

## Christians in Arab Malta (4)

# When the Maltese army conquered Djerba in 1039

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Whether one accepts Al Athir's historical chronicle and the fact that the events of 982 are related to Malta or not, one cannot deny that the central Mediterranean remained a political hotbed between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century. Both the Byzantines and the Arabs continued to fight for naval dominance of the area. If one were to analyse the naval movements that took place throughout these two centuries, it would be extremely foolish to believe that the island of Malta lost its political or strategic importance after it was conquered by the Arabs. While historians agree that Malta had important strategic value until 870, after the publication of Al-Himyari's account of Malta, historians started to question whether or not such a strategic value remained valid. According to both Al-Himyari and Ibn Hawqal, Malta was practically a wasteland visited only by the occasional fishermen.

Alex Metcalfe is one of the historians to express this idea about Malta in his book *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*. He admits that the Aghlabid acquired a "strategically placed island for Islam" but this strategic value may have soon been lost due to the renewed instability among the Arabs themselves, with the result that Metcalfe insists "Malta may have been quickly forgotten" besides the fact that after this conquest, again according to Metcalfe, "Malta lay outside the main Sicily-Ifrigiya passage". (Metcalfe, 2009, 27)

Such type of argument contradicts the general historical narrative of the period and also the one usually made about islands having strategic importance. Normally, such places have their importance enhanced and not diminished during times of crisis.

If one had to look at the maritime history of the region, one is bound to find that the movement of fleets increased and did not decrease in the central Mediterranean from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards. A few years after the conquest of Malta, Arabic chroniclers discussed the Aghlabid naval campaign viv-à-vis the Byzantines in the eastern Mediterranean. This produced a counter attack and the Greek forces landed in Sicily and, according to Metcalfe, "were able to secure positions". (Metcalfe, 2009, p. 28) This Christian mili-

tary force was still strong at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

The Byzantine navy is again active at the turn of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, as it attacked Messina around 901. Even if the Byzantines had lost, since the Arabic sources refer to the loss of 30 Greek warships, these wars make it improbable for an island like Malta to have been left uninhabited. The Arabs must have secured it and built strong fortifications otherwise the island would have been easily captured during such aggressive raids.

When the last Christian stronghold in Sicily – that of Rometta – fell in 963, the central Mediterranean was again the centre of naval engagements by the Byzantines. The Byzantine Emperor, Nikephoros Phokas is recorded to have ordered a large fleet to sail to the relief of Rometta. Metcalfe thinks that there is even the possibility that Phokas aimed to take Sicily. The fleet landed at Messina in October 964. A truce was reached, which in itself indicates and confirms that the naval power of the Byzantines at the centre of the Mediterranean was still considerable.

Once Rometta was conquered, it met a similar fate as Taormina and Acri. Like Malta, these towns were devastated and perhaps depopulated by the Arabs. But they were not left uninhabited for long. Soon the Arabs themselves introduced a policy of repopulation that took place around 976.

Metcalfe links the siege of 982 to the German Emperor Otto II, while his chronology of events is devoid of any reference to naval activity, which is the main characteristic of Al Athir's accounts. Instead, he prefers to speak in terms of a Muslim army suffering heavy defeats in southern Calabria.

Al Athir's account of the takeover of 'Malta' by Byzantines coincided with the birth of the Italian Maritime Republics. The emergence of these republics brought about the formation of new maritime routes, which increased commercial opportunities not only for the Christians of the Italian city-states but also for the Arabs of Sicily and the rest of the Central Mediterranean. Once again, it is extremely difficult to believe that in such a commercial scenario, Malta was still uninhabited.

More importantly, the Byzantines succeeded in continuing to show their strength when they mounted another major naval

expedition in 1025 against Messina. Unfortunately for the Byzantines, the whole expedition had to be abandoned on the death of Emperor Basil II that same year. Nonetheless, the death of Basil did not end the naval might of the Byzantine Empire. Greek sources speak of an active Byzantine navy until, at least, 1032. Once again, in such a scenario, it is difficult to think that while the Byzantines were raiding islands like Corfu, Malta could have been left deserted.

In this same period, the Muslims in Sicily were making alliances among themselves. Such alliances can be taken as proof of their maritime weakness. Due to internal friction in Sicily, the Arabs sought to consolidate their land power. In military strategy, this is taken to be a reflection on their lack of a strong navy. Without a strong naval power, the Muslims of Sicily could not rely on Tunisia or Ifriqiya for help. Moreover, internal friction with Ifriqiya would have weakened the Arab hold over Malta.

Such a historical narrative finds support in one particular Arabic source, which till now has never been discussed with reference to Malta. This text proves without any element of doubt that Malta remained strategically important at the turn of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The text in question is by Ben Ghadhary Al Marrakeshi (ابن عذاري المراكشي)

His actual name is disputed while his date of birth is also unknown. He grew up in Marrakesh at the end of the Al Muwahhadin era. He died in the year AH 695 (AD 1286). This text was found by Frans X. Cassar who also translated it. The text is as follows:

In the year 431 [AD 1039] the armies of Malta entered the island of Djerba conquered it and killed most of its inhabitants.

وفي سنة 431، دخلت جيوش مالطة جزيرة جربة، ففتحها وقتلت كثيرا من أهلها.

What Ben Ghadhary's narrative states is that in 1039, the rule or rulers of the Maltese Islands definitely had a strong fleet capable of moving around and attacking Djerba. The date of this story as well as its narrative contradicts what has now become part of the traditional historical narrative that Malta was uninhabited or that it had lost its strategic importance. At the same time, this short reference sustains my previous argument



that Malta was actually re-conquered by the Byzantines in 982.

