

THE ARAB CONQUEST

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THE Arab history of Malta is usually treated in general surveys of Maltese history as a Dark Age. Data for this early medieval period are less than fulsome, and there survives no indigenous Chronicle; but Byzantine and Arab sources permit a coherent analysis of the events surrounding Malta's transition to Islam in 870. In fact the real Dark Age is the period of clearcut Arab sovereignty, from 870 to 1901, for which we have very little evidence indeed. Curiously, what are usually termed the Norman and Swabian periods yield more evidence of Muslim Malta than the explicitly Arab period.

Marçais¹ informs us that the North African coasts were heavily fortified in the early 9th. Century: using Ibn al-Athīr, he documents a reciprocal Byzantine energy in defence of Sicily.² There were many Arab raids on Sicily before she was deliberately assaulted in 827, and those which tarried too long came to grief.³ Malta cannot have passed unscathed, but we do not hear of her during the raiding period, so she was probably tolerably well defended against casual pillage at least.

In 827 the Byzantine governor of Sicily, Euphemios,⁵ sought

¹MARÇAIS G. 'Note sur les Ribāts en Bérberie' *Mélanges d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de l'Occident musulman* I pp. 23-36, Algiers, 1957.

²From Ibn al-Athīr. See MARÇAIS G. *La Bérberie musulmane et l'Orient au Moyen-Age*, Aubier, Paris, 1946. pp. 64-65.

³Closely detailed by TALBĪ M. in pp. 386-8 of *L'Emirat aghlabide 184-296AH/800-909*, Adrien Maisonneuve, Paris, 1946. The only modern source which seriously attempts to update Amari.

⁴IBN al-ATHĪR 'Kitāb al-Kāmil fi't Tarīḥ' trans. FAGNAN E. 'Annales du Maghreb et de l'Espagne', Jourdan, Alger, 1898, p. 188. [Kamil]

⁵GABOTTO F. *Euphemio - il Movimento separatista nella Italia bizantina* Rasegna siciliana, Palermo, 2 Ser. 3-4, 1898, paints Euphemios as the earliest Sicilian nationalist. More soberly, BURY JB. 'The naval Policy of the Roman Empire in Relation to the Western Province from the 7th. to the 9th. Century', p 21 sqq. in *Centenario della Nascita de Michele Ama*

help from Ifriqīya in a revolt against Constantinople. After some hesitation, Ziyādat Allah, Emir of Ifriqīya, despatched a force of 10,000 and 700 cavalry in a fleet of 100 keels to Sicily,⁶ so initiating an eighty year long campaign which led, inter alia, to Arab conquest in Malta.

From 827 onward the Byzantine grasp on Sicily gradually slackened. Amari⁷ records endless reversals of fortune, treacheries, and pestilences; innumerable internecine squabbles between Muslims from Spain, Ifriqīya, and Crete; but until the intervention of Basil II, 'the Bulgar Slayer', in Western affairs in 867-8, the Empire's position in Sicily, and thus in Malta, became progressively more difficult. Basil II's ruthless energy came just in time to save Western Greece, too late for Sicily or Malta.

We have abundant proof that Malta, was both Byzantine and Christian in the early 9th. Century. Papal letters place her firmly within the Province of Sicily from 589⁸ and the itineraries collected by Parthey confirm them.⁹ Malta is presented last, or last but one, of the Sicilian dioceses. We also have the Greek inscription of one Domestikos,¹⁰ recorded by Cianfar and discussed by Cassar. The indiction marks seem to support a dating of 810, but the stone is lost. The appellation is probably a Christian name rather than a rank.

ri II, Virzi, Palermo, 1910 describes the Governor as an opportunist. Although the Arab sources play down Euphemios' role in assuring a safe landing, the complaisance of his fleet was plainly an important factor.

