

News

Christians in Arab Malta (5)

The Latin conquests started from Chris

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In our two previous contributions, we discussed both Ibn Al Athir's story about the reconquest of the fortress of Malta by the Byzantines in 982 and the attack on Drejba in 1039, and explained why these two stories are strongly inter-related. In this contribution, we wish to return to Al Athir's work to discuss another reference to Malta, which complements these two events.

Al Athir's world history, the *al-Kāmil fi t-tarikh*, was edited by Carl Tornberg and published in 14 volumes in Leiden (Holland) under the title of *Ibn al-Athir Chronicon quod perfectissimum inscribitur* between 1851 and 1876. Al Athir covered what he considered to be the history of the world up to the year 1231, and his chronicle became a historical canon for anyone wishing to write about the Arabs. The first part of this work covers up to AH 310 (AD 923) and is an abbreviation of the work of Tabari with minor additions. Ibn Athir also wrote a history of the Atabegs of Mosul *at-Tarikh al-atabakiya*, which was published in the *Recueil des historiens des croisades* (vol. ii, Paris). Other works by Al Athir are *Usd al-Ghdba*, which contains an account of 7,500 companions of the prophet Muhammad (5 vols, Cairo, 1863), and a compendium (the *Lubāb*) of Samani's *Kitāb ui-A n.-db* (cf. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld's *Specimen el-Lobabi*, Göttingen, 1835).

Despite the fact that Al Athir has been known for so long, and refers more than once to Malta, some of his references are never quoted in relation to our mediaeval history as they challenge the way the Arab history of Malta began being written from the 19th century onwards. The reason for this is partly due to the way Michele Amari interpreted Al Athir's text. Amari questioned Al Athir's historical chronology with respect to Malta, with the result that he has positively or negatively influenced subsequent historians.

In the process, a peculiar situation was created whereby Al Athir's world history, the *al-Kāmil fi t-tarikh*, is now considered one of the most important and reliable sources on the history of Sicily under Arab rule. What happened in Sicily between 800 and 1062 is normally taken from Al Athir's source, but one cannot say the same about the history of Malta.

In our opinion, this is due to two facts. First, Sicilian and European mediaevalists started to follow Amari's text as though it was sacred. The same cannot be said of Arab and Muslim historians, who had no problem questioning



Amari's text, particularly when he misread references to Malta. Secondly, Al Athir's works contradict Western sources when it comes to the history of the re-Christianisation of Sicily. For the Italians, the whole process started as a grand Western *Reconquista* which, in Sicily, was brought about by the Normans, who originated in France. Nineteenth century historians erroneously identified the beginning of this story with Al Athir's text. For Al Athir, this story had nothing to do with the reconquest of Sicily by the Normans. It only marked the end of the domination of the Kalbids' rule in Sicily. It was the western historians who interpreted this story as being the beginning of the end of the Arab period in Sicily. But to avoid linking these events, as Al Athir did with the city of Malta, Western historians fabricated a historical narrative that lacks historical credence.

It should be remembered that Amari was writing at the time of the Italian *Risorgimento*, when the South was conquered by the secular northern state of Piedmont. This conquest was viewed by historians at large, and by Amari in particular, as a war of liberation. Those historians who followed Amari blindly had every interest in supporting such a formulation of a historical narrative, in particular when these same historians



Given that Amari himself refers to Malta as *l'isola piccina*, it was inconceivable and unacceptable for a very small island to hold a higher political status than Sicily. This would have endangered the plans of Italian politicians, friends of Amari who wanted Malta to be part and parcel of the *risorgimento*, for they considered Malta a *terra irridenta*, but once united to Italy she was to be subjugated to the bigger island of Sicily



shared Amari's political agenda that the reconquest of Sicily was a European event. Stating that it all started in Malta would have demeaned such a grand historical narrative.

