Malta and the Mediterranean shipping lanes in the Middle Ages

TIMOTHY GAMBIN*

Introduction

Historic events throughout the Middle Ages in Malta are used by historians to create convenient chronological sub-divisions for Maltese history. The Byzantine conquest in the mid-sixth century AD is the event that marks the end of antiquity and the dawn of the medieval period on the island. Other historic events that punctuate subsequent centuries include the Arab invasion in 870, the Norman invasion in 1091 and finally, the arrival of the Knights of St. John in 1530, a date used to mark the end of Malta's medieval period. The study of the islands' medieval history, and more so its medieval archaeology, is a relatively recent phenomenon.[1]

Despite an Islamic presence lasting until the mid-thirteenth century, the arrival of the Normans on the island was to bring about gradual changes to the island's economy and connectivity. For the purpose of fluidity I have therefore retained the traditional periods and have divided this paper into the following three chronological phases: a) Byzantine circa 535-870 b) Islamic 870-1091 c) Latinisation 1091-1530.

This contribution is not an attempt to reinterpret the medieval history of Malta. This was done recently with considerable accuracy and proficiency.[3] My intention is to explore Malta's maritime character in the ever-changing crosscurrents of the central Mediterranean in the medieval period. This will involve looking at the role of the island in contemporary shipping lanes. Roles varied and included: the provision of shelter to passing vessels; the use of the island as a navigational waypoint and the use of an island as a base for piracy. However, one cannot simply present a

* University of Malta, Foundation for International Studies.

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1. B. Bruno, N. Cutajar, *Archeologia Bizantina a Malta. Primi Risultati e Prospettive di Indagine*, in M.G. Amadasi, M. Liverani, P. Matthiahe (edd.), *Da Pyrgi a Mozia. Studi Sull'Archeologia Del Mediterraneo in Memoria di Antonia Ciasca*, Roma 2002, pp. 109-140.

2. See M. Buhagiar, *The Norman Conquest of Malta: History and Mythology*, in P. Xuereb (ed.), *Karissime Gotifride, historical essays presented to Professor Godfrey Wettinger on his seventieth birthday*, Malta 1999, pp. 47-54.

3. C. Dalli, *Is-Zmien Nofsani Malti*, Malta 2002.

mono-perspective of the dynamic relationship that existed between the island and the sea. The influence of the sea on the local population and the surrounding landscape will be considered alongside other aspects such as the islanders' perception of the sea and the extent of its influence on agriculture and settlement patterns. In order to achieve an understanding of the various arguments put forward for discussion, a variety of sources will be used throughout the course of the paper. There remains a lacuna in our knowledge of some parts of Malta's medieval period. This, I believe, is due to a lack of an ongoing research programme in medieval archaeology. It is only recently that limited information on excavated material from this period has been published.[4] Archaeological deposits from medieval layers were often looked upon as an inconvenience before the excavation of the 'more interesting' classical deposits.[5] Until the fourteenth century, historical sources are not very numerous, yet they still provide important information. Cartographic, place name and some geomorphological evidence complement the historical and archaeological data.

1. The Byzantine Period

Following the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, the Maltese Islands may have been occupied by the Vandals and Ostrogoths[6] but clear information for this period is not yet available. Also hazy is the transition to Byzantine rule. Procopius writes that a fleet under the command of Byzantine general Belisarius called into the harbours of Malta and Gozo on its way to take Carthage, which was then under Vandal rule. It is not clear from this passage whether the Byzantines retained a permanent garrison on the islands but it would be reasonable to assume that Belisarius would have been keen to rob the Vandals of an important naval base from where the latter could harass Byzantine shipping in the central Mediterranean. Also of interest in this same passage is that Procopius describes Malta and Gozo as dividing the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas, an indication that the islands may have been perceived as lying on an invisible maritime border separating Vandal and Greek naval power.

From archaeological evidence, we can deduce that some sites, such as that at Tas-Silg at Marsaxlokk, were modified and reutilised. This site was transformed from a place of worship into a fortified settlement with a dynamic economy that was intricately linked to the harbour below. Ceramic remains from Tas-Silg suggest varied imports that span from the sixth to ninth century AD.[7] This thriving settlement situated close to one of Malta's major harbours in the south is a clear indication that vessels were calling at the island and delivering goods from various parts of the

4. Bruno, Cutajar, *op. cit.* see note 1.

5. See N.J. Cardona, *The Saracenic Cemetery on the Site of the Roman Domus, Rabat (Malta): An Analysis of the Archaeological Evidence*, unpublished BA (Hons) dissertation submitted to the Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta (2002). The Islamic burial site was never published after its discovery in the 1920 due to political reasons.

6. A. Bonanno, *Roman Malta*, in C. Cini (ed.), *Roman Malta The Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands*, Rome 1992, pp. 13-35.

7. Bruno, Cutajar, *op. cit.* see note 1, pp. 122-123.

Mediterranean. This is corroborated by finds from the seabed, which include a *spatheion* from the Grand Harbour and a number of Late Roman *amphorae* from the harbour of Marsascala.

The Marsascala site has been partially excavated and a recent analysis of the material that was found highlights the fact that the majority of finds belong to the amphora types Late Roman 1, 2 and 4.[8] It is not yet certain whether these and other ceramics from the site form part of a wreck and/or part of a harbour deposit that accumulated over the years. One cannot exclude the possibility of a wreck containing oriental amphorae lying in close proximity to other objects that, due to their varied nature, are highly likely to be harbour debris.

The use of Malta's harbours during the Byzantine period is attested by ceramic deposits found on the seabed of various other bays and anchorages around the island. An excavation carried out in Ta'Xbiex creek, within the Marsamxett harbour complex, brought to light a number of sherds datable to the period under discussion.[9] Similar sherds and a partial amphora were recently retrieved from the seabed of Sliema Creek, on the north side of Manoel Island. At Mistra Bay, a number of ceramic sherds have come to light, some of which date from the Byzantine period. Although the archaeological record from the seabed of these bays is fragmented, one can safely assume that ships made frequent use of Malta and its harbours during the sixth and early seventh centuries.