⁶ IBN al-ATHĪR p. 188. NUWAYRĪ 'Nihāya' Appx. to *Kitāb al-Ībar* tr. CASANOVA. I 412 confirms 10,000 men. IBN ADHĀRI *Bayān l-Moghrib* tr. FAGNAN I 128 writes of 70 ships and 700 cavalry.

⁷ AMARI M. *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* 2nd. Ed. NALLINO CA. Prampolini, Catania, 1933. [Storia] After more than a century still the masterwork on Muslim Sicily; Amari conscientiously isolated references to Malta, but they are few and plainly secondary. At least once Amari commits the classic howler of confusing Malta with Mljet (Vol I 115)

⁸ Greg. I Epist. I 30: XIII 22.

⁹ PARTHEY G. *Hieroclis Syndecmus et Notitiae Graecae Episcopatum* Berlin, 1866. See BORSARI S. 'L'Amministrazione del Tema di Sicilia' in *Rivista Storica Italiana* 66, 1954.

¹⁰ CIANFAR *Malta Illustrata* Vol. II Not. IV 22, Malta, 1772, and CASSAR P. *Medical History of Malta*, Wellcome NS Vol. VI, 1965. For no obvious reason, Cassar takes Domestikos to be a medical Doctor.

The solitary known seal for Malta is far more eloquent. It is that of Nikita, Drungar and Archon of Malta, and was first published by Schlumberger:¹¹ Mme. Ahweiler¹² dates it to the 9th. century. The precise function of the two ranks within the Byzantine hieratic system is much debated. 'Drungar' in a provincial fleet is described by the Emperor Leo VI in the *Naumachika*;¹³ it betokens the command of fighting ships, and although the size of thematic fleets is still rather conjectural, the likeliest span of command for a Drungar seems, from the *Naumachika*, to be about 3 to 5 ships – probably the galley with a single crew called *oussiakon* or *oussiakon-celandion*. It had a crew of just over a hundred, of which the 'rowers of the upper deck' provided the main fighting force, although they were at times supplemented by an embarked marine garrison of 'Mardaites'. Eickhoff¹⁴ offers a good impression of such a galley; it has a sail and is equipped to throw Greek fire through a 'siphon'. The 'de Ceremoniis' of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos¹⁵ makes it crystal clear that the crew were all free men.

Archon is a more elusive title; it undoubtedly refers to territorial appointments, but Archons range widely in status. Mme. Ahweiler sees them as no more than customs officers, yet the *Naumachika* ascribes to them seagoing command; so does the *Taktikon Uspenskij*;¹⁶ two other Drungar-Archons are known, in Crete and the Crimea. The safest reading is that Nikita was both the Governor and Senior Naval Officer in Malta, with command of a small flo-

¹¹ SCHLUMBERGER G. 'Sceaux byzantins inédits' IV^e Série in *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 13 (1900)... 'ce rarissime petit monument', the author calls it.

¹² AHRWEILER Mme. H. *Etudes sur les Structures administratives et sociales de Byzance* Variorum, London, 1971, II 245 n.

¹³ AHRWEILER Mme. H. *Byzance et la Mer* Presses universitaires, Paris, 1966 p. 68. KULAKOVSKIJ J. 'Drung i Drungarii' in *Vizantiskij Vremeni* IX 1-31 1902, and FERLUGA J. 'Nize vojno-administrativne jedinice tematskog medjenja,' in *Zbornik Radova Vizantoloski Institut* 2, Belgrade 1953, also repay attention.

¹⁴ EICKHOFF E. *Seekrieg und Seepolitik zwischen Islam und Abendland*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 1966, frontis.

¹⁵ ZEPOS *Ius Graecorum* I 222-223. YA'KŪBI *Kitāb al-Buldān* trans. WIET G, *Les Pays*, Cairo, 1937, p. 168, confirms it.

¹⁶ USPENSKIJ p. 123 in Vol III of *Izvestia russkovo Instituta v Konstantinople*.

tilla detached or forcibly separated from the vanishing theme of Sicily.

