

GOZO IN LATE ROMAN, BYZANTINE AND MUSLIM TIMES

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The island of Gozo on account of its smaller size and relatively sparse population is, in a historic sense, generally regarded as being less significant than its larger sister Malta which, since at least the late Middle Ages, has enjoyed greater prosperity and played the dominant role in determining the destiny of the miniature central Mediterranean archipelago. It is possible, none the less, that in the early Middle Ages and in the Roman and Byzantine periods which preceded them, the situation might have been occasionally different, and that there were also times when the two islands were politically distinct.

In classical times (which in the case of either island started officially with the Roman conquest of 218 B.C., at the outbreak of the Second Punic War),¹ the available epigraphical evidence seems to suggest both close ties with Malta as well as an apparent measure of political detachment. Chrestion, a freed man of Augustus, was the *proc(urator) Melite et Gaul* in the early years of the Empire², but the two islands were, at a later period, probably in the course of the second century A.D., granted separate municipal status which means that they had a respective town-council with duumvirs and decurions that enjoyed a degree of autonomy. The evidence for Melite is limited to two fragmentary inscriptions.³ For Gaulos there are, on the other hand, six texts with very valuable information.⁴ One of them, datable to around 211 A.D.,⁵ suggests that effective control was in the hands of an *ordo decurionum*, while another,⁶ makes a probable reference to triumvirs,⁷ or, perhaps, quadrumvirs.⁸

The inhabitants of Gaulos, like their brethren on Melite, presumably achieved enfranchisement around 212 A.D. when Caracalla extended citizen rights to all free

1. On the conquest which is chronicled in Livey, xxi, 51: T. Ashby, 'Roman Malta', *Journal of Roman Studies*, v (1915), 24.
2. CIL.x.7494.
3. CIL.x.7459; CIL.x.8318.
4. CIL.x.7502; CIL.x.7503; CIL.x.7504; CIL.x.7506; CIL.x.7507; CIL.x.7508.
5. A. Bonanno, 'Malta in the Third Century', in A. King and M. Henig (eds.), *The Roman West in the Third Century: Contributions from Archaeology and History*, BAR International Series 109, Oxford 1981, 505-506.
6. CIL.x.7504 which is published in two variants by Gaultieri (tab. 279/352).
7. As suggested in G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta*, Malta 1647, 212-215.
8. As suggested in O.Bres, *Malta Antica Illustrata*, Rome 1816, 330-331.

men within the Empire.⁹ This does not exclude the probability that prominent members of the Gaulos Community might have obtained citizenship individually¹⁰. Such a hypothesis is buttressed by the very considerable epigraphical evidence for the *Tribus Quirina* on the island.¹¹ The tribe was primarily used for enfranchised Greeks,¹² but the inhabitants of Gaulos seem somehow to have been eligible. On Melite there is, on the other hand, only one epigraphical reference to a member of the tribe. He was Lucius Castricius Prudens who is described as 'a priest of the Divine Augustus'.¹³

This last inscription testifies to the practice of Emperor worship. The evidence, which comes almost exclusively from Gaulos covers the period between the first and early fourth centuries A.D.¹⁴ The most important is a Latin text dedicated to Julia Augusta, second wife of Augustus (27 B.C. - A.D.14) and mother of Tiberius (A.D.14-37) by her priestess Lutatia, daughter of Caius and wife of Marcus Livius Optatus the *Flamen Gaulitanorum*.¹⁵ It was engraved on the pedestal of an effigy of the Empress that may, perhaps be identified with the headless, draped statue in the Gozo Museum of Archaeology.

A later dedicatory inscription honours Iulia Domna, wife of Septimus Severus, under the title of *Mater Castrorum*,¹⁶ while another commemorates Postimus 'priest for life of the Divine Hadrian'.¹⁷ Two other texts, datable to around A.D. 305-306 honoured the two Caesars of the time, Severus and Maximian, and seem to belong to a group of inscriptions set up in the period immediately after the retirement of Diocletian.¹⁸ Of greater interest was a memorial erected around 211 A.D. by the *Ordo decurionum* of Gaulos to Geta, brother and rival of Caracalla with whom he was co-emperor.¹⁹ The two brothers were irreconcilable and their struggle for the exclusive power of the Empire was only resolved by the murder of Geta. Herodian describes, probably with some exaggeration, the butchery that followed the victory of Caracalla when assassins were dispatched to the provinces to put to death the governors and

9. J. Weiss, in *Real Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, xv/l: 'Melite', 1931, 544.

10. A. Bonanno, *op.cit.*, 505.

11. CIL. x.7501; CIL.7507; CIL.x.7508; CIL.x.7509.

12. T. Ashby, *op.cit.*, 26.

13. IG.xiv.601

14. The most important texts are: CIL.x.7501; CIL.X.7507; CIL.X.7502; CIL.X.7504; CIL.X.7505. See also M. Buhagiar, *Christian Catacombs, Cult Centres and Churches in Malta to 1530*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis presented in the University of London in 1993, 51-53.

