented by the Arabic letter 'ā' [ا] 'kātib' [كاتب a writer] vis-à-vis with 'kataba' [كتب to write]. The derivation in writing is quite evident. Unfortunately, western scholars have a tendency of analysing the Arabic language and semantics using the tools of Latin philology. First of all, this smacks of colonialism, as Latin culture is overtly considered superior to the Arabic one. Secondly, while in Latin the vowels can vary irrespective of whether they are long or short, the same cannot be said for Arabic. This explains why in western historiography, the island of Malta or

Melita is mistaken with Mileto. She has also been mistaken with Malaga and Meleda besides the fact that in Classical times, there appear to have been four Mediterranean islands that were known by the name of Melita.

We wish to stress here that both Al Athir and Abu Al Fida call the place from where these Christians came as the city of Malta. Clearly, they are not referring to Malta as an island but as 'Madina'. Actually, we tend to believe that what is now known as 'Mdina' is the remnant of the longer term 'Madinatu Malta' - meaning 'the city of [the island of] Malta'. This term is used in Arab lands when referring to the centre of a city or town. In Maltese the term 'il-belt' [the city] is commonly used by the Maltese in this manner when referring to the capital city of Malta 'Valletta'. A similar occurrence is the place name for the second largest city in Saudi Arabian 'Medina'. Although this is the name applied to it worldwide, its actual full name since Quranic times is [مدينة يثرب] 'Medina Yathrib'. It is even known to by other names such as [المدينة المنورة] 'Al-Madinah al-Munawwarah' [The Radiant City]. In both cases, the attributive name was dropped leaving the city to be named just

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