There is plenty of evidence in Amari and elsewhere of small scale naval encounters in Sicilian waters as the conquest slowly gained ground. Perhaps the most interesting is that of April 858, for it is recorded by a variety of sources:¹⁷ we read of a running battle in which the Arabs, at first victorious, eventually lost 20 keels, and the Byzantines, who seem to have been reinforced during the fight, lost twelve. Amari puts the Byzantine strength at 40 ships, which is very large for a thematic force, particularly because there is no confusion about embarked troops. There was work here, perhaps, for Nikita? He may equally well have acquired his fleet after the disastrous Kondomytès expedition of 859, when 100 of 300 *chelandia* were lost. No doubt the numbers are exaggerated, but after 859 the naval balance seems to have inclined toward Islām, and it is hard to see how the Sicilian thematic fleet can have survived such a defeat as a discrete force.

It would appear then that the delicate balance of naval power favoured the Arabs from about 860. Before this date there was an engagement which may have tested Malta's defences. According to Ibn al-Athīr, in 835;

'A fleet was sent against the islands; having made a rich haul and having vanquished many towns and fortresses, it returned safe and sound.'

There follows a difficult reference to M. Dnār which Amari associates with Tindari, and the 'islands' with the Lipari, on data, which in Talbī's submission 'ne réposent évidemment sur une démonstration documentaire décisive. Il s'agit de suppositions basées sur des considérations géographiques ou des rapprochements plus ou moins convenients'.¹⁹

The Encyclopaedia of Islam invites us to believe that this raid marked the beginning of Muslim rule in Malta, which is patently absurd, for Ibn al-Athīr plainly speaks of nothing but a raid – the

¹⁷ Bayān I 145, *Storia* I 464-5; *Chronicle of Cambridge* 6366; *Vasiliev* I 219-220

¹⁸ VASILIEV AA. *Byzance et les Arabes*, Brussels, 1935, I 300.

¹⁹ *Kāmil* 191-193; Amari I 438; Talbi 440.

fleet 'returned safe and sound'.²⁰

Talbī has probed this raid more deeply than Amari and found that Ibn al-Aṭḥīr's dates may be shaky; he records the partial destruction of an Arab fleet near Pantelleria in 835, by tempest, having taken a Byzantine Ḥarraqa.

Talbī places the attack in 222/837²¹ and quotes Ibn Adhāri to the effect that the African fleet took 'neuf gros navires, avec tous les hommes à bord, ainsi qu'un chelandium (shalāndas)'. Ibn al-Aṭḥīr's fleet was led by al-Fadl b. Ya'qūb, a Sicilian luminary, so it is possible that two fleets were involved. It is equally plain that the Byzantine navies were still active in the West. An attack on Malta is possible – even probable – at this time: but there is nothing to support the notion of conquest.

Curiously, the renowned Maltese forger Vella,²² whose dates, facts, and figures are notoriously unreliable, also writes with a plethora of fanciful detail about two Arab attacks on Malta in 833 and 836. Where Vella's 'facts' tally with an accredited source they are worth investigation. He says that the Arabs took Gozo in 833, were well received, and left after a few weeks, and returned again in 836 to a similar reaction, only to be ejected again by Byzantine arms. There may be something in it.

For the next three decades we hear nothing of Malta, the excellent reason that the focus of attention had shifted to the Straits of Otranto, an area of primordial importance to Byzantium, since the important Venetian trade flowed through it. The Arabs took Bari in ca, 841, and its captor felt strong enough to style himself Sultān, and in that dignity sent ambassadors to Cairo in 861 and 863.²³

²⁰ Art. 'Malta' by Rossi E. in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd. Ed., Leijden and London Vol III, 1936.

²¹ *Bayan* I 106; Talbī 440.