15. CIL.X.7501.

16. CIL.X.7502.

17. CIL.X.7507.

18. CIL.X.7504; CIL.X.7505. The two texts were kindly examined at my request by Dr Joyce Reynolds of Newnham College, Cambridge.

19. CIL.X.7503.

procurators who had been friendly to Geta. The Gaulos inscription may indicate a party supporting the claims of Geta for which there is no evidence from Malta.²⁰

The city of Gaulos occupied the north corner of a plateau in the centre of the island to which it lent its name. It consisted of a lower town and an acropolis that rose over 30m above it. In the course of the Middle Ages, a citadel, known as the Gran Castello, was built on the ruins of the acropolis and a residential suburb, called Rabat, sprouted naturally on the plateau below. It is difficult to determine with precision the extent of the Roman city. Unlike the city of Melite, on the sister island, the site was not naturally defensive and it is likely that walls and a ditch protected its south flank.²¹

The prosperity of Gaulos is hinted at by the several inscriptions discussed supra which also record some of its statues and memorials. The archaeological evidence for its monumental buildings is, however, limited to the remains of a Doric building, discovered in 1697, and to several shafts of fluted marble columns recorded by G.P. Agius de Soldanis in 1746.²² A headless, marble, togate statue, c.1.8m high, was noted by G.F. Abela in 1647, in a wall-niche by the gate of the castello (Fig.1).²³ The pedestal carried an inscription commemorating Cestius Lucius.²⁴

Cultural levels for the lower town, ranging from the Early Bronze Age to the late Roman period were established by David Trump in 1961.²⁵ Finds included the remains of an apparent wine cellar and, at a higher level, those of a burnt down building that produced three fifth century A.D. North African lamps (Hays Type IIA) with Christian symbols.²⁶ An important quarter of the town was the St George parish church area where a cylindrical cistern built up of terracotta slabs and a solidly constructed water tank shaped 'like an elongated cask' were investigated by C.G. Zammit in 1937. A more interesting find was a large jar packed with 4,000 brass coins. The twenty that could be identified were sestieri of the Gallic Empire, datable to 259-273 A.D.²⁷ Foundation remains of reportedly Roman structures were discovered in

20. On the Geta inscription: A. Bonanno, *op.cit.*, 506.

21. A tentative but plausible reconstruction of the topography of the city is given in A. Claridge, *The Roman Occupation of Malta and Gozo* (unpublished M.A. thesis presented in the University of London in 1971), fig.16.

22. G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, *Il Gozo antico-moderno, sacroprofano*, ms. 145. See also *Annual Report of the Valletta Museum* for the Year 1906, 3.

23. G.F. *Della Descrittione di Malta*, Malta 1647, 216-218.

24. C.I.L. x. 7506.

25. *Museum Annual Report 1961*, 3.

26. M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*, Oxford 1986, 373.

27. *Museum Annual Report 1956-57*, 14-15.

1976-77 during the building of an oratory adjacent to the church,²⁸ but they were not properly investigated and no report was published.

Outside the city the remains of presumed baths were noted by Count Ciantar in 1772, in a garden called *Ta' Surgent*, near the village of Kercem.²⁹ A more important thermal resort was discovered at Ramla l-Hamra in 1911.³⁰ The building consisted of at least nineteen rooms, six of which might have been living quarters. The rest were related to the thermal complex. A presumed lounge had an impressive marble pavement while another room had a high relief figure of a youthful satyr that was presumably one of a series of telamones or architectural supports. Underground hypocausts transmitted hot air into a tepidarium and caldarium and there was an impressive octagonal cold-dip bath that was veneered with slabs of Gozo marble and ornamented with miniature pillars and statuettes (Fig.2).

The Ramla l-Hamra establishment seems to correspond, on a modest scale, to the fashionable country seat of the leisured under the Empire. There are indications of at least one other villa setup at Marsalforn,³¹ while other remains, such as the evidence for olive pressing plants at Xewkija,³² point to the presence of agricultural activity. A potentially important site is ix-Xaqqufija, near Gharb where an impressive scatter of late Roman pottery has long attracted attention.