One of the most important discoveries pointing to the use of Malta's harbours during the early Byzantine period was made in 1768, in what was originally the Roman port complex of Marsa. Two hundred and sixty entire *amphorae* stacked inside one of the chambers of the large warehouses situated on the Kortin promontory.[10] From the eighteenth century illustration one may deduce that these are similar to 'type 2' from Yassi Ada.[11] Some *amphorae*, twenty-four in all, had graffiti that were religious in nature in the form of invocations, and indicators of quantities and/or contents. Also found were some *spathia*, which from the illustration published by Barbaro, seem to be late in date and of North African origin.[12] It is difficult to establish whether the oriental *amphorae* were shipped directly from the eastern Mediterranean or whether they arrived via some secondary port in Sicily or elsewhere. Given that the main urban settlement during the Byzantine period was situated over seven kilometres away from this harbour, it is not unreasonable to assume that these warehouses were used, at least to some degree, for the redistribution of goods in the central Mediterranean.

On the north side of the Kortin promontory, precisely at the foot of the hill, a recent excavation has shed light on the possible date of the abandonment of the last

8. E. Azzopardi, *Site Formation Processes and the Archaeological Record Underwater, undergraduate dissertation*, Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Malta 2002, pp. 31-32.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

10. I refer to these warehouses as the Barbaro complex.

11. G.F. Bass, F.H. van Doorninck (edd.), *Yassi Ada*, Volume I A, *Seventh-Century Byzantine Shipwreck*, College Station, Texas 1982, p. 158.

12. I thank Dr. D. Bernal Casasola and Dr. Dominique Pieri for their comments on the amphorae published by Barbaro.

area in Marsa to be used for significant maritime activity during the Middle Ages. The remains of a building and part of a quay were excavated with large quantities of imported Byzantine *amphorae* present in the archaeological record. Traces of a fire led the excavator to believe that the site was abandoned and/or destroyed suddenly some time in the late eighth or early ninth century. This date was established due to the presence of globular *amphorae* at this site.[13] However, the presence of ceramic type Hayes 109 in the same levels points to an earlier date, probably some time in the mid-7th century. This date corresponds to the abandonment of the Barbaro complex.

Warehouses elsewhere in the Marsa area fell into disuse earlier than those on the Kortin promontory. The latest coins from one such complex date to the reign of Constantine (350-380)[14]; one brass Islamic coin (c. 10th century) cannot be taken as being indicative of sustained activity as no other evidence was found that corroborates the use of this complex beyond the Roman period. The inner warehouses that formed part of the Roman harbour fell into disuse in late antiquity, possibly due to the gradual silting up of the inner harbour area during the 5th and 6th centuries. Due to this natural process, the main maritime activity would have been concentrated around the Kortin promontory, the outer most part of the Marsa harbour. This hypothesis is substantiated by the location of the burial sites in around the Marsa area with the later tombs being located near or actually on the Kortin promontory.[15]

Early Arab raids on the central Mediterranean in the latter half of the seventh century, must have exposed the Maltese islands to sporadic attacks. Other islands in the central Mediterranean, such as Pantelleria for example, had suffered similar raids and even a spell of Arab occupation (circa 700).[16] By the late seventh century, the Arabs were firmly established on the shores of North Africa. For the latter part of Byzantine rule on Malta, the economic and maritime activity of the island seems to have retracted, a phenomenon that can be linked to Arab expansion at sea and on land.

By finding itself in the centre of a newly fragmented Mediterranean, Malta also lost out on its role as a base for the transiting of ships and their cargoes. This is especially true for the route linking the Aegean to the North African coast. By losing North Africa to the Arabs, the Byzantines also lost a fundamental supply of grain.[17] The seventh century date for the abandonment of the main port at Marsa points to a dire situation coinciding with the Arab raids and a less favourable economic situation. In various phases of the island's history, Malta's geographical position had served to the economic benefit of its inhabitants. The changing political, cultural and economic landscape of the seventh century Mediterranean greatly reduced the

13. Bruno, Cutajar, *op. cit.* see note 1, p. 122.
14. (Malta) *Museums Annual Report* 1955-1956, p. 8.
15. T. Gambin, *Ports and Port Structures for Ancient Malta*, in ANSER II, pp. 159-174.
16. Dalli, *op. cit.* see note 3, p. 27.
17. E. Özveren, *The Grain Provisioning of Istanbul in the Longue Durée*, in B. Marin, C. Virlouvet (edd.), *Nourrir les cités de Méditerranée Antiquité-Temps modernes*, Aix en Provence 2003, pp. 223-249.

island's potential for the transhipment of goods and as a centre of auxiliary maritime services.

This situation is reflected in the settlement patterns of the island. Rural sites were either abandoned or witnessed a serious decline in the eighth and ninth centuries. There is evidence for abandonment of burial sites throughout the island[18] pointing to a move away from open spaces in rural and coastal areas to fortified nuclei. The main urban centre of the island is heavily modified during this period and changes included the strengthening of fortifications and addition of a fortress within the town.[19]

2. The Arab Period

The traditional historical version of the transition from Byzantine to Arab rule, that of immediate occupation by the latter after their victory, was recently shaken by the 'discovery' of a passage describing Malta, written by Al Himyari in the fourteenth century.[20] Al Himyari states that following the Arab raid on the island in 870 AD the islands: «remained an uninhabited ruin, but it was visited by shipbuilders, because the wood in it is of the strongest kind, by the fishermen, because of the abundance and tastiness of the fish around its shores, and by those who collect honey, because that is the most common thing there».[21] One cannot ignore that Al Himyari wrote over four centuries after the event and was therefore dependant on other sources for his information. The entire passage has been meticulously studied and it is surprisingly accurate with regards to the geographic details related to the island. Al Himyari is also accurate in his references to the various Arab rulers mentioned in his text, which help pinpoint the date of the Arab invasion to 870.[22]

In my opinion, the depopulation of the island was not complete. Admittedly, archaeological evidence for the ninth and tenth centuries is not abundant, although this can be partly explained by the above-mentioned disdain with which the Arab/Islamic phase of Malta's history was looked upon in the past. Recent excavations in the town of Mdina have brought to light some interesting results that partly contradict what is stated in Al Himyari's account. Ceramics from the tenth century suggest a degree of human activity at a time when the island should have been uninhabited. The presence of some imported ceramics during this period has sometimes been taken to mean that the island «was fully integrated within the cultural and economic systems of the Islamic Mediterranean».[23] Numismatic evidence from the Muslim Arab period also sustains the idea for some form of human activity on the

18. See M. Buhagiar, *The Salina Hypogea at St. Paul's Bay*, in *Melita Historica*, 1984, pp. 1-18 and M. Buhagiar, *Four new late Roman and early Byzantine Burial Sites in the Island of Malta*, in *Melita Historica* 13, 1, 2000, pp. 23-37.

