MARITIME LINKS OF CHAPELS DEDICATED TO ST PAUL IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

Timmy Gambin

Over the millennia, the three-way relationship between humans, deities and the sea has manifested itself in a variety of ways. Not only does the sea play a pivotal role in ancient mythologies, it has also been looked upon with a sense of awe, fear and wonder. This is true for those travelling on a boat or ship as well as for those standing on the shore looking out to sea. Sudden changes in weather can turn the sea from a smooth, almost soothing scene to one characterized by a fierce and aggressive nature, both powerful and unforgiving. It is therefore unsurprising that powerful and vengeful Gods were often assigned to rule over this unpredictable domain. When undertaking a journey at sea the ancient Greeks would pray to a variety of deities for protection from the wrath of Poseidon who, if offended, could heave misery on seafarers

Willem Schellinks (1623-1678). Dehra ta' San Pawl il-Baħar tas-seklu 17. Jidhru t-torri li bena l-Gran Mastru Wignacourt u l-knisja ta' San Pawl.
Willem Schellinks (1623-1678). View of St Paul's Bay, 17th century. Very conspicuous are the watch tower built by Gand Master Wignacourt, and the church of St Paul.

and make their journey fraught with danger and difficulties.[1]

It is interesting to note that such rituals, offerings and beliefs, transcend cultural, chronological and geographical boundaries. One finds references to such activities in various corners of the world's oceans and seas. In the second millennium BC, some Canaanite deities such as Baal Shamem and Baal Faphon assumed maritime related roles.[2] During the medieval period, Nordic people had their own Gods and deities that formed an integral part of Viking seafaring. Far away, in the Pacific Ocean, sea Gods were numerous and a series of rituals and sacrifices have been recorded for a variety of purposes including the blessing of nets and the warding off of bad luck from seagoing vessels.[3] An early modern account by a Christian captive on board a Muslim corsairing vessel describes the sacrificing of a sheep on the bow of the vessel prior to attacking a Christian sailing ship.[4] Despite the development of modern navigation technology, beliefs in spiritual aids for dangerous times at sea persist up until the present day.

In Christianity, there exist saints that watch over various people whose lives depend on the sea. First and foremost among these is the Virgin Mary. She has been the preferred deity of Christian seafarers through time and is possibly an echo of past maritime cults linked to female deities such as Isis. Other important Christian saints include St Nicholas of Myra, the patron saint of travelers and seafarers (amongst many others) and St Andrew, the patron saint of fishermen. There are other saints with some affiliation to people of the sea, one of these being St Paul. Despite his obvious link to a famous maritime event, St Paul does not command a major maritime cult anywhere in the Mediterranean. Although he is

sometimes invoked to calm storms out at sea one really cannot refer to St Paul as a saint with strong links to seafaring.

In Malta, the shipwreck of St Paul on the island is considered by the inhabitants as one of the single-most important events in the island's history. This event has had long-lasting effects on the beliefs, traditions and culture of the islanders. It is therefore not surprising that outside of Rome, the cult of St Paul is mainly focused on the island of Malta. The Pauline cult is manifested by a series of churches, chapels, statues and numerous niches that are situated around both Malta and Gozo. This is also true for place names which can be identified in both rural and coastal contexts.[5] What is of interest to this study is the presence of a link between some of these places and the maritime world. This is especially true for the medieval chapels dedicated to St Paul and the place of these within the landscape.

Before proceeding to an overview of these chapels, it is important to explain some factors related to past navigational practices. Prior to the invention of detailed nautical charts, the compass and (much later) the sextant, mariners depended on a number of factors to help them navigate over open stretches of sea. It is simply untrue to assume that ancient mariners hugged the coast. On the contrary, the coast was a dangerous place where a change in wind could push you onto a lee shore. It was the sun, stars, colour of the sea, its depth, birds, noise and other natural tell-tale signs that guided seafarers.[6] The very account of St Paul's shipwreck provides us with detailed references to ancient navigational practices:

1. *Sun and stars*: "for many days neither the sun nor the stars were to be seen, so savagely did the storm rage".
2. *Depth of the sea*: "They took a sounding and found a depth of

Chapel/Church	Place (medieval)	Place (modern)	Portolan
Sancta Maria	Comino	Comino	*Lo Compasso de navegare*
San Lorenzo	Bolgo	Birgu	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*
San Ziorzi	Cala de Conili	Marsa	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*
La gliexia (?)	Binarato	Burmarrad	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*
San Polo	Colfo de Pramacho	St Paul's Bay	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*
Sancta Maria	Marsa forno	Marsalforn	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*
San Polo	Marsa forno	Marsalforn	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*
Sancta Maria	Intro lo cavo de Montela e Miciaro	Qala	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*
Sancta Maria	Comin	Comino	*Chompasso de tuta la starea della Marina*

Table 1. Chapels mentioned in two of the three medieval portulans studied by Cassola.

twent fathoms; after sailing a short distance they again tool a sounding and found it to be fifteen."

One of the most ancient practices was the recognition of natural and manmade features in the landscape as indicators of one's whereabouts: "As one sails from Rhegion towards the east, at a distance of fifty stadia, one comes to Cape Leukopetra […] then comes Herakleion which is the last cape of Italy and inclines towards the south."[7] This quote is taken from Strabo's Geography which may be considered as one of the earliest surviving examples of ancient sailing instructions which guided seafarers from one recognizable feature to another, a practice referred to as wayfaring. Such instructions were referred to as *Peripli* in ancient times and as portulans in the Middle Ages.[8] These medieval sailing instructions contained detailed descriptions of harbours and landing places available to seafarers into or around the Mediterranean Sea, including Malta and Gozo.[9] In the main, it was the natural landscape that was used to describe a stretch of coastline or a place that marks the entrance to a bay. The portulan also gave clear instructions as to the protection offered to vessels inside harbours, protection form winds, the depth of the sea and the holding qualities of the seabed.

When considering these medieval portulans as evidence for the Maltese Islands one has to keep in mind that the harbour town of Birgu was the only area with a concentration of buildings close to the sea.[10] The remainder of the coastal landscape was mainly bereft of any manmade structures. However, careful examination of these documents reveals the use of a number of

coastal chapels and churches as navigational aids. This is understandable as such structures would have been noticeable in an otherwise bear landscape. Of these chapels only one of these, that of St Lawrence at Birgu, is urban.

From the eight different chapels and coastal churches mentioned in the portolani two are clearly dedicated to St Paul whereas there can be little doubt that the church referred to in Burmarrad is that of San Pawl Milqi. I will now proceed to explain the use of these three chapels in the context of medieval navigation.

Marsalforn

This fifteenth century reference to the chapel gives a clear indication as to the medieval roots of this site. However, despite this clear reference there exist no written records as to the exact date of its construction. In the context of the portulan, the chapel dedicated to St Paul together with that dedicated to the Virgin, is clearly used to so as to help the seafarer recognize his whereabouts as well as how to anchor:

> La ch'e la varda de peire seche e una gliesia de Sancta Maria, et e station uno prodexi ala ponta e le anchor ever levante. Item ver levante si e la gliexia de San Polo.

There is no evidence for ritual or special dedications related to the chapel. However, a story recounted by Agius De Soldanis helps shed light on magical elements linked to such places. The story recounts how in 1726, s storm forced a schooner to seek shelter in the bay. When the storm abated the captain decided to proceed to Malta but the vessel could not leave Marsalforn. It transpired that one of the sailors had stolen the linen altar cloth from the church and only upon return of this item was the vessel able to leave the bay and make its way safely to Malta.[11] This

story sheds light on how certain superstitions linked to the sea and sacred spaces were very much present in the Mediterranean. The respect of maritime sacred spaces was not unheard of in the Early Modern period. A Christian hermit living in a chapel on the island of Lampedusa also tended the tomb of an Ottoman saint making sure that a lamp burnt at all times. This hermit was not only left unharmed by Christian and Muslim corsairs but he also supplied provision to vessels that were in need.[12]

Burmarrad

Human activity around the site of San Pawl Milqi can be traced back to prehistoric times[13] and subsequent use of the site in Punic and Roman times is also well attested.