The Hayes Type IIA lamps, with Christian symbols, discovered by David Trump at It-Tokk in 1961, mentioned *supra*, point to a Christian presence around the fifth century A.D. There is otherwise little that is demonstrably Christian in late Roman Gozo. Another presumable North African red ware (Hayes Type IIA) lamp with a dove with spread wings on the discus was discovered in a rock tomb at Sannat in January 1929,³³ and there are rumours of a miniature catacomb (which I have been unable to locate) at Il-Qbajjar, Marsalforn, at the back of the Hill known as Il-Qolla s-Saffra, to the north.³⁴ The report mentions 'a number of large loculi placed on either side of a passageway' but no specifically Christian elements and the catacomb could indeed have been pagan. Similarly doubtful is the Christian identity of Gozo's only significant late Roman cemetery, namely the Ghar Gerdif, outside Rabat. This burial-place which is cut into a natural cave has been so much mutilated by modern

28. A. Bonanno, *Roman Malta - The Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1992, 30.

29. G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata ovvero Desrittione di Malta*, i, Malta 1772, 367.

30. T. Ashby, *op.cit.*, 68-74; *Museum Annual Report 1910-1911*, 11-12.

31. A Bonanno, 'Distribution of Villas and Some Aspects of the Maltese Economy in the Roman Period', in M. Vassallo (ed.), *Contributions to Mediterranean Studies*, Malta 1977, 76.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Museum Annual Report 1928-29*, v.

34. H. Lewis, *Ancient Malta - A Study of Its Antiquities*, Bucks 1977, 150.

quarreling that in its present state there is very little that can be said with certainty about it except that it had wall-tombs of the arcosolium variety for which there is still clear evidence. The reputed remains of a triclinium (or as it is popularly known 'agape-table')³⁵ are in such a bad state that an interpretation is not possible and, anyhow, triclinia are not an exclusively Christian feature because they also occur in Pagan catacombs.³⁶

In 1787, Jean Houel mentioned a site on the Rabat-Marsalforn Bay road which was, apparently, associated with a Gozitan Pauline legend. He described it as follows:

... I visited a certain cave on which I heard several marvellous stories. It is situated in the middle of a valley about half a mile from the Capuchin convent (on the way) to the Inlet of St Paul.³⁷ The mouth of this cave faces north and is so narrow that a man can only with difficulty pass through. This narrow corridor is twenty-five feet long and leads to a rock-cut room of sorts, about thirty feet in diameter, in the middle of which is a column that supports the ceiling. At its end are two passages that I could not get into and which seemed to lead out to the fields, but in fact, they do not lead anywhere. After having made sure that there was nothing of particular interest, I left the cave without taking any drawings ...³⁸

In the early nineteenth century, F. Lacroix again commented on the great fame of the cave,³⁹ but, in the course of the century, all knowledge of it seems to have been forgotten. At the turn of the twentieth century, Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia complained about its loss.⁴⁰ Bishop Pietro Pace thought, none the less, that he could identify it with an underground cave, not far from Marsalforn, and he took Mgr Farrugia to see it shortly before his death in 1914.⁴¹ In July 1960, Mr George Pisani wrote an article about it in the Government sponsored periodical *Ir-Review* and speculated on, no evidence, that it was an important Christian catacomb.⁴² This write-up stimulated considerable interest and the site was, in fact, relocated in August 1960 by Mr Joseph Attard who photographed it and took notes and measurements.⁴³ No archaeological

35. As suggested in V.Borg, 'Une île et ses hypogées de l'ére des premiers chrétiens: Malta', in *Les dossiers de l'archéologie*, 19, Nov-Dec. 1976, 58.

36. M.Buhagiar, *Christian Catacombs. Cult Places ...*, *op.cit.*, 100-101.

37. Marsalforn

38. J. Houel, *Voyage Pittoresque des Iles de Sicilie de Malte et de Lipari...*, iv, Paris 1787, 86.

39. F. Lacroix, *Malta ed il Gozzo* in the series *L' Universo o Storia e Descrizione di tutti i Popoli ...* (Italian ed.), 1848, 48.

