

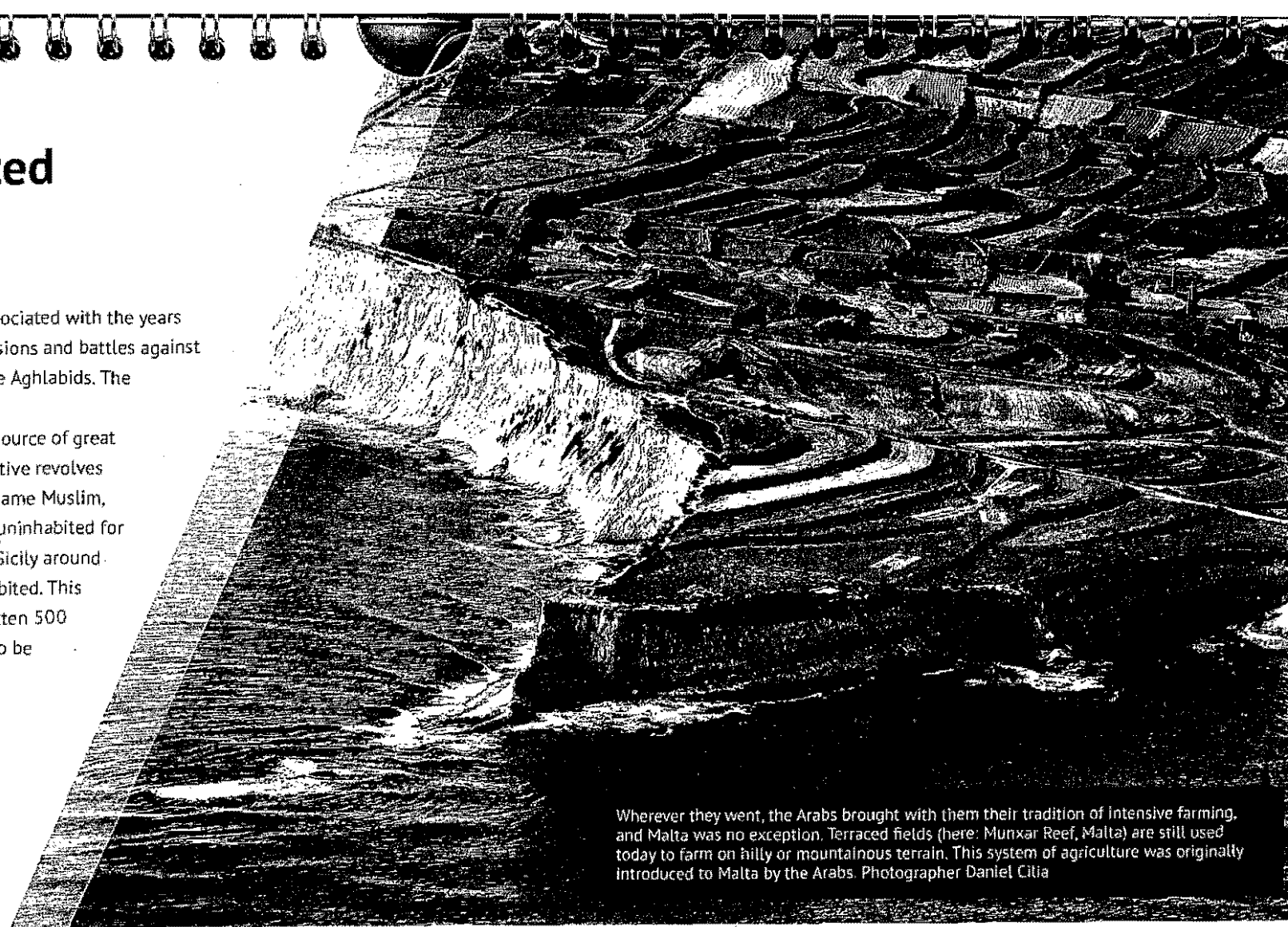
Was Malta Inhabited in Arab Times?

