

## Debate & Analysis

# Christians in Arab Malta



**Simon Mercieca**

The recent demise of Professor Godfrey Wettinger has resuscitated the debate about Christianity in Arab Malta. Ironically, two days before his demise, the Archaeology Society of Malta brought over Professor Jeremy Jones from Oxford, who gave an interesting lecture about two texts; the donation of Constance, and the poem published by Horatio Vella, Stanley Fiorini and Joseph Busuttill. His visit was sponsored by APS Bank.

Professor Jones' lecture was publicized as an overview of Malta's high Middle Ages spanning from the 7th to the 13th centuries and focused on these two particular documents. The first was the Latin-Arabic document for Malta and Gozo of Queen Constance, dated November 1198. The Latin part of this document was published in the 18th century. The original document in the meantime went missing. Professor Jones found the original document among the papers of the Moncada family in Sicily. The original parchment consists of two parts: on the left there is the Latin text and on the right the Arabic one. Professor Jones showed that the 18th century Latin publication was correct. It had no mistakes. Therefore, in the 18th century, scholars were doing a brilliant job and publishing correct information. The Arabic text was not published, most probably because there were no Arabic print letters at the time. They were invented in Malta around 100 years later. Yet the discovery of the original document did not add anything to the knowledge that we already have about it. The Arabic script is a faithful translation of the Latin text. The only interesting thing is that the Arabic text was written by a certain Baulus, that is, Paulus. He was definitely Christian. I don't think he was a Muslim convert of North Africa, as in all probability he would have signed his name in Latin. I think that he was a native Arab. But North African Arabs do not use Paulus as a name. This holds for both Christian Arabs (or Berbers) and Muslims. There were still Arab Christians in North Africa till the 15th century. The other possibility is that he was an Oriental Christian. Baulus was a common name among the Christians of Syria.

Then, there is the next document, which was discussed by Professor Jones. This is the poem *Tristea et Melitogaudo*. I agree with Professor Jones about the Greek translation, which leaves much to be desired. In fact, I personally remember discussing it with Fr Joseph Busuttill and he was not at all happy with this version. Now, it is up to Greek Byzantine scholars to establish the truth about this translation.

In the new translation, Professor Jones said that the poem speaks about George of Antioch establishing a Christian colony in Malta. I beg to differ with Professor Jones' claim that this was the FIRST Christian colony. It was a Christian colony but not the first one. He said that in this poem, the poet speaks about the Trinitarian God. He took this to mean an indirect reference to the Muslims who according to him believed in God but not in a Trinitarian one. By this time, both sides were labelling each other as unbelievers or infidels. There-

fore, it is right to conclude that such a reference was not in relation to the Muslim infidel but to the presence of Christians in Malta who did not believe in a Trinitarian God. This claim could appear as a God sent to those who want to sustain the claim that Malta remained Christian in Arab times. By the 13th century, the mainstream Christians believed in a Trinitarian God but there were pockets of Christians who continued to reject this theological position. These communities normally predated the Council of Chalcedon of 451. This can be seen as a proof that there was a Christian community in Malta dating to the time of St Paul. However, I still believe that there was a population rupture in 870, even if the Arabic documents recounting the events of the fall of Malta in 870 are a little bit confusing.

Definitely, in Malta, there was a community of Christians who did not accept the Council of Chalcedon and this line in the poem is a direct reference to them. In simple words, we have colonies of Christians from the East mov-

ing towards the West in the 10th and 11th centuries. This explains why a number of Arabic scholars such as Al-Shidyaq or Arsalan and the German scholar Hans Stumme identified Maltese with the Arab dialect of Syria. I will expand on this later on in the study. This interests me due to my demographic study and my research on the movement of people in the High Middle Ages and how this affected Malta.

My last word goes to the term Saracen. The islanders are called Saracens among others by Bishop Burchard of Strasbourg. In 1175, Burchard wrote that Malta was inhabited exclusively by Saracens. This was always taken to mean Muslims. Professor Jones and all those who support the total annihilation of Christianity from Malta love to define Saracens as Muslims. But Saracens does not mean only Muslims. In truth it means Oriental Arabs, in particular, the people of Syria. In fact, the term Saracen is found used in Sicily for both Christians and Jews. For those who do not agree with me, they have to check with serious English dic-

tionaries. They all agree that this word 'Saracen' was in use at the time of the Crusades and it is a direct reference to the people living in the Levant, mostly Arabs but not only. According to the *English Oxford Dictionary*, Saracen is the general name among later Greeks and Romans for a nomad of the Syrian-Arabian desert; Arab or Muslim at the time of the Crusades. The *Webster Dictionary* suggests that this word is derived from the Arabic language. According to my friend and eminent expert of Arabic, Frans X. Cassar, the people of the Crusades were most probably referring to the people of the Levant as Semite families. In Classical Arabic, the term Semite families is 'Usar al xam' and in pronouncing it, it is similar to 'saraxemi'.

Therefore, what George of Antioch wanted was to settle a colony of Christians in Malta who believed in a Trinitarian God to counter the majority of Christians living in Malta who did not believe in the Holy Trinity. Incidentally, many of the Christians of the Levant, in particular large communities in Syria, did not believe in a Trinitarian God.

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