40. G. Farrugia, *S. Paolo Apostolo e Padre dei Gozitani - Studio Apologetico*, Malta 1915, 180-181.

41. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

42. G. Pisani, 'Dwar Ghawdex: X'sar mill-Katakombi tal San Pawl?' in *Ir-Review* (Malta), 20.vii.1960, 3

43. J. Attard, 'Il-Grotta tal San Pawl f'Għawdex' in *It-Torċa* (Malta), 11.ix.1960, 10.

investigation was, unfortunately, undertaken and the entrance has since been blocked.⁴⁴ The site does now, however, seem to have produced evidence for either early Christian associations or for burials. Its date and use remain unknown.

The Western half of the Roman Empire ceased to have a formal existence in the fifth century A.D. For the Maltese Islands the end might have come in or around A.D.455 when the Vandals of North Africa invaded Sicily and the other *insulas maximas*. There are five fifth century Vandal coins in the Valletta Museum Collection but their provenance is unknown. Nearly a hundred years later in A.D.533 the great armada of General Belisarius 'touched' at the islands of Malta and Gozo on its way to reclaim Africa (which had been a hundred years in Vandal hands) for the Empire. Justinian, who had become Emperor in 527, ambitiously desired to unite under his sole authority the two halves of the Roman world by the reconquest of 'the countries possessed by the ancient Romans, to the limits of the two oceans.' Africa was to be the first important step in the realisation of this dream. His armada consisting of 500 transport and 92 escort vessels carrying 10,000 foot soldiers and 5,000 cavalry, used the port of Kaukana in Sicily as a base and it was from here that it departed in the direction of the Maltese Islands. The verb 'touched' used by Procopius,⁴⁵ does not make it clear whether Belisarius simply sailed in the lee of Malta or whether he actually stopped on the islands. In any case it is unlikely that the islands were Byzantine territory at this time because otherwise it would be difficult to explain why Belisarius did not make use of the excellent harbour of Malta.⁴⁶ The rapid success of the African campaign made Carthage the base and centre of supplies for the conquest of Italy. Sicily fell in A.D. 535. Malta and Gozo probably formed part of the conquest, but direct evidence is once again lacking. The islands were, however, certainly in Byzantine hands by A.D. 544.⁴⁷

A reference to soldiers in a letter concerning Malta which Pope Gregory the Great addressed to the Bishop of Syracuse in October 598 seems to suggest the islands had some sort of military garrison.⁴⁸ They might in fact have been governed by a military giunta of the type found in Italy and Sicily.⁴⁹ This is suggested by a couple of seals, one of which (of unknown provenance) commemorated the archon and droungarios of Malta.⁵⁰ The other comes from Gozo, where it was found around 1960, and is on

44. I am indebted to Mr Joseph Attard for generously putting his notes and references at my disposal,
 45. Procopius, *Bellum Vandalicum*, I.14,15-16.

46. On this argument see T.S. Brown, 'Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources', in A.T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975, 73.

47. Procopius, *Bellum Gothicum*, II.24.28.

48. M. Buhagiar, *Christian Catacombs, Cult Places....*, op.cit., 229-230.

49. T.S. Brown, *op.cit.*, 76.

50. *Ibid.*, 77.

display in the Gozo Archaeological Museum. It commemorates the archon Theophylact (Fig.3). Since the office of archon entailed a measure of administrative responsibilities, it is possible to interpret the seal as evidence for an official with authority over Gozo. It may also hint some form of independent administrative status for the island. This is quite possible considering that Gozo had its own separate municipium in Roman times. The island, moreover, gets a separate mention in the early seventh century A.D. civil geographical list of George of Cyprus which places Melite and Gaudos in the section of Sicily thereby implying a political dependence.⁵¹ On the other hand an early seventh century A.D. text, the *Istoria Suntomas* of Patriarch Nicephorus makes reference to the dux of the island of Gaudomelete. Gaudomelete is quite obviously a compound word formed of the respective Byzantine names of the two islands, though the fact that Gaudos precedes Melite may not be without significance. The relevant passage in the *Istoria* projects a picture of the Maltese Islands as an outpost of the Empire to which political dissidents were banished. It relates the sad story of how around A.D. 637, Atalarich, the son of the Emperor Heraclius (A.D. 610-641) conspired against his father together with his cousin the magister Theodorus, the son of the Emperor's brother, and of the terrible revenge of Heraclius who cut off their noses and hands and sent both into exile. Atalaric he banished to the island of Principus in the sea of Marmora, and Theodorus he sent to Gaudomelete 'ordering the dux of the place to amputate one of his feet on arrival'.⁵² Does the fact that Gaudos precedes Melete in the compound toponym suggest that the place of exile was Gozo? The question is at present impossible to answer. It does however deserve consideration.