Simon Mercieca

The Arab, or Muslim, domination of Malta is associated with the years 870 to 1091. In 870, following a series of invasions and battles against the Byzantines, the island was conquered by the Aghlabids. The Normans seized the island in 1091.

What happened in between those dates is the source of great historical controversy. The local historical narrative revolves round whether Malta remained Christian or became Muslim, and whether Malta was inhabited or remained uninhabited for a long period of time. Ibn Hawqal, who visited Sicily around 970 C.E., suggested that the island was uninhabited. This idea finds confirmation in al-Himyari's text, written 500 years later, in which he says that Malta began to be repopulated only after 1048.

► *Continued on back of page*



Wherever they went, the Arabs brought with them their tradition of intensive farming, and Malta was no exception. Terraced fields (here: Munxar Reef, Malta) are still used today to farm on hilly or mountainous terrain. This system of agriculture was originally introduced to Malta by the Arabs. Photographer Daniel Cilia

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| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|---------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| WEEK 34 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| WEEK 35 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |

Literature:

Ester Boserup:

The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change und Population Pressure. London 1965.

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The Failed Siege of 868 and the Conquest of Malta by the Aghlabid Princedom in 870. In 60th Anniversary of the Malta Historical Society, A Commemoration. Valetta 2010, pp. 87-102.

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Christians in Arab Malta (3): The Reconquest of Malta by the Byzantines in 982. In: The Malta Independent on Sunday, 3 January 2016, pp. 22-23.



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History

To be sure, Arab documentation is scarce and was written several centuries after the events. Moreover, there are at least three Arab chroniclers who contradict al-Himyari, and affirm that Malta fell back into the hands of the Byzantine Empire in 981 and that the island remained in Christian hands until 1052. Western historians wrongly argue that these references to 'Malta' by Ibn al-Athir, Abu al-Fida and al-Dhahabi, are related to 'Mileto' in Calabria. Another scholar, al-Marrakeshi, states that Malta had a navy, with which, in 1039, it attacked Djerba.

Modern demographic thought is useful in providing an answer to at least the demographic question. The Danish economist Ester Boserup (1910–1999) studied the relationship between population growth and agricultural conditions, and presented her results in her well-known book, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*. Through her studies, Boserup challenged the Malthusian theory that food supply determines population growth. Instead, Boserup argued that it is the population that determines what type of agricultural methods a society uses. She insisted that women are an important and indispensable asset for the agricultural workforce, but that their contribution has often been ignored in earlier economic models. This has become known as the 'Boserup theory'. If one were to apply this theory to the linguistic evidence, a totally different conclusion would be reached.

Wherever they went, the Arabs introduced intensive farming. Malta was no exception. It is difficult to conceive that such a rich agrarian terminology, as is found today in the Maltese language and which implies intense cultivation, could have been introduced in a short span of time, i.e. between 1040 and 1091, by a handful of families.

This terminology implies advanced methods of farming, which could only have taken place on an island that had had a long period of demographic presence. Even if one were to extend the period of Arab presence until 1127, when the Normans reaffirmed their authority over the island, the period is still too short for such a development. The Maltese language is primarily Arabic, and any introduction of new Semitic words ceased completely after the Arabs lost control of the island in 1127. Therefore, agrarian terms in Maltese point to an increase in the level of per capita production. This could only have come about through intensive cultivation, which in turn was the result of an increasing population. Such growth, over a short period of time, could not have taken place without the intensive support of women. Men alone, in a small community, could not produce such a huge agrarian output. This population density allowed for the creation of surplus resources, which, in turn, explains how the Arabs had the means to build the former capital, Mdina.

Thus, while the Malthusian checks may well have been at work in Malta in the 10th century, from the beginning of the 11th century, the island must have experienced rapid demographic growth that led to the formation of a society that enjoyed a high standard of living, which is confirmed by references of Muslim chroniclers to Maltese poets and engineers. To put it succinctly, during the first phase of Norman rule (1091-1127), the island had reached the cultural zenith of its Muslim heritage.