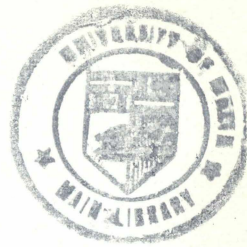


# FORTIFICATIONS IN THE MIDDLE AGES



## THE ARABS

With the advance of the Arab soldiers along the Northern coast of Africa, the Maltese Islands found themselves in the middle of two empires. The ever-expanding Islamic Empire and the ageing Byzantine. But at the beginning the Arabs had still to use galleys to attack other lands. They had not been trained on the sea and therefore their conquests followed the terrain of the land. It was in fact only in the seventh century that the Arabs started sailing in the Mediterranean, and we note their advancement in this aspect because by the year 700 they occupied Pantalleria Island and started attacking Sicily. During the same year a naval base was established in Tunis. Still the Arabs were more concerned with their successes in Algeria, Morocco and the Iberian Peninsula, than with the acquisition of the Maltese Islands.

It was during the ninth century that the Arabs' interest in Sicily was revived. By the year 831 the city of Palermo was in Arab hands. Although our Islands were not on the main shipping route to Sicily, in 836 the Arabs raided the Maltese Islands. Till their conquest of the Islands, the Arabs continued with their sporadic raids. From recent excavations at Tas-Silġ, Marsaxlokk, it has been concluded that the Byzantines had built a wall behind the Basilica, probably to defend the community from Arab raids. This fortification wall, which was built in a crude way, seems to have been rebuilt a number of times, probably after each Arab raid.

But the main Byzantine fortification in Malta was the city of Mdina, larger than we know it today. It is not known exactly when and how our Islands were finally conquered by the Arabs, as historians disagree about the method and the date. It has been said that in 869 the Arabs invaded the Islands and besieged the Byzantine garrison inside the main city. Meanwhile a Byzantine relief force arrived in Malta and the Arabs had to retreat. In 870 the Arabs again invaded our Islands and this time the Byzantine garrison surrendered. Another version is almost contrary to what is said in the first version. It is said that in 869 the Arabs actually conquered the Maltese Islands. Soon after, a Byzantine force arrived and with the help of the Christian population besieged the Arabs inside the old city. In the following year an Arab relief force arrived in Malta and the Byzantines had to retreat.

The fortifications of the Islands then were strongly

defended. It is to be noted that although the Arab raids started in 836, it was only in 869/870 that the final conquest was accomplished. In our opinion this confirms the theory that the fortifications were well maintained and garrisoned. And naturally even with the arrival of the Arabs, the fortifications still had to be maintained. While the crude fortifications that the Byzantines built at Tas-Silġ were never rebuilt and utilized by the Arabs, new fortifications were built at San Pawl Milqi, where the Byzantines had utilized the Roman farmhouse as originally intended.

Although no drastic change seems to have taken place around the coastal defence of Malta, a great change occurred around the old city, Mdina, and the walled city of Rabat in Gozo. It is still not clear why the Arabs thought of diminishing the size of these two main fortifications. It could have been thought that smaller fortified towns would be better defended than larger ones. It could have also been that the Arabs had the intention of leaving only a small garrison in the Islands, and therefore the fortifications had to be suited to the size of the garrison. The actual size of the fortified towns of Mdina and the Citadel in Gozo, dates to this period.

No further information has been found regarding the fortifications of our Islands during the Arab period. The only other information has been handed down to us through local folklore and tradition. This tradition concerns Fort St. Angelo which is said to have been first built by the Arabs in 870. We have already seen that the Phoenicians could have founded a town somewhere in Grand Harbour. Even Ptolomey said that the Romans had a town in that area. It was assumed that these towns were the same one and that it was also surrounded by a wall. Presumably the city, if still standing, would have been used by the Byzantines. As there is no information regarding the period, we cannot conclude for certain that this city was still standing before or during the Arab period. The Arabs could have easily built a tower of some sort in the Grand Harbour area, but it is unknown in what size and shape it was built. The first documented evidence of a castle in this area was in 1240, and the origin of Fort St. Angelo still needs to be studied.

## THE NORMANS

The next contenders for the possession of the strategic Maltese Islands, were the Normans. After their



Fort St. Angelo ... first built by the Arabs?

establishment in Southern Italy during the early 11th century, the Normans thought of consolidating their position by acquiring and conquering new territories. In 1030 they were established in Naples and were thinking of extending the territories of the city. In 1084 they entered the city of Rome and sacked it. In 1071 the city of Catania was next to fall into the hands of the Normans. In 1090, during the month of February, the city of Noto was taken by the Normans. During July of the same year, the Normans, led by Count Roger, landed in Malta.

