Christians in Arab Malta (4)

Simon Mercieca and Frans X. Cassar

Neither one accepts Al Aith's argument that the Maltese were Christian two centuries after the conquest of Malta by Byzantine forces in 982. While historians agree that Malta had important strategic value until 1007, 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 doubt about Malta in his book *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*. He admits that the Arab conquest and the Byzantine occupation were both strategically placed island for Islam. But this strategic value may have been lost by the time when the island was revisited by the Arabs. They were not left untouched for long. Soon the Arabs themselves introduced a policy of repopulation that took place around 950.

Metcalfe links the siege of 982 to the German Emperor Otto II, while his chronology of events is different to any reference in medieval Arabic source, which is the main characteristic of Al Aith's account. Instead, he prefers to speak in terms of an overall Muslim suffering heavy defeats in southern Calabria. Al Aith's account of the takeover of Malta by Byzantine forces coincides 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, 1052. Once again, in such a scenario, it is difficult to believe that while the Byzantines were raiding islands like Corfu, Malta could have been left deserted.

In this same period, the Muslim history is riddled with alliances among themselves. Such alliances can be taken as proof of the island's 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 Brugia for help. Moreover, internal friction with Brugia would have weakened the Arab hold over Malta.

Such a historical narrative finds support in one particular document which still now has never been discussed with reference to Malta. This text provides the argument of doubt that Malta remained strategically important at the turn of the 11th century. The text in question is *Ben Ghadhary“Al Murrakkesa (أعمال عزيز الفتح)“*.

This account is disputed while his date of birth is also unknown. He grew up in Marakhe in the end of the 11th century. The first text written by Ben Ghadhary dates to 1039. This text proves that Malta was uninhabited and that Al-Himyari's statement on Malta's population is totally wrong. The situation on our island at the turn of the 11th 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 about anything 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 its conquest, in 870. Thus, according to Al-Himyari, Malta stopped being uninhabited after 1007. 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 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 eroded over time. The evidence of 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 Kharjieh (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 of 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 Aith as having been conquered by the Byzantines, was in fact the island of Malta? Moreover, there are other Arab medieval authors who spoke about the island being predominantly Christian. This will be the subject of a future study, which will...
army in 1039

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

In case one does not accept Al-‘Arif’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 Bidaines, whom the Muslims considered a sect. Fjodor Orontes 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 Bidaines. 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 Malta by Christian and Muslim forces. In fact, one should ask whether the Arabs had the necessary maritime forces to launch such an attack. Thus, can this text be considered as another dowel in the proof that Malta was inhabited at the end of the 10th century, Malta was Christian? Judging from what Al-‘Arif wrote, there was at least another instance during this period when Muslim factions in Sicily asked the Christians, whom Al-Ata’i 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. The fleet originated from Malta. It was Malta’s fleet.

It should be pointed out that at the turn of the 10th 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 place as a maritime nation was reached in the 13th century. However, 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 11th century. However, whether this was a Christian or a Muslim force can be a source of controversy and historical contention. As stated above, Ben Ghadhary fails 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 Muslims and the Zerdites. 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 desert land. In a nutshell, this text confirms beyond any doubt that Malta was inhabited at the turn of the 11th century and remained strategically important after 870.

The Malta Independent on Sunday

In 2013, Prof. Mathias Mallia was a combined attack on Malta by Christian and Muslim forces. In fact, one should ask whether the Arabs had the necessary maritime forces to launch such an attack. Thus, can this text be considered as another dowel in the proof that Malta was inhabited at the turn of the 10th century, Malta was Christian? Judging from what Al-‘Arif wrote, there was at least another instance during this period when Muslim factions in Sicily asked the Christians, whom Al-Ata’i 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. The fleet originated from Malta. It was Malta’s fleet.

It should be pointed out that at the turn of the 10th 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 place as a maritime nation was reached in the 13th century. However, 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 11th century. However, whether this was a Christian or a Muslim force can be a source of controversy and historical contention. As stated above, Ben Ghadhary fails 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 Muslims and the Zerdites. 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 desert land. In a nutshell, this text confirms beyond any doubt that Malta was inhabited at the turn of the 11th century and remained strategically important after 870.