19. S. Spiteri, *Castellu di la Chitati*, in *Malta Archaeological Review* 4, 2000, pp. 17-27.

20. 'Discovered' in the context of Maltese historiography and published in J.M. Brincat, *Malta 870-1054: Al-Himyari's account and its Linguistic Implications*, Malta 1995.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

23. N. Cutajar, A. Molinari, *Of Greeks and Arabs and Feudal Knights*, in *Malta Archaeological Review*, 1999, pp. 3, 9-16.

island.[24] The data so far available suggests that, due to the insecurity of the Mediterranean during this period, the island and its inhabitants went through a phase of turmoil during the eighth and ninth centuries culminating in the large Arab invasion of 870. In the light of such setbacks, it is not surprising that the island passed through a period of demographic and economic decline.

Of major interest to this study is the reference in Al Himyari's account to the various types of persons that called at the island. The mention of shipbuilders 'visiting' the island, for example, poses some problems that deserve further explanation. Firstly, the building of a ship from scratch requires a substantial human effort and a large quantity of timber. With regards to the latter, Al Himyari describes the island as being having an abundance of trees, specifically the pine, the juniper and the olive.[25] Of these three species, none are quite large (and straight) enough for the construction of sections of the ships such as the keel and strakes but can be used for other parts such as frames. It is therefore more plausible to interpret the reference to shipbuilders as seafarers that wintered on the island, at a convenient place that was in close proximity to the supply of timber used for the repair of their ships. One cannot exclude the possibility of the odd ship being built on the island during this period. Such activity would be very difficult to trace in the archaeological record, mainly due to the non-permanent nature of a temporary shipyard.

Elsewhere, I have argued that changes in agricultural practices contributed to land erosion and subsequent alluvial deposition in the island's harbours.[26] The numerous ancient groves, neglected after the sea borne raids of the previous decades, may have been cut down during this period for the provision of timber. The 'deforestation' of the island would have subsequently contributed to the erosion of the surrounding landscape and, in the longer term, to the further siltation of the some of the harbours.

Al Himyari's account contains a reference to the 'building' of the city, more likely to mean the modification of the surviving urban fabric that existed in Byzantine and Roman times. A Muslim cemetery dating to the early eleventh and/or twelfth century was discovered in the 1920s over the ruins of a Roman villa, just outside the modern walls of Mdina. Given that burial sites were, more often than not, situated outside the city walls, this, and other Muslim cemeteries in the area, provide a sound reference for the reduction in size of this town. For the study of the later phases of the Arab 'occupation' of the islands' history, archaeological evidence from limited excavations carried out at some of the medieval sites.[27] Excavation within the town walls have brought to light a number of imported ceramic sherds that are datable to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which help confirm the continued occupation of the town.[28]

24. H.W. Brown, *The coins of Muslim Malta*, in *Melita Historica* 11.1, 1992, pp. 1-18.
25. Brincat, *op. cit.* see note 20, p. 11.
26. T. Gambin, *Islands of the Middle Sea: an archaeology of a coastline*, in ANSER I, pp. 127-146.
27. I say limited because these excavations were determined by the types of civil works that were carried out in Mdina as part of a project to place all telephone and electricity cables underground. Therefore, the archaeological investigation was focused on those particular areas that were exposed through these works.
28. Cutajar, Molinari, *op. cit.* see note 23, p. 11.

The regeneration of the town coincides with a large effort in 1053-54, on behalf of the Byzantines, to besiege the island. Both Al Himyari and al-Qazwini describe this attack, which ended in defeat for the Greeks with most of the Byzantine ships being captured in the process.[29] It cannot be confirmed whether this expedition was an attempt to recapture the islands in order to establish an advanced naval base or whether it was a punitive attack aimed at eradicating pirates that may have operated from the island.

How does the Arab period in Malta fit in with what was going on elsewhere in the Mediterranean? In the first volume of his seminal work on the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages, Goitein deals exclusively with the 'economic foundations' of contemporary Arab networks.[30] Large sections of this volume are dedicated to trade routes, seafaring, piracy and other maritime aspects. The main source for his research are the various letters discovered in the Cairo Geniza, written by Jewish merchants that operated in the Arab world during the tenth and thirteenth centuries. In the many letters used for his research on trade and trade routes during this period, Malta is conspicuous by its absence. The island is listed neither as a destination, perhaps due to its limited economic significance, but neither is it listed as a stopover.[31] There is no mention whatsoever of Malta in the volume's section on piracy. It is possible that references to the islands, if any do exist, are contained in collections/documents not studied by Goitein.

There have been subsequent interpretations of Mediterranean trade routes in the High Middle Ages as described in the Geniza documents. Despite looking at a significant number of 'new' documents (with no apparent mention of the island), the trade routes outlined by Udovitch do not differ significantly from those proposed by Goitein and thus shed no new light on the maritime role of Malta during this period.[32] Udovitch insisted on a Alexandria-Palermo route that goes against the prevailing currents and is not practical from a nautical point of view. On the other hand, Gertwagen has used prevailing oceanographic conditions in the central Mediterranean to argue in favour of a Tripoli-Malta-Sicily route in the tenth and eleventh centuries.[33] I agree with Gertwagen's idea that this route would have been preferable, especially when one considers aspects such as sailing conditions and safety at sea. Ceramic evidence from Mdina points to some form of connectivity with the wider Arab world during the late tenth and eleventh centuries. The absence of more substantial evidence could be due to the lack of ongoing research of the islands' harbours, anchorages and territorial waters.

Finally, just as the Arabs introduced cotton into the various other islands of the central Mediterranean, such as Pantelleria, there can be little doubt that this crop was

29. Dalli, *op. cit.* see note 3, p. 32.

30. S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, voll. 1-5, Berkeley and California 1967.

31. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 325-326.

32. A.L. Udovitch, *Time, the sea and society: duration of commercial voyages on the southern shores of the Mediterranean during the high Middle Ages*, in *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto* 25, 1978, pp. 503-546 (with discussion, pp. 547-563).