²² VELLA *Codice Arabo-Siculo* I/1 415, 419; I/2 130-133. Ibn al-Aṭḥīr, Ibn Kḥaldūn, and Nuwayrī all owe much to the Zīrīd Secretary of State al-Raqqiq, whose work seems to have disappeared fairly recently. Perhaps Vella pillaged it? The existence of a Sicilian Chronicle has also been posited, and although we must ascribe to Vella a high talent for forgery, it is very plain that he falsified from a basis of knowledge.

²³ HİTTI PK. *History of the Arabs* Macmillan, p. 605. *Storia* op. cit. I 499n.

More dangerous still, they beseiged Ragusa (Dubrovnik) for 15 months in 867/8, and were only worsted by the most vigorous exertions of Basil II and his Admiral Nicetas 'Ooryphas; Bury assures us that the Byzantine fleet was 400 strong. On the evidence of the Porphyrogenitos,²⁴ the Imperial fleet in the 10th. century numbered 100 keels, to which 77 more warships from the three thematic fleets of the Aegean might be added (Kibbyrrhaeotoi, Samos, and Aegean): the naval service was better found in the 10th. century than the 9th., and even allowing for 100% exaggeration, 'Ooryphas' fleet must have scraped every provincial barrel clean; there was no strength to spare for the west. Yet Byzantium 'in extremis' struggled through – she was to do so for a further six centuries – and in 870, when we next read of Malta, we again hear of a Byzantine fleet. This time it failed. Ibn al-Khaldūn offers a very curt account of Malta's fall:²⁵

'The island of Malta was taken in 257' (870-871).

Ibn al-Khaldūn's date of 257 AH is important, for he is far more scrupulous in this regard than his great co-religionist Ibn al-Athīr. Nuwayrī is a little more precise.²⁶

'In his time (Muḥammad ibn Hafāḡah, 869-871) the island of Malta was conquered by the hand of Aḡmād ibn 'Umar ibn 'Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Aḡlāb.'

Here the name is of interest; an Aḡmād ibn 'Umar ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Ibraḡim al-Aḡlāb 'el Habāshi' can be positively identified in contemporary Ifriqīya: as we shall see, he is of particular interest to the early medieval history of Malta.

Ibn al Athīr complicates the matter further, yet he complements rather than contradicts his peers:

'In 256 he (Muḥammad ibn al-Aḡlāb) sent an army to Malta, which was beseiged by the Greeks. They raised the seige on learning of the Muslim strength.' Here there are three points of interest:

– The date is one year earlier than Ibn Khaldūn: but Ibn al-Athīr's dates cannot be taken as Gospel.

²⁴ See NEUMANN C. 'Die byzantische Marine' *Historische Zeitung* 45-1 (1898), using de Cerim. 655-665.

²⁵ AMARI *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula* Versione Italiana, 2vv. Turin & Rome, 1880, L p. 178

²⁶ BAS XLVII p. 147

– The conqueror is said to be a Sicilian, not an African Arab: the writer is far more reliable for names than for dates.

– A Byzantine naval force is in attendance – but we learn that it was relatively weak, and dared not suffer loss, which accords well with what we know of the Byzantine strategic situation of the age.

It seems that the first assault was launched from Ifriqīya and failed, and either lost its ships or saw them withdrawn, for we soon find it besieged by another naval force. Yet the inherent fault of the Galley was its unweatherliness, even Piali's vast force in 1565 could not prevent the 'Piccolo Soccorso', so it seems likely that the fleet which decamped in 870 must have wintered in Malta's remarkable harbours – perhaps Nikita of the seal was the

We are thus entitled to infer from the sources that Habāshī was rescued from his plight by a Sicilian fleet. It would follow that the rights of conquest fell to the Sicilian commander, not Habāshī.

The date of definitive capture is recorded in the Chronicle of Cambridge²⁷ as 29 Aug. 870.

