

Editorial: Byzantine Gozo

A large part of our history seems to have gone blank from the public gaze. We seem to have forgotten almost completely that Malta was under the rule of the Greeks from Constantinople for nearly four centuries (from 535 - 870), a stretch of time longer than under any other power since the Roman empire.

Recent research, summarised by Prof Stanley Fiorini in a recently published monograph (*The Gozo Cathedral: Its History and Treasures*, 2017, edited by Joseph Bezzina), features new findings which highlights Gozo's Greek-oriented historical experience.

While the history of Gozo mirrors and runs parallel to that of the sister island, there have been several instances where this was not the case, evidence which comes out clearly from this study which could explain why orthodox influences were stronger and more lasting in Gozo compared to Malta.

Older research has given the impression that the Arab invasion all but destroyed the Byzantine influence, with decimation of the population of Malta, which has been described as being 'uninhabited' for several years. While in Malta, the Arabs found considerable resistance from the 3000 odd Byzantine troops stationed there, and while the resulting destruction was brutal, this was not the case in Gozo, where there was no resistance and the Arabs seem to have been more lenient. The result was that Christianity (of the Greek orthodox type) survived better, and persisted for longer. In a survey carried out in 1241, 55% of Gozitans were Christians, compared to only 41% in Malta.

Not surprisingly, the Citadel in Gozo was occupied by Byzantines. Recent important evidence relating to Byzantine domination have been found from excavations in the cathedral square. Among these finds were lead seals belonging to a Greek 'acron' (chief), which also attest to this influence.

We also find several churches and chapels in Gozo named after saints which were particularly

venerated by Greeks. These include not only St George, (a Roman soldier of Greek background), but also St Dimitri, St Aristarchus (at San Dimitri Chapel), St Anton Abbot, Sta Dominca, and also the chapel in Comino, which was originally dedicated to the Return of the Holy Family from Egypt, a typical Greek theme not commonly seen in Latin churches.

We also find place-names like 'Ta San Cer' (St Cyraicus) in Għarb, Sta Dominca and Sta Verna which reflect Greek influence.

Evidence also shows that not only did Gozo have its own bishop, but a list of precedence, published in Fiorini's article shows this order of precedence: Syracusae (1)... Gaudos (15), Melita (16).

Surnames of Greek origin, e.g., Anastasi, Apap, Calleya, Callus, Camenzuli, Cumbo, Cuschieri, Grech, Grixti, Piscopo, Mallia and Schembri certainly attest to the lasting presence of Greek in the islands.

Perhaps some tweaking of history teaching could help correct our complete ignorance of certain pages of our history and fill the gaps with the results from more recent research, to give a more complete and holistic picture of our past.

These days, when it has become so easy, and relatively cheap, to determine one's genetic make-up through DNA analysis, it would be of interest to see what genetic contribution our rulers have left on us. The analysis of surnames would suggest that this has been determined primarily by those who left hard evidence, like monuments, in stone. Genetic research carried out at the University of Malta in conjunction with overseas workers indicate that our main genetic background comes from Southern Italy, which itself was under Byzantine Greek domination when Malta was. We look forward to more extensive delineation of Gozitan genetic background.

Maurice Cauchi