33. R. Gertwagen, *Geniza Letters: Maritime Difficulties along the Alexandria-Palermo Route*, in S. Menache (ed.), *Communication on the Jewish Diaspora: The Pre-Modern World*, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1996, pp. 73-91.

introduced into Malta during the island's Arab period. Cotton cultivation spread from Tunisia to various parts of Sicily some time during the Islamic/Norman period.[34] What one must consider here is that in some Mediterranean regions that were recaptured by the Christians, the cultivation of plants introduced by the Muslims was sometimes abandoned, as was the case with sugar cane in Sicily.[35] Once again, the landscape would have undergone some form of modification with consequences on the environment. Cotton was an export-orientated agricultural product that proved, over the centuries, to be an important asset for the island.

3. The Latin Period

The event often taken to mark the end of Islam and the dawn of the Latin period of Malta is the Norman raid on the island in 1091. However, the origins of this hype have been traced to the writings of the early modern historian G.F. Abela who used this episode to argue in favour of the Christian and Latin roots of the Maltese people.[36] In reality, the raid must be seen in the broader context of Norman expansion in the southern and central Mediterranean. The much-debated event is the subject of an excellent reappraisal by one of Malta's leading medievalists.[37] Expanding naval power of some Italian city-states would gradually tip the balance in favour of the Latin north. It is not within the purpose of this paper to dwell at length on the Norman 'invasion' of Malta but a closer look at some details related to the accounts describing this event is warranted.

In 1087, other islands and cities of the central Mediterranean such as Pantelleria and Mahdia had been attacked and sacked by Genoese and Pisan forces. The ability to launch attacks against these islands can be seen not just as a reflection of the increasing naval capabilities of some Italian cities but also as an expansion into various strategic outposts that would also contribute to their commercial development.[38] The eradication of the pirate base on Mahdia weakened Arab shipping and naval capability, thus opening up the possibility for attacks on other Arab outposts, such as that on Malta by the Normans.[39] Count Roger's chronicler Malaterra provides the main historical source for this event, an account that due the chivalric nature of the text warrants a degree of caution.[40] Following the attack on the city (or Medina) and the surrender of Malta's Islamic rulers, Count Roger sailed back to Sicily with all the Christian slaves that were freed from the island. Upon their request, the slaves were returned to their homelands, probably in the eastern Mediterranean. A large booty seized on Malta was also carried away. Given that the Normans left the island, points towards

34. A.M. Watson, *Agricultural innovation in the early Islamic period. The diffusion of crops and farming techniques, 700-1100*, Cambridge 1983, p. 40.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
36. Buhagiar, *op. cit.* see note 2.
37. C. Dalli, *The Siculo-African peace and Roger I's annexation of Malta in 1091*, in T. Cortis, T. Gambin (edd.), *De Triremibus: Essays in honour of Joe Muscat*, Malta, in press.
38. *Ibid.*
39. A. Luttrell, *Approaches to Medieval Malta*, in A. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975, pp. 1-70.
40. Buhagiar, *op. cit.* see note 2, p. 48.

this attack being more of a 'razzia' than an all out attempt at conquering and occupying the island.

In 1123, Pantelleria and Mahdia were once again raided by the Normans albeit with negative results, highlighting that notwithstanding the earlier attacks of 1087 the Normans were forced to launch attacks against places that had been ransacked less than half a century earlier.[41] I believe that following the above-mentioned raids of the late eleventh century there must have been some form of renaissance in Arab maritime activity, including piracy, thus necessitating the need for the eradication of Arab naval bases. Malta would have been ideally situated to act as an advanced base from which raids could be launched against Christian shipping in the central Mediterranean. Given that other central Mediterranean islands were repeatedly attacked, it is not surprising that the Normans felt compelled to return to Malta in 1127. This time their presence on the island was to be of a more permanent nature.

Following this second attack, one of the major changes witnessed on the island was related to its defensive set up. In all probability, permanent military garrisons were placed in the fortified towns of both islands. Given that the sea was the only route to Malta, the Normans must have been quick to realise the importance of fortifying the main nodal point for the island, the harbour. Due to the partial silting up of the Marsa harbour and the abovementioned abandonment of its harbour facilities, the new harbour of Malta was now situated in what is today known as Dockyard Creek (fig. 1). Some form of site migration took place between the late ninth and late eleventh centuries. Although the first known documentary reference to the *Castrum Maris* dates to 1223, it is not unreasonable to assume that the castle was built or expanded some time after in the twelfth century as an aftermath of the second Norman invasion. Both these inferences have yet to be confirmed by archaeological and environmental investigations. The choice of Dockyard Creek over the adjacent French Creek deserves further attention.

In practical nautical terms, the latter provides better all-round shelter than the former, a fact that is especially true for the prevailing north-easterly storms that occur during the winter. Despite the presence of the modern breakwater across the mouth of the Grand Harbour, these winter gales still cause problems to vessels moored in Dockyard Creek. So why did the new harbour settlement move from Marsa to present day Birgu? The answer to this question can be deduced from the natural landscape of the various peninsulas that are situated in the main harbour. In its natural state, the rocky promontory at the tip of the Birgu peninsula must have been a substantial topographic feature dominating the entrance of the Grand Harbour and Dockyard Creek (fig. 2). The changing political, cultural and economic climate of the Mediterranean in the high Middle Ages[42] influenced the choice of site and Malta's rulers chose strategic priorities over nautical practicality.

41. Dalli, *op. cit.* see note 3, p. 42.

42. M. Balard, *A Christian Mediterranean 1000-1500*, in D. Abulafia (ed.), *The Mediterranean in History*, London 2003, pp. 183-218.