Gozo was presumably Christian by this time but the real nature of Gozitan Christianity is not known. On Malta there are hints of links with the *Ecclesia Africana* which probably extended also to Gozo.⁵³ One intriguing piece of archaeological evidence the significance of which still needs to be properly assessed, is a bronze statuette of a cripple begging alms. He squats on a wicker cushion and lifts up his right hand a cup-like receptacle, while tilting his head backwards in an apparent act of supplication. His robe and his seat are covered with letters cut in low relief, which are partly Greek but mostly unknown, among which is a prominently displayed Chi-Rho monogram(Fig.4).

51. E. Honigmann (ed.), *Le Synedkdemos d' Hierales et l' Opuscule Geographiques de Georges de Chypre = Corpus Bruxellense Historiae Byzantinae, forma Imperii Byzantini*, Brussels 1939,i. 49,53 nos.592, 593.

52. J. Busuttil, 'Fonti Greche per la Storia delle Isole Maltesi', in *Missione Arcaeoologica a Malta - Campagna di Scavi 1968*, Rome 1969, 19-18.

53. M. Buhagiar, *Christian Catacombs, Cult Places* 222-226.

The statuette was found in Gozo around 1771⁵⁴ and excited immediate attention among antiquarians who tried to decipher the mysterious characters, which some interpreted as a sacred alphabet.⁵⁵ In more recent times suspicion that the statuette might be a fake led to its being withdrawn from display and transferred to the reserve collection of the Valletta Museum where it was soon afterwards misplaced. It was only rediscovered in 1984 and still awaits proper study and publication. A metallurgical analysis is in particular desirable. Until this is undertaken, the various hypotheses proposed by late eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars must be viewed with cautious reserve. St Priest⁵⁶ and Boisgelin⁵⁷ suggested, for example, that the Chi Rho monogram considered in association with the Greek letters which preceded it could be interpreted to mean 'The Lord is scourged'. They saw in the strange characters the 'arithmetical theology' of the Gnostics who 'pretended that the letters of the alphabet, particularly those that expressed numbers, contained the power that created the universe, and became (as they asserted) even the physical cause of its production'.⁵⁸ A connection with the Gnostics had also been proposed by Ciantar and the erudite connoisseur Carlo Castone della Torre di Rezzonico who saw the statuette in the Grand Master's collection during a visit to Malta in 1793,⁵⁹ as well as by most other subsequent antiquarians several of whom digress into a discussion of the squalid superstitions of this heretical sect which became a problem and a threat to the early church. The presence of a Gnostic community in late Roman and early Byzantine Gozo (and indeed Malta) is a possibility which cannot be excluded but so far there is no concrete evidence to support its existence.

The possibility of papal estates in early Christian Gozo is raised in the now classic edition of the *Liber Pontificalis* edited by L. Duchesne in 1886. This identifies with the island a place called Mengaulum that was the site of a *massa* or estate with a revenue of 222 solidi that constituted a benefice in favour of the baptistry of St John Lateran in Rome.⁶⁰ The *massa* is included in a list of donations said to have been made to the Church by Constantine the Great in the early fourth century.

A frequently repeated myth about Byzantine Gozo is that concerning a hermitage supposedly founded in the district of Ramla Bay by St Rossinianus, a follower of

54. G.A. Ciantar, *op.cit.*, 666.

55. A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of the Islands of Malta*, Malta 1982, 115.

56. P.St.Priest, *Malte par un Voyageur Francois*, Paris 1791, 29.

57. L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta ...*, London 1804, i, 17-18.

58. *Ibid.*, 17.

59. J. Eynaud, *Carlo Castone della Torre di Rezzonico - Viaggio a Malta anno 1793*, Malta 1989, 59.

60. In Mengaulum: Massa Amazon, praest. sol. cxxii: L. Duchesne (ed.), *Le Libre Pontificalis*, cxlix (Paris 1886), 193 n.63. L. Voelkl, *Der Kaiser Konstantin annalen einter Zeitenwende*, Munich 1957, 90, dates the Mengaulum donation to A.D. 317.

