

St Paul's departure from Malta

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An old tradition holds that St Paul left Malta from Cospicua. At a local level, this tradition is backed by a special devotion to the Apostle of the Gentiles that developed in this town.

In 1590, Francia Micallef, wife of one of the most important *maestri* of Cospicua, donated the land for a church to be built dedicated to the saint. The church was built in a site known as *La Croce di Bormla* and such a nomenclature, meaning the cross of Cospicua, shows that the area carried special religious reverence.

It is also of particular interest that the second notarial deed, by which Francia donated even more land to this church, refers to the fact that this church was being built over what was called the *mandragio* or the only pen that existed in Grand Harbour offering shelter to boats. This reference shows the association that this place had with the overlaying shore.

During the 17th century, this church became a place of popular devotion while a cemetery developed next to it. Besides its main painting with showed the figure of St Paul with martyred saints, it also had a votive painting offered to the saint. The presence of this painting indicates that this small church was assuming the status of a Pauline sanctuary.

As a result of the increased number of devotees, the old church was pulled down in 1735 and replaced by a bigger church, built to Doric proportions. The church was finished in 1740 and blessed by Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan on October 22, 1741. Francesco Zahra and Rocco Buhagiar were both commissioned to paint for this new church. Unfortunately, the main *pala d'altare* by Zahra depicting the conversion of St Paul is now missing. Bishop Vincenzo Labini did not appreciate Zahra's painting and, in 1781, ordered its removal. Buhagiar was commissioned to execute a fresh painting.

Around 1756, Francesco Spiteri erected a big stone statue of St Paul on the façade-corner of his house, which, according to the records, was situated in one of the busiest streets of the town's. This statue became one of the town's landmarks. The imposing figure of the saint overlooked the entrance of the *mandragio*, became a backdrop that travellers and sailors saw on embarking or disembarking at Cospicua. It is a great pity that the statue was destroyed during World War II. What is of interest is that Geo Fürst's photograph of this statue led to it being featured in a watercolour painting that was reproduced in one of the first modern books to be published in France, in 1935, for tourism purposes. Written by André Maurois and entitled *Les Grandes Escales Malte*, this book aimed at helping French tourists discover Maltese towns and villages. Cospicua featured prominently in the book.

Concurrently, a story began to circulate that according to an old tradition, St Paul had left Malta from Cospicua. The origin of this tradition is not clear. It could have been fabricated in the 19th or early 20th century, if not earlier. The presence of this tradition exposes a serious lacunae with the modern reading of the story of St Paul. A lot of importance was and is still being given to the localities where the saint landed and stayed while completely omitting the existing historical information concerning the saint's departure from the island.

In fact, in the reading of St Paul's story, little attention is paid to the lines discussing his departure. In his article, *The Creation Of Mare Nostrum 300 BC-500 AD*, Geoffrey Richman explains that the arrival in Malta of St Paul, and his departure, came about through the use of big Roman ships used for the transportation of corn. Richman uses these references to show that Malta was on the Roman grain trade route.

This commercial reality explains why the biblical text emphasises the important fact that the ship, which would transport Paul to Rome had, in the meantime, spent the winter here.

In fact, she remained for three months in one of our harbours and may have arrived after St Paul's shipwreck.

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The arrival of this ship could either be linked to the fact that, like the ship of Paul, she was caught in the same storm but succeeded to make harbour or else she was expressly brought to the island to winter due to Malta's sheltered harbours.

What is of particular interest to this story is that corn ships were rather bulky. They were 180 feet long, had a hold of about 10 feet and a beam of around 45 feet. Each ship was capable of carrying a crew of 276 men and had a tonnage of about 810 tons.

Expensive to build, this type of ship had very few harbours where to anchor in the Mediterranean and could only stay for such a long period of time off an island if good natural harbours were available. Normally, small islands lack good harbour facilities. Malta was one of the few exceptions. I have my doubts whether the other islands in the Mediterranean, which were called Melita at the time of the Romans, had good harbours to offer anchorage to these big ships



The statue of St Paul before the war. A photo taken by Geo Fürst and published by Giovanni Bonello in the book *Nostalgias*.

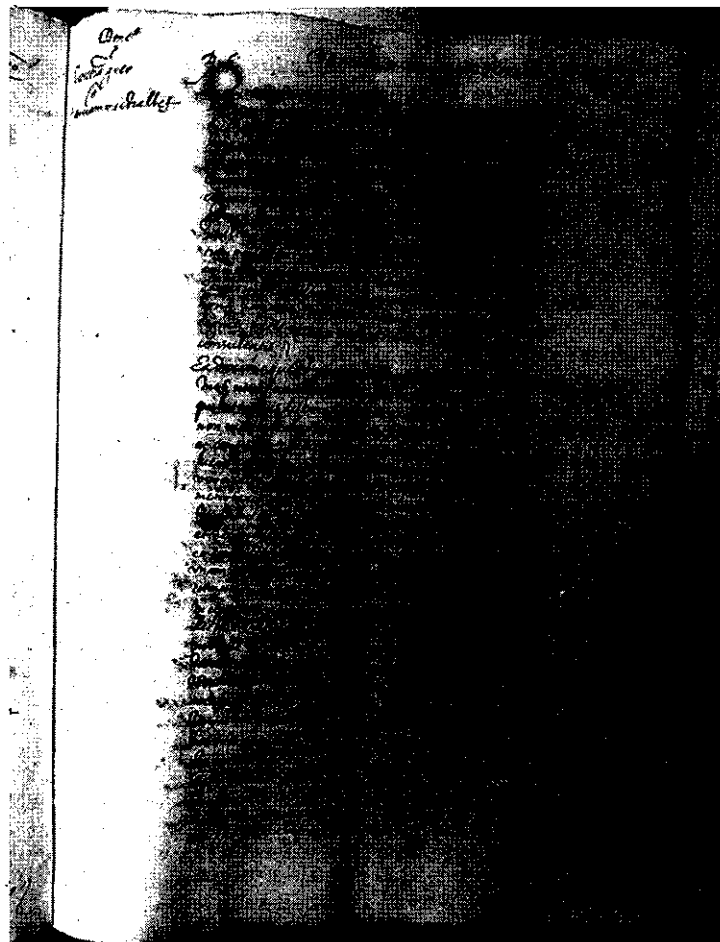
for the duration of the winter months.

There should be no doubt that Grand Harbour was, at the time, the only natural port in Malta that could offer such a facility. Since it has a wide mouth, the ideal berthing would be either in the inner part of the harbour, that is Marsa, or in one of the inlets. Incidentally, some years ago, it was reported that a Roman quay was discovered at Marsa, thus proving that the Romans had used this area and its harbour.

Another natural inlet that guaranteed safe haven in all types of weather was the inlet between Senglea and Vittoriosa. The *mandragio* of Cospicua, as the meaning of this word itself implies, offered one of the ideal harbouring places.

There is no information about the origins of this Pauline tradition in Cospicua. It could easily have been hatched during the early modern period when this cult took root. However, this narrative indicates that it may have had an earlier origin.

Ironically enough, of all the traditions related to the story of the saint, this is the only one that can be correctly associated with a precise and correct geographical location provided one accepts that the biblical Melita is indeed Malta.



The 1590 contract Francesca Micallef made in front of Notary Albano.