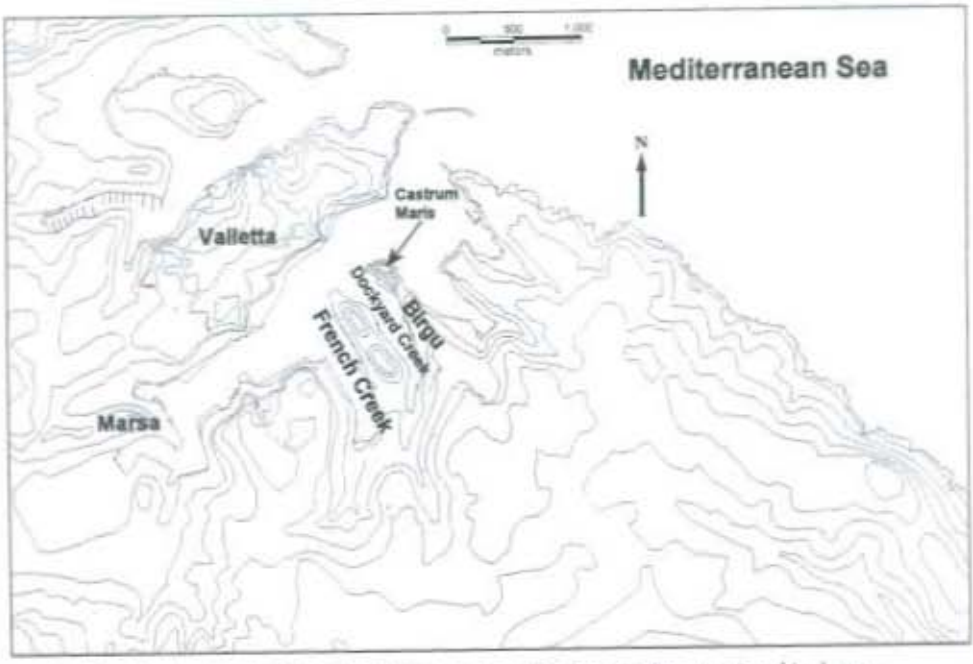

FIG. 1 – Map showing details of the main harbour complex on Malta with places mentioned in the text.

FIG. 2 – Photo taken from the top of Fort St. Angelo (*Castrum Maris*) looking back onto Dockyard Creek.

References to the 'new' port of Malta during the twelfth century offer insight into the kind of maritime activity taking place in and around the island. With the permanent establishment of the Normans on the island, the Maltese islands must have taken on a new role as a friendly port for Latin ships operating between the northern and southern Mediterranean. In 1184 «a Pisan captain seized a Tunisian ship at Malta with the goods onboard it, and threw the crew into the sea»[43]. This incident sheds light on the frequenting of Malta's harbours by both Muslim and Christian ships, albeit not always with peaceful results. Further light on Malta's maritime role is shed by the Muslim geographer Idrisi who, besides mentioning the island's harbour, also writes that «shipping reached Scicli in Sicily from Calabria, Africa, Malta and many other places»[44]. The reference by Idrisi of a safe harbour in Gozo has been dismissed as inaccurate.[45] However, this reference to good harbours can be explained and it is probable that the inner reaches of the harbours of Xlendi and/or Marsalforn had not yet silted up.[46]

In the early thirteenth century, the Swabian successors of the Normans kept two small vessels in imperial service manned by 25 sailors who were stationed in the *Castrum Maris*.[47] These vessels were used for coastal patrols and communications with Sicily. The garrisoning of the *Castrum Maris* and the maintenance of two ships clearly illustrates the importance of the Birgu harbour as the link to the outside world. Other harbours and bays were also used throughout this period. Loose finds, including ceramics ranging in date from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries found on the seabed in Salina Bay and Marsaxlokk point to some degree of maritime activity in these areas.[48] Furthermore, there are a number Marsa place names around both Malta and Gozo including, besides Marsa itself, Marsamxett, Marsascala, Marsaxlokk and Marsalforn. The Marsa prefix, Semitic for harbour or anchorage, dates from at least the thirteenth century and confirms the use of these harbours in the Middle Ages (fig. 3).[49]

The maritime activity of the Maltese Islands during this period was intricately linked to various political currents elsewhere in the Mediterranean, especially those on the neighbouring island of Sicily. Given their power at the time, the involvement of one of the northern Italian maritime states in Malta should come as no surprise. The 'new Swabian dynasty' found it convenient to pass Malta on to individuals that would protect the island as well as exploit its position in the centre of the Sicilian channel and who better to do so than a hardened naval commander. In the late twelfth century, the renowned pirate Margarito of Brindisi became a Sicilian royal commander and acquired the title of Count of Malta.[50] All the successive Counts of

43. Luttrell, *op. cit.* see note 39, p. 31.
44. *Ibid.* p. 32.
45. *Ibid.*
46. T. Gambin, *The Harbours of Ancient Gozo*, in *Malta Archaeological Review* 6, 2002-03, pp. 20-26.
47. G. Wettinger, *The Castrum Maris and its Suburb of Birgu in the Middle Ages*, in M. Buhagiar, L. Bugeja (edd.), *Birgu: A Maltese maritime city*, Malta 1993, vol. 1, pp. 31-72.
48. Cutajar, Molinari, *op. cit.* see note 23.
49. A. Cassola, *The Maltese Toponomy in three Ancient Italian Portulans (1296-1490)* in *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 5, 1992, pp. 47-64.
50. Luttrell, *op. cit.* see note 39, p. 35.

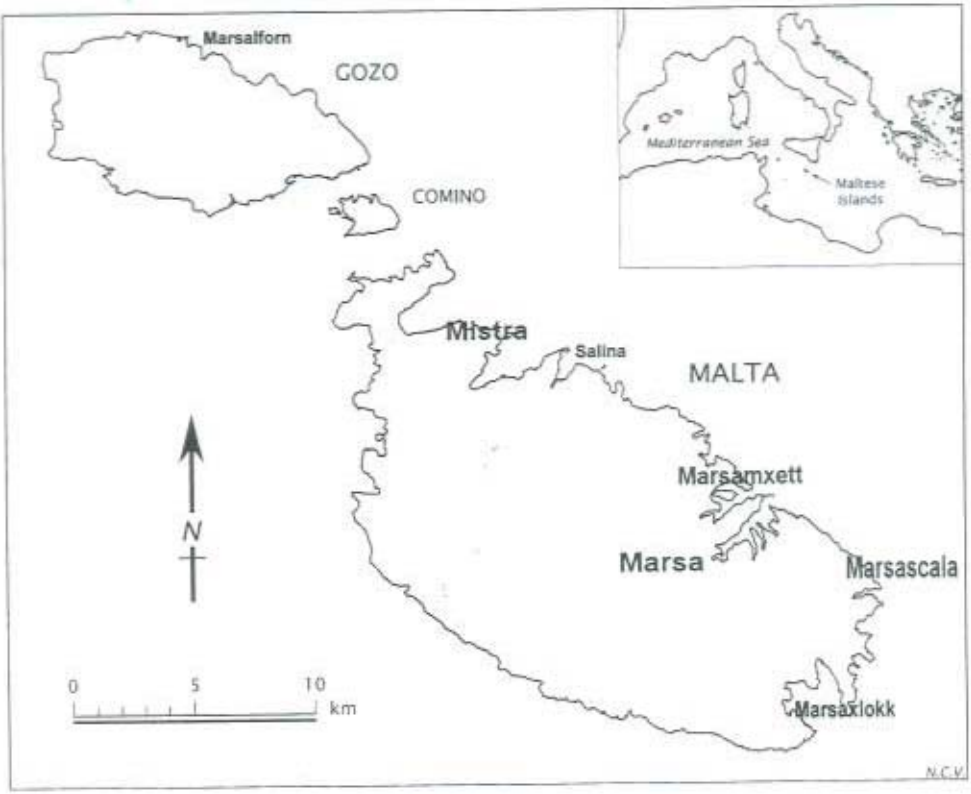

FIG. 3 – Harbours around Malta with Marsa prefix and other places mentioned in text.