Augustine of Hippo, after he and his companions fled from North Africa following the Vandal invasion of the early fifth century. The story is apparently first told in Agius de Soldanis⁶¹ who bases his thesis on personal conjecture and the writings of the Augustinian chronicler Bonaventura Attardi who had written a treatise on monasticism in Sicily called *Sul monachesmo in Sicilia*. An 'old and trustworthy' Augustinian friar had, furthermore, assured Agius de Soldanis that memory of the monastic establishment at Ramla Bay was preserve in a 'very ancient tradition'. Soldanis does not refer to any presumed remains of the monastery and its church. In 1962 Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo was, none the less, convinced that he had located 'an early Byzantine wall which might have belonged to the establishment'.⁶² He does not disclose its whereabouts, but it can presumably be identified with a wall overlooking Ramla Bay in Gajdoru Street Xaghra. This wall which is constructed partly of squared stone blocks (53 x 50cm) and partly of stone chips cemented together by a soil-based mortar, has an approximate ht. of 173cm and can be followed for a distance of about 10m. Its age is unknown and, unless excavations are undertaken, there is little that can be said about it, at least for the time being.

At some time during the long Byzantine period, Gozo alongside Malta passed from the jurisdiction of the Roman Church to that of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. As in Sicily and the Calabria, this might have happened around A.D. 756 at the height of the Iconoclast Controversy.⁶³ A Byzantine *notitia episcopatum* for the period c. A.D.730 - c.780 mentions Melite as a suffragan see within the province of Sicily,⁶⁴ while another *notitia* for the years c. A.D.800 - 850 lists Melite and Gaulos among the twenty towns forming part of the province of Sicily. This list, which employs earlier records, gives as the reason for the transfer the fact that 'the pope had fallen into the hands of the Barbarans'⁶⁵ probably implying political considerations provoked by the capture of Ravenna by Aistulf in 751 A.D., which put Rome in the imminent peril of the Lombards.⁶⁶ The real motif was, however, presumably, theological, particularly so since the Emperor, Constantine V, who was sincerely convinced of the righteousness of Iconoclastic teaching, had taken serious exception to Pope Stephen II's outspoken iconophile doctrine. There is no way of knowing in what way Gozo and Malta were affected by the Iconoclast doctrine, but the impact on religious life was presumably considerable.

61. G.F.P. Agius de Soldanis, *op.cit.*, ii, 78-79.

62. M. Cagiano de Azevedo, in *Missione Archaeologica Italiana* 1963, 23.

63. On Sicily and the Calabria: V. Grumel, 'L'Annexion de L'Ilyricum Oriental, et de la Sicile et de la Calabre au Patriarchat de Constantinople', in *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses*, xi (1952).

64. T.S. Brown, *op.cit.*, 80.

65. *Ibid.*, 79-80.

66. J. Herring, *The Formation of Christendom*, Oxford 1987, 370-377.

Muslim raiders were active in the central Mediterranean from the second half of the seventh century. The Maltese Islands and other Christian possessions in the area came under increased pressures which strained the Byzantine defences to the limit. The first raids were apparently swift razzias restricted only to exposed coastal areas,⁶⁷ but it is not known how Gozo and Malta were affected. There is nothing to suggest that the islands were an important naval or military base, but there is some evidence that they were adequately garrisoned and this might, for a while, have served as a deterrent against a full scale attack. When the offensive against Sicily was renewed with increased intensity in 819-820,⁶⁸ the Maltese Islands presumably came under increased pressure. It comes as a surprise that they were not lost at about this time. That Malta, at least, held out for another half century is a tribute to the tenacity of Byzantine defence. The first major victory for Islam was the capture in 830 of Palermo which became the capital of Muslim Sicily. At some time between 835 and 837, the Chronicler Ibn al-Athir reports a raid on the islands in Sicilian waters during which 'many towns and fortresses' were vanquished and rich booty taken. The Maltese Islands were presumably involved but absolute certainty is impossible and Ettore Rossi's thesis that the capture of Malta took place at this time is untenable.⁶⁹ G.F. Abela who depended for his information on the writings of the Castilian antiquarian Luis de Marmol Caravaial, put the capture of Malta even earlier at 828.⁷⁰ The notorious Maltese forger, the Abbate Giuseppe Vella (1749-1814) describes two pillaging raids on the Maltese Islands in 833 and 836 respectively, maintaining that Gozo was occupied on the two occasions but each time relieved by a Byzantine expeditionary force. Vella whose history of the Arabs in Sicily, *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* was supposedly based on an Arab chronicle that he had discovered in the monastic library of San Martino alle Scale, near Palermo, is usually not to be taken seriously, but J.B. Barnard has hinted at the possibility that he might have pillaged the now lost writings of Al-Raqid to which a number of Arab chroniclers, such as Ibn al-Athir and Ibn Khaldun, are said to be indebted.⁷¹ This is not improbable, and Barnard might be justified in arguing that Vella falsified from a basis of knowledge, but the hypothesis must be treated with caution. Vella's account has been responsible for misleading generations of historians and consequently for deepening the mist over a period whose outlines are blurred by the dearth of reliable source material. It is possible that Malta and Gozo were not captured at the same time. There is some indication that the two

67. C. Lo Jacono, 'La prima incursione musulmana in Sicilia secondo il *Kitab al-Futuh* di Ibn Altam A'Kufi', in *Studi Araboislamici in onore di Roberto Rubinacci nel suo settantesimo compleanno*, i, Naples 1985, 347-363.