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This false historical narrative served the local situation well. The period of Arab Malta was kidnapped by our history of secularisation. Stating that Malta was Christian during Muslim rule would have given credence to the local Roman Church, which sustained the idea that Malta was Christian from the time of St Paul. Therefore, denying the true fact that Malta had a strong Christian community in the 11th century became a political expediency for those who had an interest in lessening the importance of Christianity in the history of our islands, because such a historical fact started to be seen as a stumbling block in the process of the secularisation of Malta. What Karl Popper

termed as 'the falsification of science' can be found applied and at work in the history of Arab Malta.

Yet, if proof is needed on how politicised this story became, it is to be found in Al Athir's text. Despite the fact that Al Athir felt it necessary to reaffirm the Byzantine conquest of Malta in 981 when he discussed the events that hit Sicily in 1052, Western historians still continue to refuse associating these events with Malta. On the other hand, the fact that Al Athir felt it necessary to make direct reference to this episode reconfirms that he was referring to the same place which, for 71 years, had been under Christian rule.

This time, Al Athir discussed how Malta became entangled in an internal feud over a woman that developed among the Arab rulers of Sicily at the turn of the 11th century. According to Al Athir, these events that he recounts happened in the year of the Hegira 444. Now, 1st Rajab AH 444 corresponds to Tuesday, 27 October 1052. In Metcalfe's opinion, this internal feud was the true reason for the Arabs' decline and their eventual loss of Sicily. The whole story began after one of the main Arab rulers in Sicily, Ben Al Thamna, found himself in serious trouble with his kinsmen. Like the previous articles, this reference is being translated into English by Frans X. Cassar.

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Al Athir's text is as follows: ern followers refused to recognize historiographical conundrums.