Malta were Genoese, the first of which was Guglielmo Grasso. By having a 'local' ruling the island, Genoa managed to secure the central Mediterranean routes that led to the Levant.[51] Whereas the Genoese exploited the island and its harbours as a convenient stopover, other maritime powers would have been forced to give Malta and Gozo a wide berth to avoid being attacked and/or captured.

The most notable of these Genoese counts was Henry 'il Pescatore'. From Malta, he attacked Pisan and Venetian shipping in the central Mediterranean and beyond. In 1204 and 1205 he set sail with comrades and attacked the Pisans in Syracuse thus marking «the culmination of a series of violent attacks on Pisan shipping in and near Sicilian waters».[52] His exploits took him as far east as Tripoli in Lebanon where his deputies made an alliance with Bohemond IV of Antioch-Tripoli, a deal which allowed Henry and the Genoese in general «the freedom to trade within his [Bohemond's] domain».[53] Henry's most audacious expedition was to take place on Crete. In 1206, Henry sailed to Crete promptly capturing Candia and establishing a series of forts on the island. The Venetians saw this as a threat to their shipping routes in the eastern Mediterranean and responded by sending a fleet to attack the newly established Genoese interests on the island. By 1212, Henry Pescatore was ousted from Crete but not after securing a large pay-off from the Venetians. Henry was eventually made admiral of the royal fleet by Frederick II and was allowed to keep Malta as his fief.

Henry, as count of Malta, was able to arm vessels and muster the manpower needed to carry out attacks in various places throughout the Mediterranean. There can be little doubt that due to Henry's status as both count of Malta and of admiral of the royal fleet, Malta must have been able to provide a variety of maritime services such as repairs and victualling for his ships. Malta's male population also contributed to the count's forces and in some of his expeditions up to 300 Maltese men sailed with Henry.[54] Although other Genoese retained the title of count, the rulers of Sicily made sure that the *Castrum Maris* remained under royal command limiting the autonomy of the Maltese counts.[55]

Thirteenth century records highlight the existence of Maltese exports and include a document from 1248 that sheds light on the sale in Genoa of a Muslim Maltese slave girl called Maimona.[56] It is not known whether this was part of an active slave trade on the island or whether this was a one-off sale. The sale of a Maltese Muslim on the slave market may have been related to the expulsion of the Muslims from the island. Cotton too was traded during this period and again it was Genoese merchants that played a leading role. During the Angevin period, it becomes apparent that although Genoese captains still used the main port of Malta, their presen-

51. *Ibid.*
52. D. Abulafia, *Henry Count of Malta*, in A. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta Studies on Malta Before the Knights*, London 1975, pp. 104-125.
53. *Ibid.* p. 112.
54. Dalli, *op. cit.* see note 3, p. 46.
55. S. Fiorini, *The De Malta Genoese Counts of Malta*, in *Melita Historica*, 12. 4, 1999, pp. 359-366.
56. R.S. Lopez, I.W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World: Illustrative Documents Translated with Introductions and Notes*, New York (2nd edition) 1990, p. 116.

ce was not always welcome. In January 1273, of the four Genoese vessels present in the harbour, two were captured and the goods on board seized.[57]

From a political perspective, the thirteenth century was to be one of evolution and change with the Maltese islands passing from the Hohenstuafens to the Angevins and subsequently to the Aragonese. The passage of the islands from French to Spanish rule was not without its difficulties including a large naval battle fought between opposing navies. In 1283, an Angevin fleet was moored inside Dockyard Creek under the walls of the 'Castle by the Sea'. The Aragonese ships interlocked their oars thus trapping their enemy within the creek. A desperate attempt by the French to break out of the harbour ended in a comprehensive victory for the Spaniards.[58] Although this battle has been described in ample detail elsewhere,[59] I must highlight one interesting result. Despite their loss, the French managed to retain the castle highlighting the importance of this site as the key to maritime communications for the island. After the eventual capitulation of the castle, the Aragonese held onto the fortified site throughout their reign in Malta. This ensured that all ships calling into and leaving the main harbour would be under the watchful eye of the ruling power, enabling the latter to control aspects such as port taxes.

Insight into the maritime activity of Malta and its sister islands can be gleaned from one of the earliest known Italian portulans, *Lo Comapsso de Navegare*, probably composed in Pisa and datable to 1296. All three of the Maltese Islands and their ports are mentioned and described in modest detail. The inclusion of Malta, Gozo and Comino in *Lo Comapsso de Navegare* points to the islands being used, at least to some degree, by ships navigating in the central Mediterranean. Despite mention of good harbours, available evidence suggests that the island did not possess a shipyard capable of servicing seagoing vessels. In 1273, the 'Maltese' galley was ordered to sail to Syracuse «to be handed over to the officials in charge of the repair and construction of ships»,[60] a clear indication that certain maintenance works had to be carried out overseas.

For the thirteenth century, we possess an increasing number of documents that help shed light on the maritime activity in and around the Maltese islands. Although Malta formed part of the kingdom of Sicily, the inclusion of the islands within the broader framework of Spanish power in the Mediterranean had a direct bearing on the nature of their economy and connectivity. «The urban patriciates of Catalunya, with their ports and industries, were responsible for the emergence of a single and strategic unit, a Western Mediterranean common market in which the merchants of Valencia, Barcelona and Perpignan could buy and sell in the Balearics, Sardinia and Sicily, while at the same time controlling in those islands the safe harbours they needed along their routes to lucrative markets in North Africa and the

57. Wettinger, *op. cit.* see note 47, pp. 34-35.
58. J.H. Pryor, *The Naval Battles of Roger of Lauria*, in *Journal of Mediterranean History* 9, 1983, pp. 179-216.
59. L. Mott, *The Battle of Malta, 1283: Prelude to a Disaster*, in D. Kagay, A. Villalon (edd.), *Circle of War in the Middle Ages*, Woodbridge 1999, pp. 145-172.
60. J.M. McManamon, *Maltese Seafaring in Medieval and Post-Medieval Times*, in *Mediterranean Historical Review* 18.1, 2003, pp. 32-58.