The value of the Chronicle is that it is much older than the other Arabic sources, being a 10th. century compilation, and that it appears to have been written by a Christian Sicilian and later translated from Greek into Arabic. Unlike the foregoing Arab sources it owes nothing to the Zīrīd Secretary of State Al-Rāqiq (d. 418 AH/1027-8AD). But it is a curt, dry compilation, little more than a list of dates and events: nonetheless it offers the inestimable boon of a documentary control upon the sources founded upon Al-Rāqiq.

We thus have a siege within a seige if we are to explain why the Greeks were besieging an island which had yet to fall to Islam. The galley had many virtues as a naval weapon in the Mediterranean, but the ability to maintain a blockade in foul weather was not one of them; this lay behind Piali's insistence upon the prior capture of St. Elmo in 1565. Thus if Habashi was contained in 869, it was by a force garrisoned upon Malta, and we have evidence of such a force in the Schlumberger seal. But it is equally clear that no Byzantine commander had a mandate for losing ships whilst the Strait of Otranto remained in danger, as it plainly was until Bari

²⁷ AMARI BAS XXVII: VASILIEV AA Vol. II/2 p. 99;

was retaken. The Byzantine force which decamped in the face of a superior Sicilian fleet in the summer of 870 respected the strategic realities of the period and may well have abandoned the Byzantine garrison in the process as Vella contends. Thus abandoned, it behoved the Maltese to make the best possible composition with the Arab force already disembarked. Indeed it is perfectly plausible that the financial exactions implicit in the maintenance of a Byzantine galley force upon the Archipelago had left the population disaffected. This is Vella's drift and Talbī is also convinced that the Maltese made an 'ahd with their new masters. Two Arab references support this contention.

Ibn al-Khatīb says that

'The island of Malta was conquered and its King taken prisoner in Jumada the First 261' (874-875)

This tardy Grenadine reference²⁸ has been dismissed as a confusion with the date of death of the Sicilian Emir Abu'l Gharaniq, yet it uses the curious term 'king' without mentioning the ubiquitous 'Rūm'. This suggests a Maltese dignitary administering the islands in accordance with an 'ahd four years after conquest. It can be squared with the Kitāb al-Uyūn, which quotes Ibn al-Gazzar²⁹ to the effect that the marble columns and certain unspecified 'materieux precieux' in the Qasr Habāshi at Sousse were brought from Malta by Habāshi b. 'Umar, whom we have already met in Nuwayrī. Why should a figure prominent in the politics of Ifriqīya have taken leave to pillage a Sicilian conquest? Talbī offers the highly plausible explanation that the Maltese were punished after capture for having ruptured their 'ahd. In passing, it is of no small interest that 9th. century Malta possessed valuables and heavy marble columns of sufficient value to merit transportation to Sousse. A basis for taxation compatible with the cost of a locally based galley force under Nikita begins to emerge.

Now Muratori³⁰ tells us that when the captured Bishop of Syra-

²⁸ VASILIEV I/1 no. 32.

²⁹ TALBĪ op. cit. pp. 474-6. The writer died in 394 AH/1004 AD, and thus offers another valuable control. The *Kitāb al-Uyūn* was apparently unknown to Amari and Vasiliev.

³⁰ MURATORI *Rerum Italicorum Scriptores* I/2 p. 264A

cuse was conveyed to Palermo in 878, he found in the prison of that city

'sanctissimus Melitensis episcopus duabus compedibus astrictus'

This reference has attracted frequent commentary, but no credible explanation of why the poor man was so afflicted. Since he was 'sanctissimus', he was presumably properly consecrated. The Encyclopaedia suggests that he must have been incarcerated since conquest in 835 or even before, which places an intolerably high premium upon human survivability in a medieval prison without saying why he had been imprisoned. His appointment offers no real grounds, for the conquests were marked by comprehensiveness to 'People of the Book' so long as they respected the new order, not persecution or forced conversion, which simply served to reduce taxation, Gregory VII conducted a cordial correspondence with the Emir of Bugia in the 11th. century in response to the Emir's request for the consecration of new bishops.³¹ Idrīs³² tells us that the Zīrīd Tamīm was noted for his tolerance to Christianity a century later, writing thus to a mistress;