What was the reaction of the Arabs and the Maltese to this Norman invasion? As the majority of the population was Mohammedan, this invasion was not thought to be provident. In fact, on landing, the Normans were met with armed resistance. It is thought that this resistance was very feeble, due to the lack of experience of the local inhabitants and garrison. The Normans started to burn and steal whatever was found and the population retreated to inside the old city of Mdina. But on the arrival of the Normans outside the gates of Mdina, the governor of the city together with other officials, went to meet the Normans. They immediately agreed to the surrender

of Malta. But the Normans had other ideas. They extracted as much money as they could, confiscated all the donkeys and horses and then left Malta. The Normans made the Arabs promise to pay a yearly amount of money and other goods. With them left a good number of Christians who were on the Island. These could have been either slaves or else the Christian families that remained on the island.

On leaving Malta, the Normans stopped in Gozo and did the same thing. But one thing remains clear. The Normans had no intention of staying or occupying the Islands and their only concern was to give them a tributary status and thus minimize the possibility of a counter-attack on Norman-held cities in nearby Sicily from the Maltese Islands.

In 1127 the son of Count Roger I had to invade and reconquer the Maltese Islands again, as it seems the Arabs had re-taken full control of the Islands. One can say that it was during this period that the Maltese Islands were connected with Sicily, and for hundreds of years to follow, the two Islands seemed to have travelled the same path, although sometimes in different lanes.

Maltese history during the 12th century is negligible,

mainly due to a lack of documents. There seems to have been an introduction to European thought and manners in the Islands and possibly some form of stability was enjoyed. It was only near the end of the century that the Islands had their first bitter taste of being ruled by a feudal lord. In Sicily, a number of rival nobles were fighting between themselves over the succession to the throne. So the incumbent king started giving the Maltese Islands to loyal nobles, so that in case of threats to his throne, he could count on that noble's loyalty.

Regarding the fortifications of the Maltese Islands during this turbulent period, it is not easy to discuss what was the situation. It is thought that both Mdina and the Citadel in Gozo would have remained the main fortifications of the Islands. But it is also thought that the nobles were not that much interested in the defence of the Islands. More important would have been the re-building or building of a castle somewhere in Grand Harbour. The majority of these nobles would have also been owners of transport galleys and other vessels for piratical use. Quite naturally while these galleys would be in Malta, they would be in need of some protection and that is why it is thought that these feudal lords would have re-

built or built a castle of some sort in the Grand Harbour area.

Some sort of order was returned in 1222 when Frederick I confirmed the well known pirate Henry, known as "il Pescatore", as Count of Malta, but the control over the castle of Malta was to be in the hands of the King. It is still doubtful which castle was being referred to. Was it the castle in Grand Harbour or was it the Mdina fortifications? As in 1240, the castle in the Grand Harbour was being referred to as the "castrum maris", it is still doubtful whether the King meant this castle. Probably the King meant Mdina.

In a document dated 1240 a "castrum maris" (castle by the sea) is mentioned for the very first time. Besides this most important information, we know that there were three castles in the Maltese Islands. The "castrum maris" was one, while the others were those of Mdina and the Citadel of Gozo. There were 220 soldiers to defend these three castles, while previously there were only 150.

## THE ANGEVINS

With the death of Frederick I, there was turmoil in Sicily. Battles were being fought to determine who was going to inherit Frederick's kingdom. Charles of Anjou was also pretending to be the legitimate heir to the throne and after prolonged fighting, in 1268 he was crowned as the rightful King of the Two Sicilies (Southern Italy and Sicily). Naturally the Maltese Islands were also included in this Kingdom, but the reign of Charles of Anjou was to be short-lived.

On being crowned King, Charles appointed a Castellan to take charge of the "castrum maris". Charles also sent 150 soldiers from France, who were naturally loyal to him. It is also recorded that the "castrum maris" was divided into two sections. It is probable that there was an outer ring of walls as a second ring of fortifications to make the castle better defended.

The trouble that was to end with the fall of Charles of Anjou started in Sicily in 1282. When the Maltese heard of the Sicilians' revolt against the French, the Angevin governor of Malta, Diongi da Barba, together with the majority of the Maltese population, revolted against their Angevin rulers and besieged the French garrison inside the "castrum maris". But the small French garrison resisted against the Maltese. Although the Aragonese crown was helping the Sicilians to oust the Angevins from Sicily, no help seems to have been immediately sent to Malta. Then in the summer of 1283 an Angevin fleet entered the Grand Harbour. It seemed for the Maltese rebels that everything was lost. But then, a few days later in July, the Aragonese fleet was seen off Grand Harbour. The Aragonese ended as the outright winners, but the French garrison inside the "castrum maris"

King Frederick I





The Gozo Citadel . . . under the control of the università

was still safely inside. Due to other commitments in Sicily, the Aragonese fleet had to leave the Islands. But before they left, three hundred Catalan soldiers were left in Malta to help the Maltese rebels. It was only in February of 1284 that the French soldiers finally surrendered, due to lack of food.

These events show that the “castrum maris” was strongly built, and strong enough to resist a siege of more than a year. Although as already stated the “castrum maris” was first mentioned in a document in 1240, it is understood that it had been built years before that date although exactly when and by whom is not known.