Levant».[61] It not difficult to conceive Malta's role as a maritime base fitting into this network of commerce and exchange.

What exactly did the Maltese islands have to offer to this 'common market' of the western Mediterranean? Primarily harbours, not just the main port of Malta at Birgu protected as it was by the castle, but also its secondary ports including those at Burmarrad and Marsaxlokk. Secondly, Malta provided the ideal stepping-stone for vessels sailing between Sicily and various other ports in North Africa and/or in the Levant. Vessels could stop to replenish their water supplies, take on victuals or simply wait for the right wind in order to proceed with their journey. Finally, there was also the lure of local products to supplement the cargo of passing vessels, although the export of these goods was, more often than not, handled by Maltese shipping.

The increase of cotton exports in the late Middle Ages consisted of a revival for Maltese cotton rather that an introduction of this crop into the international market. I say this because references to Maltese cotton were not completely absent in the preceding centuries. In 1164, Maltese cotton is mentioned in an inventory of a Genoese merchant with substantial commercial interests overseas.[62] In 1272, a Genoese privateer captured a ship from Syracuse in the Sicilian channel and amongst the goods on board was Maltese cotton. Although few and far in between, these references illustrate that the production and export of cotton from Malta did exist in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This dearth of information is more likely due to the absence of documents and the lack of research in the field of landscape studies, including the study and dating of pollen samples.

The irrigation systems created to support large-scale cotton cultivation must have involved landscape modification, including terracing, to facilitate the retention of soil. Landscape transformation for the introduction of new crops was a phenomenon witnessed throughout the Islamic world.[63] In the long term, the terracing of fields must have contributed to the slowing down of the siltation process in the harbours. Newly built walls and terraces would have played a vital role in the diminution of further erosion. Once again, this is put forward as a working hypothesis, which can only be confirmed or negated through C-14 dates of samples retrieved from the alluvial plains on both Malta and Gozo.

The study of cotton production and export in the later Middle Ages is facilitated by the increased records for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[64] Maltese cotton was shipped on Maltese vessels to Syracuse in Sicily in order to be transhipped as far a field as Barcelona where, along with Sicilian cotton, it formed the bulk of imports.[65] The Malta-Syracuse cotton trade and the processing of the plant were mainly in the hands of Jews resident on either side of the Sicily channel.[66] Maltese

61. Luttrell, *op. cit.* see note 39, p. 44.
62. Abulafia, *op. cit.* see note 52, p. 105.
63. Watson, *op. cit.* see note 34, p. 103.
64. G. Wettinger, *Agriculture in Malta in the Late Middle Ages*, in *Proceedings of History Week* 1981, pp. 1-48.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
66. H. Bresc, *The 'Secrezia' and the Royal Patrimony in Malta: 1240-1450*, in A. Luttrell (ed.), *op. cit.* see note 39, pp. 126-162.

ships did venture beyond Sicily, as in 1380 for example, when Maltese Jews and ships were trading with Dubrovnik.

With so much land dedicated to the cultivation of cotton, the production of other agricultural produce such as grain, evolved into one of secondary importance. The inhabitants of the island could afford not produce the main staple foodstuff due to the island's proximity to Sicily. As the Maltese islands formed part of the kingdom of Sicily, Maltese nobles successfully argued that export taxes between the two islands should be lifted.[67] High-quality grain was therefore imported from Sicily at prices that were significantly lower than elsewhere. Although such a single-crop system was vulnerable to various factors such as pirate raids, drought and fluctuations in market prices, the gains were large enough to induce farmers, merchants and shippers to fully embrace the cotton-grain exchange. In turn, this exchange permitted the evolution of an economy that was relatively prosperous as is attested by the imported ceramics present in the archaeological record of the urban centre of the island.[68]

The increased maritime and economic activity around the Maltese islands in this period must have been one of the pull factors that attracted pirates to the islands and their surrounding seas. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Barbary corsairs were asserting themselves as a naval force in the central Mediterranean. By the end of the fourteenth century, attacks on both Malta and Gozo had begun and would increase in the fifteenth. In 1389, a Hafsid fleet led an attack that left widespread devastation on Gozo. It was aimed at avenging Manfredi Chiaramonte's seizure of Djerba a year earlier as this was possibly launched from Malta.[69] By the first years of the fifteenth century, the situation had degenerated to the extent that Muslim pirates were wintering on the island of Comino, harassing shipping between Malta and Gozo. In 1418, faced with the continuing menace of Barbary corsairs stationed on Comino, the islands' inhabitants petitioned the their sovereign, King Alfonso V, to approve the construction of a tower on the island of Comino. Due mainly to financial difficulties, this tower was not to be built until over two centuries later. [70]

The increase of corsairing and piratical activity by North African vessels around the Maltese islands was paralleled by an increase in similar activity by Christians that attacked mainly, but not exclusively, Islamic shipping. During the fifteenth century, Malta was to evolve into one of the main centres for corsairing and piratical activities in the central Mediterranean. The islands of Sicily and Malta were ideally situated to dominate the passage of vessels crossing the Sicilian channel. Evidence for corsairing and other aggressive maritime activities can be traced throughout the Middle Ages; during the thirteenth century, Henry Pescatore was a case in point. In 1366, Malta was enfeoffed by Frederick IV to Manfredi Chiaramonte, then Admiral of Sicily.[71] Although the exact reason for the Genoese attack of 1372 remains unclear, it is widely accepted that some form of piratical activity by ships sailing out of Malta

67. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
68. Cutajar, Molinari, *op. cit.* see note 23, pp. 11-12.
69. Luttrell, *op. cit.* see note 39, p. 46.
70. A. Samut Tagliaferro, *The Coastal Fortifications of Gozo and Comino*, Malta 1993, p. 127.
71. Luttrell, *op. cit.* see note 39, p. 45.

against Genoese interests caused the reaction. Given that Chiaramonte had commercial interests in Malta and close links with the Genoese, it therefore comes as no surprise that he, along with Frederick IV, supported the attack. This was aimed at removing the royal Captain of Malta, Giacomo de Pellegrino, who was probably responsible for the piratical activity emanating from the island.[72] This case illustrates a degree of tension and conflict between those who on the one hand had 'legitimate' commercial interests on the island and those who sought to use Malta as a base for corsairing.

