

MALTESE HARBOURS IN ANTIQUITY

by

Joseph Busuttil, B.A., Lic.D., Ph.D. (Lond.).

The Maltese islands, lying as they do in the central part of the Mediterranean, have always attracted the attention of the leading maritime powers. The Phoenicians or Carthaginians, the Romans of the West and of the East, the Arabs and the Normans, have all in turn coveted and occupied the islands of Malta and Gozo. For who controls these islands can also control the sea lanes leading to and from the central part of the Mediterranean. Lying just less than sixty miles away from Sicily and about one hundred and twenty miles away from Africa, they have always been on the trade and sea-routes linking Africa with Europe. This was more obvious in antiquity when navigation was slower and when the skipper was forced "to hug the shores, creeping round the coasts" (1).

The two islands are blessed with excellent harbours, some of which are perhaps the best in the Mediterranean (2). This was realized in antiquity and Diodorus Siculus in a passage culled, it seems, from Timaeus (325-260 B.C.) (3), dwells fairly long on the harbours of Malta and Gozo (4). Skylax, writing in about 350 B.C. calls Malta a 'harbour' (5). In the sixth century A.D. Malta is called by Arator a *statio* — a place of call for ships (6). Reference to the harbours of Malta and Gozo are found in Arabic authors (7).

Diodorus Siculus writes that the Maltese and Gozitan harbours are suited to give shelter to ships which spend the winter there (8); and that the Phoenicians or Carthaginians used Malta as a place of refuge (9). In Cicero's time the pirates used to spend the winter in Malta almost every year (10). A ship from Alexandria was wintering in Malta when St. Paul was shipwrecked there; and St. Paul himself had to spend three

1. Cf H. A. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient World*, London, 1924, p. 15; G. Picard, *Carthage*, London, 1964, p. 15.

2. Cf Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography*, London 1949, p. 68

3. Cf J. Geffcken, *Timaios' Geographie des Westens*, Berlin 1982; F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, Vol. IIIA, Leiden 1950; I. Scaturro, *Storia di Sicilia*, Raggio 1950, Vol. II, p. 233; T. S. Brown, *Timaeus of Tauromenium*, Univ. of California, 1958, pp. 41-43.

4. Cf V, 12, 1-4.

5. Cf C. Muller, *Geographi Graeci minores*, Hildesheim, 1965, Vol. 1, Skylax III.

6. Cf *De Actibus Apostolorum*, McKinsley, Vinidobiana, 1951

7. Cf M. Amari, *Biblioteca arabo-sicula*, Torino e Roma, 1880, p. 254.

8. Cf V, 12, 1.

9. Cf V, 12, 2.

10. Cf *In Verrem*, 2, 4, 104.

months in Malta before proceeding to Rome (11). In antiquity navigation started in Spring (12) and ended in October: which means that ships stopped at the islands for about six months. The fact that the islands served as winter-quarters for mariners has left a mark on the local toponymy. *Marsamxett* with its calm waters was used as a wintering place as the word *mxett* suggests (13).

Ships reached Malta from several parts of the Mediterranean. The sea-distances in nautical books which had been copied by geographers and historians help us to reconstruct the common trade-routes to and from Malta (14). Diodorus, reechoing Timaeus, writes that the distance from Malta to Syracuse is about 800 *stadia* (15). This suggests that since Timaeus's times there had been a regular service linking Malta with Syracuse (16). When St. Paul left Malta he landed in Syracuse (17). In 533 A.D. Belisarius and his men sailed to Malta from a harbour not far from Syracuse (18). Another sea-route seems to have been Malta-Camarina. Strabo, quoting from a Latin *portolano*, says that Malta is 88 miles away from Camarina (19); and Pliny asserts that Malta is 87 miles distant from the same place (20). Similarly M. Capella, writing in about the fourth century, states that the island is about 80 miles distant from Camarina in Sicily (21). The Arabic geographer Edrisi writes that ships from Malta reach Scicli in Sicily, which is not far from Camarina (22). Both Pliny and M. Capella give distances from Malta to Lilybaeum (Marsala), which suggests a third sea-route to Sicily (23). It was from Lilybaeum that T. Sempronius Longus sailed to occupy Malta in 218 B.C. (24). Strabo mentions also the distance from Malta to Cossura (Pantelleria) (25).