### THE ARAGONESE

The Maltese Islands were incorporated within the Aragonese Crown by King Pedro on the 7th of April 1283, even though the French soldiers inside the “castrum maris” surrendered on February of the following year. Although the Maltese Islands were garrisoned by Spanish soldiers, and the Angevins had been ousted from Sicily and the Maltese Islands, the French seemed not to have lost heart in winning back their lost territories.

In the year 1287 the Angevins re-attacked the

“castrum maris” and managed to occupy it. It could have been that the Angevin idea was to mount an expedition from our Islands against Spanish-held Sicily. But the Aragonese King thought of strengthening the “castrum maris” and also its garrison. During the 14th century the Maltese Islands were in turn given to a number of different nobles, who thought only of obtaining as much money and goods as possible from the Maltese. The nobles continued ascertaining their control on the “castrum maris”, while the fortified town of Mdina and the Citadel in Gozo were under the control of the “università”. The “università” was a local institution representing the people before the King. It also had the privilege of issuing various laws and collecting taxes. But their jurisdiction did not include the “castrum maris”, as that was under the control of the King or the feudal lord.

The next time that the “castrum maris” was mentioned was in 1366 when the Maltese seem to have revolted against their feudal lord and managed even to take control of the “castrum maris”. It was again retaken by the King’s followers, but soon after the Maltese revolted again. Due to lack of documents it is not possible to know exactly what happened. The same thing occurred in 1426, when the Maltese, fed

up by the treatment of the feudal lord, Don Gonsalvo Monroy, revolted against his rule. His possessions in Mdina were set on fire while his wife and servants, together with the soldiers were besieged inside the "castrum maris". During this revolt the Maltese did not manage to take the "castrum maris", possibly because the nobles had learned the lesson to leave a strong and well armed garrison to defend the castle.

From some documents that have survived and that used to belong to the "università", we can get an idea how the money was collected from the local people, so that the fortifications could be well maintained. The laws were issued periodically by the "università" and sometimes after a number of years the same law would be re-issued, probably because the people would have discontinued to obey such a law.

One of the laws that concerns us was the one that was issued on the 4th October, 1469, when it was stated that nobody was allowed to sell fish anywhere except in the proper market place. Transgressors would be fined 20 carlini, 15 of which to go towards the maintenance of the city walls. Another of these laws states that nobody could wash clothes or anything else in the public fountains of Saqqajja and Gherixem. The fine for transgressors was of 30 carlini, 15 of which were to go towards the maintenance of the city walls. Besides these two laws there were others which were in the same line of thought and all dating to the same period.

Other interesting items that give us some idea regarding the defences of the Islands, and how arma-

ments were sometimes acquired, are the conditions that were tied with the fiefs, given to local and foreign nobles. Looking at some of these conditions we meet with the giving of a missile thrower, paying the salary of one knight for a year, providing the services of an armed horse or providing an amount of money to go towards the maintenance of the fortifications.

But the most effective method of defence during the Middle Ages was the militia. All males were eligible to do their night duty. The "università" took care of issuing a roster of watch-duties, and of seeing to it that each and every place was manned by three persons. Besides the city of Mdina there were 24 other localities where look-out posts were set up. At each post there would be three persons, and usually one of them would also be mounted. No watch towers existed in those times but most probably some kind of field huts would be rented by the "università". But the majority of the men would be stationed inside Mdina. Each night there would be 55 men and a horse-riding contact man with the garrison of the "castrum maris".

While, during the Middle Ages, the defence of the Maltese Islands was left to the ability and discretion of the "università", with the coming of the Knights to the Islands, that privilege was taken away from the "università". The Order felt the need to control such a sensitive aspect of her own existence.

Vincent Zammit

(to be continued)

### THE COSTAL WATCH POSTS OF 1417

1. Blat Mogħza, near Pellegrin Bay
2. Ta' Lippija, Ġnejna
3. Ghajn Tuffieħa
4. Ghajn Rażul, near Veċċa, St. Paul's Bay
5. St. Paul's Bay
6. Buġibba, probably near Qawra Point
7. Bummarrad
8. Bir il-Bahar, probably near Ghallis Point
9. Qalet Marku
10. Nadur Qalel, near Madliena Tower
11. Bir Bitut, St. George's Bay
12. Ġnien Feris, near St. George's Tower
13. Qortin l-Abjad, probably near Fort Tigné
14. St. Elmo Point
15. Blata l-Bajda, to the east of Xaghra
16. Ras Żonqor, Marsascalea
17. Marnisi, Marsaxlokk
18. Gadir, probably St. George's Bay, Birzebbuga
19. Ras Ġuliana, probably in Birzebbuga
20. Kalafrana
21. Nadur Kelba, near Bengħasa
22. Qabar Għarib, near Għar Hasan
23. Ta' Xutu, Wied iż-Żurrieq
24. Haġra s-Sewda, near Haġar Qim Temples