The first consideration one should make is that this text contradicts Al-Himyari's account. According to Al-Himyari, who wrote centuries later after Ben Ghadhary, Malta was still uninhabited in around 1039. This text proves that Malta was inhabited and that Al-Himyari's statement on Malta's population is totally wrong. The situation on our island at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century was completely different to how Al-Himyari described it. At least, Ben Ghadhary's account is more authentic than that of Al-Himyari. First it predates it. Secondly, Al-Himyari omitted this attack by Malta's fleet against Djerba in his narrative. Either he did not know anything about it or wilfully wanted to eliminate those stories that tarnish the history of the Muslim religion.

Al-Himyari stated that Malta was uninhabited for about 180 years from the date of conquest, in 870. Thus, according to Al-Himyari, Malta stopped being uninhabited after 1050. It is very difficult to accept that Malta could have built a big fleet in a period when the island was supposed to have been visited only by fishermen or by those in search of timber and honey. Demographically, these types of individuals did not build fleet of ships. Nor do they have the power or the capacity to attack and devastate another island.

Having such a fleet capable of attacking another place and killing nearly all the inhabitants, shows that the island of Malta must have definitely been inhabited for a long period of time. This period of habitation must have been even longer than 20

years from the actual attack on Djerba itself. One suspects that Al-Himyari had a vested interest to manipulate the historical facts and remove references to Christianity or other references that could embarrass Muslim historiography. This proves that Al-Himyari's text has errors of commission or the wilful manipulation of facts that might throw a bad light on the Muslim history of Malta. Such failures are definitely not the result of simple oversights.

Therefore, in 1039, Malta was heavily inhabited. But were its rulers Christian or Muslims? If Malta was under Muslim rule, were the rulers at war with other Muslim rulers, in particular those of Djerba? Ironically, Ben Ghadhary does not mention the ethnicity or religion of those attacking Djerba. In 1039, the inhabitants of Djerba were in their majority Muslims. In fact, during this period, Djerba was occupied by members of the Kharejite (Ibadite) sect.

In this case, one needs to ask: what religion was practised in Malta? Why did Ben Ghadhary fail to mention the religious denomination after this attack? Did this attack originate from Christians or Muslims from Malta? Was this attack the direct result of the conquest of Malta by Byzantine forces in 892? Could this attack be taken as another proof that the island of Malta, referred to by Al Athir as having been conquered by the Byzantines, was in fact the island of Malta? Moreover, there are other Arab medieval authors who spoke about an island being predominantly Christian. This will be the subject of a future study, which will

Djerba by Christian and Muslim forces. In fact, one should ask whether the Zerides had the necessary maritime forces to launch such an attack. Thus, can this text be considered as another dowel in the proof that at the turn of tenth century, Malta was Christian? Judging from what Al Athir wrote, there was at least another instance during this period when Muslim factions in Sicily asked the Christians, whom Al Athir stated were living in Malta, to come to their aid and fight with them against the rival Muslim faction. But this story will be dealt with in a separate study.

At any rate, Ben Ghadhary's narrative makes one point extremely clear. This is not a case that Malta was used as a base by a foreign fleet, or that a Christian or Muslim fleet passed through Malta on its way to attack Djerba. The fleet did not use Malta as a base to attack Djerba. This fleet originated from Malta. It was Malta's fleet.

It should be pointed out that at the turn of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the only power that had a powerful fleet in the Mediterranean at the time was the Byzantine Empire. Ayse Devrim Atauz stated in her book *Eight Thousand Years of Maltese Maritime History*, that Malta's peak as a maritime nation was reached in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This statement was considered slightly far-fetched, with the result that local historians did not accept it as credible. However, Ben Ghadhary's quote supports her view. Atauz does not make reference to this quote. She based her analysis on archaeological finds. However, this narrative by Ben Ghadhary confirms that Malta had an important navy at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Now, whether this was a Christian or a Muslim force can be a source of controversy and historical contention. As stated above, Ben Ghadhary failed to state the religious nomenclature of the attackers. Nor does he state the reason why the fleet of Malta attacked Djerba and killed all the Muslim inhabitants. Yet, this text confirms Atauz's research that Malta's maritime history needs to be reconsidered and that one needs to reconsider the conclusion drawn from Al-Himyari's text that Malta was a deserted land. In a nutshell, this text confirms beyond any doubt that Malta was inhabited at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and remained strategically important after 870.

also be published in *The Malta Independent on Sunday*.

In case one does not accept Al-Athir's account on Malta, there still should be no doubt that the island in question is Malta. Historically, this attack could be attributed to both sides, Christian or Muslim. At the time, Djerba was inhabited by the Ibadites, whom the Muslims considered a sect. *Folia Orientalia* associates this attack with the Zerides of Sicily (p. 186). Therefore, according to this interpretation, this should be considered a Muslim attack. But could it have been a Christian attack? After the re-conquest of Sicily by the Christians, both Sicily and Aragon considered Djerba to be theirs. They disputed its possession with the Ibadites. Therefore, such a claim could only be made on the premise that Djerba was, at some point or another, attacked and occupied by Christian forces. Moreover, the Republic of Genoa also had a vested interest in Djerba.

Yet, until new historical evidence is unearthed, this attack should be considered as originating from the Zerides. But this does not necessarily mean that Malta was Muslim. Could the Zerides of Sicily have asked for the help of the Christians of Malta to conquer this island? If this is the case, then one can conclude that Malta was re-conquered again by the Arabs after it fell into Byzantine hands in 982. If the Zerides asked the Christians of Malta to help them in this attack, then this explains why Ben Ghadhary avoids mentioning the religious denomination of the attackers. It was a combined attack on