San Pawl Milqi, Burmarrad. Veduta tal-knisja li nbniet wara l-1647, b'wiċċa jħares lejn il-port tas-Salina li jidher fl-isfond.
San Pawl Milqi, Burmarrad. A view of the church built after 1647, facing Salina harbour and the sea.

The exact date of the conversion of part of the site into a place of worship is not yet known but indications are that some form of chapel existed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. In order to better understand navigation in the medieval harbour of Burmarrad it is imperative to note that the natural topography of the place was radically different to what it is like today. Sediment studies have shown that the harbour of Binarat consisted of a large natural embayment which covered part of the present-day floodplain.[14] Place names with direct references to sailing ships are relatively common in Burmarrad and these give further indications as to the extent of the medieval harbour. Reference to the chapel in the context of Burmarrad is made to indicate how to find the ideal anchorage: 'si e bon stazio'. This chapel must have denoted the anchorage situated at the inner-most reaches of the bay.

St Paul's Bay

The medieval chapel referred to in the portulan was rebuilt in the early seventeenth century.[15] Once again, a chapel is used to help seafarers recognize their whereabouts: *in fondi del colfode ver sirocho si e una gliexia de San Polo sovra la riva blancha provo mar*. Little else is known of the relationship, if any, between seafarers and this particular chapel. Although no reference is made to anchoring near this chapel, a seventeenth century illustration by Schnellinx clearly shows a chapel in St Paul's Bay with vessels anchored just under it. There can be little doubt that the seafarers on board these vessels would have offered some form of prayers to St Paul.

Post-medieval coastal chapel at Xrobb l-Ghagin

Besides the three sites mentioned in the portulans, there exists one other coastal chapel dedicated to St Paul, that at Xrobb L-Ghagin. This chapel was built in the eighteenth century,[16] possibly reflecting a belief that the site of St Paul's shipwreck occurred in the south of the island. This chapel is visible from out at sea and there can belittle doubt that it was used a waypoint for fishermen working the fishing grounds off this area.

Rural Chapel with Maritime Link

So far I have described and discussed the coastal chapels. There are other chapels dedicated to St Paul but these are mainly concentrated around the Mdina-Rabat area and in rural villages. Of these, there is one rural chapel that is of interest to this study.

Tal-Qliegha

This chapel is situated on the outskirts of Mosta on the road leading from the coastal area of St Paul's Bay and Burmarrad to Mdina-Rabat. From its place in the rural landscape

Knisja ta' San Pawl tal-Qliegħa, l-Mosta.
Church of St Paul, tal-Qliegħa, Mosta.

one cannot observe the sea. To perceive the maritime link of this site one must take a close look at its walls. The façade and one side wall are decorated with numerous ship graffiti of various sizes.[17] The exact nature of these graffiti has not yet been defined. Given that the vast majority of ship graffiti in Malta are found on chapels and churches a votive origin cannot be excluded. Ship graffiti on Maltese churches have been defined by experts as a poor man's votive offering in return for a favour received whilst confronting a difficult situation out at sea.[18] People would make their way to this rural sanctuary so as to etch a ship and a memory into its limestone walls. The church of the Immaculate Conception in Qala had similar maritime links with numerous ship graffiti on its walls as well as recorded votive offerings and monetary donations to the church from fishermen and boat owners.[19]

Conclusion

It is nearly certain that the coastal chapels discussed above were not built specifically for a maritime purpose. This function must have been assumed following numerous observations and mental notes taken by seafarers who sailed into the various ports of call. Such notes would have been passed on through word of mouth and finally written in the form of portulans. The inclusion of these chapels in such sailing instructions highlights their nautical importance and legends such as that of St Paul's in Marsalforn point they may have been held in high regard by seafarers for reasons that went beyond the pragmatic. This idea is reinforced by the presence of ship graffiti on inland chapels with no obvious and clear link to the sea.