'And how I love your soft spoken tones, though it cost me my life, as you read the works of the Messiah.... For love of you I savour Christian feasts and the melodious tones of canonical chant'

In fact only the dreaded Vella³³ offers a halfway credible explanation, saying that the Bishop of Malta – surely Ibn al-Khatīb's 'King'? – had been sending grain to beleaguered Syracuse, was caught, and imprisoned. The most likely reason for the Bishop's detention in Sicily is plainly that he was a focus for rebellion in

³¹ COURTOIS C. 'Gregoire VII et l'Afrique du Nord' *Revue Historique*, Apr.-Jun 19 1945. Also LEWICKI on 'Afariq' in *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* XVII Krakow 1953.

³² IDRĪS HR. *La Bérberie orientale sous les Zirides Xe – XIIe Siècles* Adrien-Maisonneuve 1959 2vv. Vol II 733-4.

³³ VELLA *Codice* I/2 374. He claims that the grain was sent from Marsaskala, which adds the idea of subterfuge; but it is difficult to imagine that the Bishop had ships enough for an operation of any size – a reason, perhaps, why he was merely imprisoned rather than executed.

Malta, which in turn tallies with Talbī's concept of an 'ahd broken between 870 and 878. However much credence we may accord to Vella – and it cannot be much – the Bishop's imprisonment must have something to do with the seige of Syracuse.

Nor does Muratori state the name of the unfortunate ecclesiastic, or whether he was set at liberty with his fellow unfortunates in 885.³⁴ Possibly this was the Manas whom Abela writes about³⁵ as one of the participants at the Eighth Oecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 868 – a further nail in the coffin of the Encyclopaedia. Unfortunately Manas is not to be found in Mansi's uncharacteristically poor account of the Council,³⁶ for which he neglects to give his customary list of participants and lists of signatories. Abela says that Manas signed Articles I and IV; his book antecedes Mansi's immense work by eighty years, and is no doubt the source of Vella's extraction of the name, but not of the 'details'.

CONCLUSION

Any attempt at the reconstruction of the medieval history of a poorly documented area is of necessity tentative; by the same token it is unwise to discard early sources, even if they are less than contemporary, for they are too rare. The grave weakness of the Encyclopaedia's account of Malta's capture by Islam is that it adopts a 'position prise' on the strength of a selective reading of the Kāmil linked up with Muratori's bishop. For Amari Malta was merely a passing interest in Sicilian studies, and he took little interest in the Byzantine naval situation in its wider sense. Talbī's account is by far the most widely based in that he has found controlling references for the sources coloured by al-Rāqiq, but *his* prime concern is medieval Tunisia, and he evidently knew nothing of the Nikita seal.

³⁴ AMARI *Storia* I 551.

³⁵ ABELA GF *Descrittione, di Malta* Malta 1647 II not. 9

³⁶ MANSI JD *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova* 1728

When we take the matter in the Maltese context, considering all the published evidence, a reasonably coherent picture begins to emerge, in no way founded upon Vella, yet in several interesting respects confirming some of his lines of argument.

Most appreciations of Maltese history make the mistake of assuming that, because the islands have been of military importance in many periods, they have been of high strategic concern in all ages. In the early medieval period it appears that Malta's naval importance was very slight; confined so far as we know to a raid or series of raids in the 830's, the implantation of a small Byzantine naval garrison, itself perhaps a splinter from the defeated Sicilian thematic fleet, and a rather complicated double siege. The later history of Arab Malta suggests that capture may not have been entirely unwelcome, nor Arab rule unbeneficial. Malta seems to have been spared the interminable warfare which ravaged Sicily for almost a century, although as we have seen, she was pillaged at least once.