This 'friction' was to remain evident during the fifteenth century. Islands such as Malta and Pantelleria were used as advanced 'naval' bases and the expansion of corsairing came to play a vital role in the Mediterranean conflict between Christian north and Islamic south. Part of the local nobility worried that such activity would have a negative impact on their contacts with the Barbary coast.[73] Another fear, this time related to the recruitment of local men to serve on board corsair vessels, can be deduced from a decree issued in the 1440 by the Maltese authorities, which forbade local men from joining corsairing expeditions so as not to deplete the land of manual labour, so badly needed for the cultivation of cotton.[74] On the other hand, the fact that local men were attracted to such a perilous activity is a clear indication of the potential profits of corsairing.

Despite such protestations, corsairing activity evolved into a significant economic activity rivalled only by agricultural production. In the period 1400-1440, of the eight known ports in the northern part of the central Mediterranean where corsair vessels were armed, Malta 'hosted' two of the 24 vessels for which this information is known. This compares with no vessels for the period 1290-1400. After 1440, specifically for the period 1440-1460, one notes a significant increase in the number of corsairs using Malta to set up their expeditions. Seven out of the 37 ships with a known 'port d'arm' used Malta as their base, second only to Syracuse. Over and above using the island as a logistical base, various vessels utilised the island to redistribute goods captured on their expeditions. For the period 1440-1460, Malta and Gozo hosted five vessels, three and two respectively, that called at the islands in order to sell and/or tranship spoils.[75] These figures are based on documentary evidence but due to the clandestine nature of this activity much exchange related to corsairing that took place in the later Middle Ages would not have been recorded. It is therefore difficult to gauge the exact extent of corsairing activity that went on in the Maltese islands and indeed anywhere else in the Mediterranean.

The Maltese islands receive substantial attention when described in portulans of the fifteenth century. Two of these, the *Chompasso de tuta la starea della marina* and the '*Rizo*' portolan contain detailed references to the Maltese islands, describing

72. H. Bresc, *La course méditerranéene au miroir Sicilien (XII^e-XV^e siècles)*, in J. Les Pins, (ed.) *L'Exploitation de la Mer de L'Antiquité a Nos Jours: La Mer, Moyen d'Echange et de Communication* VI^ème *Recontres Internationales d'Archeologie et d'Histoire (Antibes, octobre 1985)*, Valbonne 1986, pp. 91-110.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 96; Wettinger, *op. cit.* see note 64, p. 13.
74. McManamon, *op. cit.* see note 60, p. 42.
75. Bresc, *op. cit.* see note 72, p. 104.

their ports, distances between waypoints and dangers to shipping.[76] Of interest are the distances given from various points in Malta and Gozo to other places in the central Mediterranean. These give a clear indication as to the connectivity of the Maltese islands during the later Middle Ages. Some of the crossings mentioned in the text are listed below:

From	To	Distance (miles)
Castle (Birgu Harbour)	Capo Passero	75
Marsaxlokk	Tripoli (Libya)	260
Marsaxlokk	Tunis	500
Marsaxlokk	Modon	530
Marsaxlokk	Cephalonia	480
Gozo/Malta Channel	Lampedusa	100
Gozo	Pantelleria	140

TABLE 1 – List of distances from Malta and Gozo from various medieval portulans. (After Cassola 1993).

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Through this contribution, I have presented an overview of the maritime activity of the Maltese islands and their role in Mediterranean shipping lanes during the Middle Ages. This subject deserves a more in depth analysis, a task that is currently being undertaken by the present author. However, notwithstanding the cursory nature of this paper some discernible traits are worthy of note.

Despite the availability of good natural harbours and its convenient geographical position, Malta and Gozo were not always witness to intensive maritime activity. Throughout various periods in the Middle Ages, such as the early Islamic phase, the islands fade into obscurity. With the rise of the Italian maritime powers, the islands assume a degree of importance for short periods of time that are mainly linked to the activities of individuals, such as the exploits of Henry Pescatore. The evidence available to date does not permit us to gauge the type of investment made in the maritime infrastructure of the islands. This removes opportunities for comparisons with other islands in the Mediterranean, such as Crete, where the Italian city-states developed facilities geared towards the servicing of their ships and merchants.[77]

Also of importance was the influence of the sea on the inhabitants of the islands and in particular their choice of agricultural practices. The proximity of the island to Sicily and its large supplies of grain enabled the Maltese to devise a system whereby they were able to dedicate the majority of the land to the production of cotton for export at the expense of a subsistence crop such as grain. This was only possible due

76. Cassola, *op. cit.* see note 49, p. 52.

77. See R. Gertwagen, *The Venetian port of Candia, Crete (1299-1363): construction and maintenance*, in *Mediterranean Historical Review* 3, 1988, pp. 141-158.

to the outward looking nature of the inhabitants who not only recognised this opportunity but also, despite the dangers of piracy, took the initiative to set up a system to sustain this exchange. This is not dissimilar to the situation on Roman Malta where the islands' inhabitants took advantage of the presence of grain brought over from Africa en route to Rome enabling them to dedicate the land to a cash crop; only in the Roman period, it was the olive.

The site migration that occurred between Marsa and Birgu is an interesting notion that deserves further attention. Although the event clearly took place, we still do not have an accurate date for such an important event. Urban development and the lack of ongoing archaeological research in the harbour areas preclude one from obtaining and/or analysing new information. Despite this, it is still possible to discern maritime activity around the island including that in secondary ports. Such activity went on despite the attempt by the rulers of the islands to consolidate maritime traffic in the central harbour of Birgu. This phenomenon occurred due to a number of reasons including accessibility to centres of habitation, those of production and the attempt by some to avoid the imposition of taxes.

I would like to end this paper with a pointer to potential areas for future research. With regards to the written record, the likelihood for undiscovered documents is of course unknown. In my opinion, research should be geared towards the systematic survey of the siltation of the bays during this period coupled with the investigation of archaeological deposits that are present within the seabed of the harbours around the islands. Preliminary sondages have highlighted the potential of this archaeological resource and long-term projects in this field may yield interesting results.[78]

78. See T. Gambin, *A Window on History from the Seabed*, in *Treasures of Malta* 10, 3, pp. 71-76.