NOTES

1   Bassett Fletcher. 1885 *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and Sailors in all lands and in all times.* Belford & Clark, Chicago and New York. Paġna 383.

2   Brody Aaron. 1998. *"Each man cried out to his God" the specialized religion of Canaanite and Phoenician seafarers,* Havard Monographs, Scholars Press. Paġni 1-13.

3   Basset. Paġni 71-72

4   Pitts Joseph. 1704. A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohammetans. England

5   Wettinger Godfrey. 2000. Place names of the Maltese Islands. C. 1300-1800. Malta – PEG Publishers. Paġni 501-503.

6   Armand Pascal. 2005. Les Routes de la Navigation Antique, Itineraires en Mediterranee. Paris – Editions Errante. Paġni 50-59.

7   Strabo's Geography 6.1.7. minn Morton Jamie. 2001. *The Role of the Environment in Ancient Greek Seafaring.* Boston-Brill. Paġna: 179.

8   Il-Kaptani ta' dgħajjes u bastimenti moderni għadhom jirreferu għal dawn l-istruzzjonijiet bil-miktub. Dawn illum jissejħu kotba tal-pilota. Ara Nordenskiöld Adolf Erik. 1897 Periplus (materjal kartografiku: saġġ dwar l-istorja tal-bidu ta' mapep u direzzjonijiet fit-tbaħħir: Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Sollner.

9   Ir-referenzi għall-portolani huma meħudin minn: Cassola Arnold. 1992. The Maltese Toponomy in Three Ancient Italian Portulans (1296-1490) in *Al Masaq International Journal of Arabo-Islamic Mediterranean Studies* 5. Pages 47-64. It-tliet portolani medjevali studjati minn Cassola huma *Lo Compasso de Navegare* tal-1296, *Chompasso de tuta la starea della marina* tal-1490 u l-portolan *Rizo* ta' madwar 1490.

10 Għal rendikont iddettaljat dwar Malta marittima fil-Medju Evu ara: Gambin Timmy. 2005. Malta *and the Mediterranean Shipping Lanes in the Middle Ages in De Maria Lorenza and Turchetti Rita* (Editors). *Rotte e porti del Mediterraneo dopo la caduta dell'Impero d'Occidente. Continuità e innovazzioni tecnologiche funzionali.* IV Seminario.Genova, 18-19 Ġunju 2004. Paġni 115-133.

11 De Soldanis Francesco. Gozo Ancient and Modern, Religions and Profane. Traduzzjoni Ingliża ta' Farrugia Giuseppe. 1999. Malta-Media Centre Publications. Paġni 74-75.

12 Horden Peregrine, Purcell Nicholas. 2000. The corrupting sea: a study of Mediterranean history. Oxford – Blackwell Publishers. Paġna: 455.

13 Pace Anthony in Cilia Daniel (ed). 2004. Malta Before History. *The World's Oldest Freestanding Stone architecture.* Malta – Mirand Publications. Paġna 203.

14 Ara Gambin, Timmy. (2004) Islands of the Middle Sea: an archaeology of a coastline in de Maria Lorenza and Turchetti Rita (edituri) Evolución paleoambiental de los puertos y fondeaderos sntiguos en el Mediterráneo occidental: I seminario: El patrimonio arqueológico submarine y los puertos antiguos: Alicante, 14-15 noviembre 2003. Paġni 127-146.

15 Ferris Achille. 1866. *Descrizione delle chiese di Malta e Gozo.* Malta. Paġna 344.

16 Għal deskrizzjoni ddettaljata ta' dawn il-Graffiti ara: Muscat Joseph. 2002. *Il-Graffiti Marittimi Maltin.* Malta-PIN. Paġni 106-18.

17 Ibid. Paġna 25.

18 Ara Theuma Frank. 2003. A View over Water: The Qala Ship Graffiti in Context in *Melita Historica* 13: 409-420.