68. M. Amari, *Bibliotheca Arabo-Sicula*, 3 vols (reprinted in 1982 with Appendix of 1889), 327.

69. E. Rossi, entry on 'Malta' in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Rome (Treccani), 1929. On the date of the raid see M. Talbi, *L'Emirat Aghlabide 184-296 (800-909): Histoire Politique*, Paris 1966, 440.

70. G.F. Abela, *op.cit.*, 256-7.

71. J.B. Barnard, 'The Arab Conquest', in *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, vi/2 (1975), 165.

islands might have had separate civic and military set ups' and it is not improbable that Gozo fell some time before Malta. It is perhaps indicative that the known accounts of the capture of Malta,⁷² make no mention of Gozo.

Gozo's next excursion into written history had to wait the razzia raid on Malta undertaken in 1091 by Count Roger the Norman after he had reclaimed Sicily for Christendom from the Muslims. Gozo does not appear to have been on Roger's pillaging itinerary. Mention of the island, in fact, comes at the tail end of the eyewitness account of Goffredo Malaterra who wrote the *gesta* or chronicle of Count Roger. The attack on Malta was over and the good Count had already set sail away from the island with such a rich booty that it was little short of a miracle that his galleys did not sink under its weight. Malaterra describes, picturesquely, how the hand of God manifested itself by 'lifting the ships with the waves' and making them race on the sea. He then continues:

...None the less while returning home in such haste, the Count observing in the distance an island which is named Golsa ordered the sails to be directed towards it so that he might attack it. Landing there, he pillaged (the place) and carried away the booty, and desiring to have it under his rule, he annexed it to his domains...

This to my knowledge is the only securely documented reference to Gozo for the long Muslim period.⁷³ Archaeology is unfortunately equally reticent. If the known situation in Malta is an indication (which need not necessarily be the case) of what could have happened on Gozo, it would than appear likely that the island became essentially Muslim and that it remained so for a long time after the Norman conquest, until at least the turn of the thirteenth century.⁷⁴ The only secure archaeological testimony for the whole period is a tomb stone in the form of a prismatic stele tentatively dated to 1155-6 (A.H. 550) which carries the customary Koranic text and the male name of (al-Hagg) al-Banna.⁷⁵ It was discovered in Piazza Sabina, at the foot of the Castello, on 19 July 1901,⁷⁶ and may be indicative of a burial ground in that area.

Gozo's most famous Islamic relic, the Maynûnha Stone, currently one of the prime exhibits of the Gozo Museum of Archaeology might actually not belong to the Island. The stone which is remarkable for the intricate calligraphic beauty its cufic lettering and for the poignancy of its text, carries the date 1174 (A.H. 569) (Fig.5). According

72. M. Talbi, *op.cit.*, 475-6.

73. Details in M. Buhagiar, *Catacombs, Cult Places ...*, 276-289.

74. *Ibid.*, Chaps.6-7.

75. *Ibid.*, 299, 304.

76. A.A. Caruana, 'Santa Sabina Gozo - Cufic Inscription found in August 1901', *The Daily Malta Chronicle*, 12 September 1901.