<p>Everyone retired to a region and banished Al Samsâm. Al</p>	<p>وانفرد كل إنسان ببلد، وأخرجوا</p>
<p>Qa: id Ghabd Allah Ben Mankûb retired in Mazara, Trapani and other places. Al Qa: id Ghali Ben Nighma, known as Ben Al Hawwâs in Enna and Girgent and other places and Al Qa: id Ibn Al Thamna retired to the city of Syracuse and Catania and married the sister of Ibn Al Hawwâs.</p> <p>Then an argument rose between her and her husband, both of them becoming vicious to each other. While he was drunk, Ben Al Thamna ordered that she be bled in her upper arms and left to die. His son Ibrahim heard of this and came to her rescue. He brought doctors who cured her until she regained her strength. When his father woke in the morning, he repented and apologized to her, blaming drunkenness. She appeared to accept his apology.</p>	<p>الصمصام، فانفرد القائد عبد الله بن منكوت بمازر وطراينش وغيرهما، وانفرد القائد علي بن نعمة، المعروف بابن الحواس، بقصريانة وجرجنت وغيرهما، وانفرد ابن الثمئة بمدينة سرقوسة، وقطانية، وتزوج بأخت ابن الحواس. ثم إنه جرى بينها وبين زوجها كلام فأغلظ كل منهما لصاحبه، وهو سكران، فأمر ابن الثمئة بفصدها في عضديها، وتركها لتموت، فسمع ولده إبراهيم، فحضر، وأحضر الأطباء، وعالجها إلى أن عادت قوتها، ولما أصبح أبوه ندم، واعتذر إليها بالسكر، فأظهرت قبول عذره.</p>
<p>Then, after a while, she asked him to retire with her brother and he allowed her, sending with her gifts and presents. When she arrived, she told her brother what he did to her and he swore not to return her to him. Ben Al Thamna requested her back but he did not return her to him. So Ben Al Thamna gathered his soldiers and conquered most of the island. He was informed about the town. He moved and besieged Ben Al Hawwâs at Enna who came out and fought him. Ben Al Thamna was defeated. He followed him to the nearby town of Catania, and returned after killing most of his companions. When Ben Al Thamna saw that most of his armies had been cut down, he let himself to be seduced by asking assistance from the unbelievers unwanted by Allah Almighty. He moved to the town of Malta, which had been in the hands of the Franks, when Barduwil the Frank, mentioned earlier for the year three hundred seventy two¹, and occupied it since. At the time, its king was Roger the Frank among a group of Franks. Ben Al Thamna came to them. He said: 'I will give you possession of the island!' They said: 'There are many soldiers in it and we do not have the power to face them.' He said to them: 'they quarrel between themselves and most of them listen to me and do not oppose my command.' They moved with him in Rajab of the year four hundred forty four.² They did not meet any resistance and took everything on their way. He drove them to Enna and besieged it. Ben Al Hawwâs came out to face them and fought them. The Franks defeated him and he returned to the castle. They went away from him and moved into the island, occupying many regions.</p>	<p>ثم إنها طلبت منه بعد مدة أن تزو أخاها، فأذن لها، وسير معها التحف والهدايا، فلما وصلت ذكرت لأخيها ما فعل بها، فحلف أنه لا يعيدها إليه، فأرسل ابن الثمئة يطلبها، فلم يردها إليه، فجمع ابن الثمئة عسكره، وكان قد استولى على أكثر الجزيرة، وخطب له بالمدينة، وسار، وحاصر ابن الحواس بقصريانة، فخرج إليه فقاتله، فانهزم ابن الثمئة، وتبعه إلى قرب مدينة قطانية، وعاد عنه بعد أن قتل من أصحابه فأكثر. فلما رأى ابن الثمئة أن عساكره قد تمزقت، سولت له نفسه الانتصار بالكفار لما يريد الله تعالى، فسار إلى مدينة مالطة، وهي بيد الفرنج قد ملكوها لما خرج بردويل الفرنجي الذي تقدم ذكره سنة اثنتين وسبعين وثلاث مائة، واستوطنها الفرنج إلى الآن، وكان ملكها حينئذ رجار الفرنجي في جمع من الفرنج، فوصل إليهم ابن الثمئة وقال: أنا أملكم الجزيرة! فقالوا: إن فيها جنداً كثيراً، ولا طاقة لنا بهم، فقال: إنهم مختلفون، وأكثرهم يسمع قولي، ولا يخالفون أمري. فساروا معه في رجب سنة أربع وأربعين وأربعمائة، فلم يلقوا من يدافعهم، فاستولوا على ما مروا به في طريقهم، وقصد بهم إلى قصرية فحاصروها، فخرج إليهم ابن الحواس، فقاتلهم، فبزمه الفرنج، فرجع إلى الحصن، فرحلوا عنه، وساروا في الجزيرة، واستولوا على مواضع كثيرة.</p>
<p>Many of its inhabitants, among them scholars and righteous people, left. Groups of inhabitants of Sicily went to Al Mughiz Ben Bâdis and mentioned to him the disarray of the people in the island and the conquest of most of it by the Franks. So he set up a large fleet and armed it with numerous men and equipment. It was wintertime. They sailed on to Pantelleria and the sea hit them, drowning most of them, with only a few surviving. The departure of this fleet weakened Al Mughiz and the Arabs rose</p>	<p>وفارقها كثير من أهلها من العلماء والصالحين، وسار جماعة من أهل صقلية إلى المعز بن باديس، وذكروا له ما الناس فيه بالجزيرة من الخلف، وغلبة الفرنج على كثير منها، فعمر أسطولاً كبيراً، وشحنه بالرجال والعدد، وكان الزمان شتاء، فساروا إلى قوصرة، فهاج عليهم البحر، ففرق أكثرهم، ولم</p>
<p>against him, taking the country away from him. In the meantime, the Franks took over the country bit by bit with nobody preventing them. The lord of Africa was occupied by what caught him unaware by the Arabs. Al Mughiz died in the year four hundred fifty three³. His son Tamim took over and he too sent a fleet and soldiers to the island, headed by his two sons Uyub and Ghali. They arrived in Sicily. Uyub and the soldiers descended on the town and Ghali descended on Girgent. Then Uyub moved to Girgent, ordered Ghali Ben Al Hawwas⁴ to come to his castle, and sent many gifts.</p>	<p>ينح إلا القليل. وكان ذهاب هذا الأسطول مما أضعف المعز، وقوى عليه العرب، حتى أخذوا البلاد منه. فملك حينئذ الفرنج أكثر البلاد على مهل وتؤدة، لا يمنعه أحد، واشتغل صاحب إفريقيا بما دهمه من العرب، ومات المعز سنة ثلاث وخمسين وأربعمائة، وولي ابنه تميم، فبعث أيضاً أسطولاً وعسكراً إلى الجزيرة، وقدم عليه ولديه أيوب وعلياً، فوصلوا لى صقلية، فنزل أيوب والعسكر المدينة، ونزل علي جرجنت، ثم انتقل أيوب إلى جرجنت، فأمر علي بن الحواس أن ينزل في قصره، وأرسل هدية كثيرة.</p>