11. Cf *Acts*, 28, 11.

12. Cf Pliny, N.H., 11, 22; Vegetius, IV, 29.

13. Cf P. P. Saydon, *Die Ortsnamen der Maltesischen Inseln*, Napoli, 1967.

14. Cf G.M. Columbia, *I porti d'Italia*, Roma MCMVI, p. 238-239.

15. Cf V, 12, 2. An Attic *stadion* is equivalent to 177.6 metres; an Alexandrian *stadion* is about 184.85 metres.

16. Cf Augusto Zeri, *I porti delle isole del gruppo di Malta*, Roma MCMVI, p. 261.

17. Cf *Acts*, 28, 12.

18. Cf Procopius, B. V. 1, 14, 16.

19. Cf VI, 277. A Roman *milion* corresponded to eight and a half Attic *stadia*.

20. Cf N. H. III, 8, 92: Insulae ad Africam versae Gaulos, Melita a Camarina LXXXVII, a Lilybaeo CXIII.

21. Cf *De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae*, VI. 648: Melita a Camarina in milibus octoginta a Lilybaeo in centum tredecim.

22. Cf Idrisi, *Il libro di Ruggero*, tradotto e annotato da Umberto Rizzitano, Palermo, 1966, p. 45.

23. Cf notes 20 and 21.

24. Cf Livy, XXI, 51: A Lilybaeo consul . . . in insulam Melitam . . . traiecit.

25. Cf XVII, 8, 34. Cf also Edrisi, op.cit p. 29: Cento miglia a levante di Pantelleria l'isola di Gozzo, che ha un porto anch'esso sicuro.

In Roman times, therefore, and before, it would seem that Malta and Gozo were connected by sea-routes with the Sicilian harbours of Syracuse, Camarina and Lilybaeum and with the island of Cossura. The same sea-routes lasted till Arabic times. Though no distances are given from Africa, still ships coming from Africa and stopping at Malta must have been numerous. Malta seems to have been a station for the heavy cargo vessels carrying corn from Egypt to Pozzuoli in Italy (26). The Alexandrian vessel which was wintering in Malta when St. Paul was shipwrecked there may have been one of the corn ships. The *Itinerarium Antonianum* mentions Malta as a station for ships going to Africa from Italy (27). The pseudo-Acts of the Apostles Peter and Paul implies that Malta served as a place of call for ships voyaging to Africa (28) Belisarius called at Malta before proceeding to Libya (29). In Byzantine times Malta was connected by a sea-route with Byzantium. Artabanus was shipwrecked on the island (30). The Byzantine coins found in Malta confirm the ties between Constantinople and Malta. The word *Skala* in the sense of wharf or pier has been retained in the toponym *marsaskala*. The words *marsa* with its compounds *marsaxlokk*, *marsalforn*, *marsamxett*, *marsaskala*, and the word *mġarr* suggest that the corresponding harbours were used by the Arabs.

In wartime the harbours of the islands served to give shelter to the navies of the different powers who held sway over them. Cicero informs us that the Carthaginians made use of the harbours in the two Punic Wars (31). In Byzantine times Malta was under a naval officer of the Byzantine navy — the *drungarius* — who had a small flotilla at his disposal (32). In Arabic times Muslim fleets left Malta to attack the Italian cities of the south (33).

In the course of time different kinds of ships visited the island and left their mark on the local toponymy. *Għar il-Lembi* may have been a sort of hideout for the small *lembi* which the pirates used. *Xlendi* in Gozo seems to have been used as a haven for the long Byzantine *chelandia*. *Lforn* compounded with *Marsa* could have been named after the Illyrian type of ship, the *Liburna*. *Ix-Xwejni* in Gozo and *Ras ix-Xini* in Malta are connected with Arabic ships.

26. Cf Lucian, *The Ship*, 9.

27. Cf O. Cuntz, *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti*, Leipzig, 1929, 518.

28. Cf R. Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, Hildesheim, 1959, Vol. 1, p. 178.

29. Cf note 18.

30. Cf Procopius, B. G. 111, 40, 17.

31. Cf *In Verrem*, 11, 4, 103.

32. Cf G. Schlumberger, *Revue des Etudes Grecques*, XIII (1900), p. 492.

33. Cf P. Francesco Russo, *Storia della Archidiocesi di Reggio Calabria*, Napoli, 1961, Vol. III, p. 59.