Instead, they say that Al Athir's narrative is slightly exaggerated and his dating a bit problematic. It should be pointed out that Al Athir is normally considered reliable when it comes to dates. This is one of the instances, when, because his narrative contradicts the western line of historic thought, his timeline is considered erroneous by Western scholars.

Some Western scholars went as far as to argue that, perhaps, Al Athir exaggerated the Christian presence in this place which he called Malta, for the simple reason that Mileto of the mid-11th century did not have a big Christian community capable of going to the aid of one of the Arab factions of Sicily.

Metcalfe refers to this passage in his book *Muslim and Christians in Norman Sicily*. He narrates this event from Al Athir's perspective but refrains from making reference in his text to the land from which these Christians came, that is, the town of Malta. Metcalfe thinks that Al Athir's story is a "presumably fictionalised historical set piece". He describes the situation as one of civil war, which was turned into a Christian reconquest "when Ibn al-Thamna approached a 'group of Franks' and is depicted in a direct conversation with them" (p. 26). But, later on, in his historical narrative, he accepts the alliances that the Muslim Sicilian leaders made with Christians as historically possible, showing "that the invasion was unlikely to have been driven by religious factors alone, in spite of the implications to the contrary made by both Muslim and Latin historiographers" (p. 32).

Yet Arab historiography agrees that Malta was strong enough in that period, and capable of sending forces to intervene abroad. At least, this was the view of Al Marakeshi, who had written about the armies of Malta attacking and killing most of the inhabitants of Djerba 11 years before. There are other Arab chroniclers who held the same view but these will be dealt with in a separate study. Therefore, the Malta that these Arab chroniclers wrote about had the required population capacity to engage in foreign battles.

The only strong argument produced in support of the fact that the Malta of Al Athir stands for Mileto in Calabria is that Roger's chronicler, Malaterra spoke about an encounter between the Count and Al Thamna. But contemporary historians are now dating this encounter to 10 years after the narrated event by Al Athir, that is, in 1062. But Al Athir does not exclude this encounter. He also speaks about it in another part of his text. In fact, Al Athir explains the efforts made by the Arabs, in particular, the lord of Africa, Al Mughiz and his son to regain Sicily. Al Athir specified that "the lord of Africa was stricken by what had been caused by the Arabs and died of a broken heart in the year four hundred fifty three". Now, the year of the Hegira 453 began on Sunday 26 January 1061. Therefore, it seems clear that Al Athir and Malaterra are discussing two separate events. Al Athir himself acknowledges that this period of tension within the Arab world extended to 1061, the period, which according to Malaterra, marks the encounter between Roger and Al Thamna in Mileto.

Al Athir did not express any ambivalence in the way he wrote the place name Malta. Malta is written in the conventional form that the Arabs started to use to refer to our island. Malta is now written with an alif. Unlike Latin, the Arabs had only one place known as Malta written in this format. Yet, despite this fact, all Amari's West-

the town of Malta to stand for Mdina and started to associate the toponym with the Calabria city of Mileto. Identifying the toponym Malta with Mileto made it easy for Amari to speak in terms of a conquest that started out from Calabria and the European mainland. In itself, this association with Calabria has created a number of

The first problem is linked to the actual date of the event. Count Roger and the Franks were not in Mileto in the year 1052, which is the year when Al Thamna fought with his kinsmen. Count Roger was still in France at the time. Therefore, to explain this shortcoming, western historians did not admit that Amari was mistaken.

In the next study, we shall start discussing these texts and explain how different Arab authors in mediaeval times narrated this story about a strong Christian community in the town of Malta.