to popular tradition it seems to have been found some time in the eighteenth century in the neighbourhood of the villages of Sannat and Xewkija. A toponym *ta' Maynûnha* has been recorded in this locality since at least the late Middle Ages,⁷⁷ but the legend of the finding of the stone in that neighbourhood seems to have been unknown before the early nineteenth century and may in fact be a modern fabrication. The stone was first reported in 1772 by Count Ciantar who saw it embedded in the courtyard of the Valletta residence of a local antiquarian whom he does not mention by name.⁷⁸ It was by that time sufficiently well known and several *forestieri eruditi* had returned home with transcriptions of it. It is, therefore, to say the least, strange that Ciantar's contemporary, the learned Gozitan chronicler and antiquarian, Canon G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, who composed a detailed history of Gozo,⁷⁹ makes no reference to it. The inference is either that the stone was discovered in the period between 1746 and 1772, or else that it has no connection with Gozo because otherwise de Soldanis would have included it in his meticulously drawn up list of the antiquities of that island. I believe the latter to be the case. The typology of the stone which sets it apart from the other stelae which belong entirely to the prismatic or *mqabriyyah* variety and the use of marble instead of the local globigerina limestone, makes me suspect whether it is Maltese at all. It is, in fact, quite possible that it reached Malta as an antique at an unknown period, or, perhaps it could have reached Malta as ballast on a cargo boat. A number of similar tombstones are known to have reached Sicily from North Africa in the latter way.⁸⁰ The first claim that the stone had been found in Malta was made by Italinsky in 1809.⁸¹ By that time the stele had established itself as one of Malta's better known antiquities and its presumed association with the island was taken too much for granted to be seriously questioned.

What happened in Gozo during the Muslim period remains therefore almost completely unknown. Nor do we know much about the early period of Christian resettlement. The first secure post Muslim reference to the island belongs to 1299 when an important will was drawn up in the Gozo Castello.⁸² This suggests that the island had by that time already experienced a measure of Latin culturisation.

77. Information kindly supplied by Professor Godfrey Wettinger.

78. G.A. Ciantar, *op.cit.*, 691-2. Later sources make it clear that he is referring to the Baron de Piro whose family donated it to the Malta Government in, 1845.

79. G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, *op.cit.*

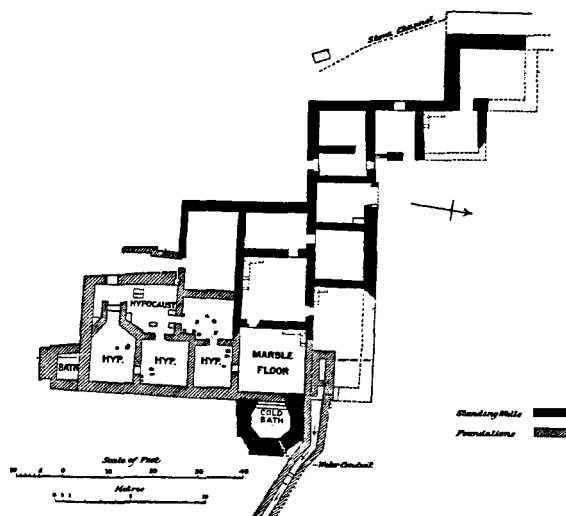
80. Information kindly supplied by Professor Henri Bresc.

81. C. Italinsky, 'Iscrizione sepolcrale araba scritta con caratteri cufici, trovata a Malta e decifrata', in *Fundgruben des Orients*, i (1809), 393-7.

82. H.Bresc, "Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano", *Melita Historica*, vi/3 (1974), 313-21.



Fig. 1: Headless togate statue of Cestius Lucius which in the seventeenth century stood in a wall niche by the bridge of the Gozo Castello. The statue is now unaccounted for. After *Abela 1647*.



The Ramla l-Hamra Thermal Resort

Fig. 2a: Plan of the resort. After Ashby 1915



Fig. 2b: Fragment of an architectural high relief of a youthful satyr, presumably one of a series of telamones. It disappeared in 1911 shortly after its discovery. After Ashby 1915.



Fig. 3: Byzantine lead seal of the Archon Theophylact (diam 2.8cm) showing the obverse and reverse sides. The seal is on display at the Gozo Archaeological Museum.

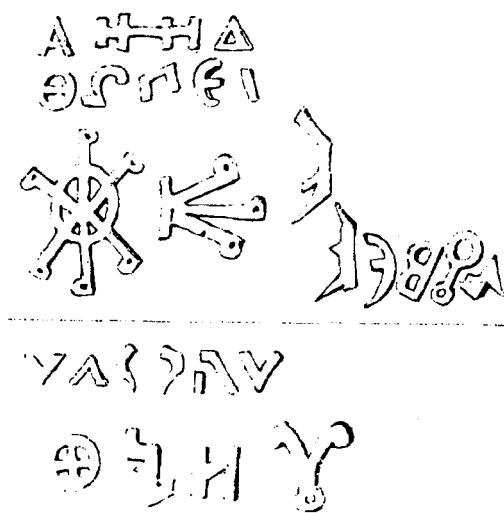


Fig. 4: Bronze Statuette of a cripple with a cryptic inscription in an unknown alphabet. It is currently in the reserve collection of the Valletta Museum of Archaeology. After *St. Priest 1971*.

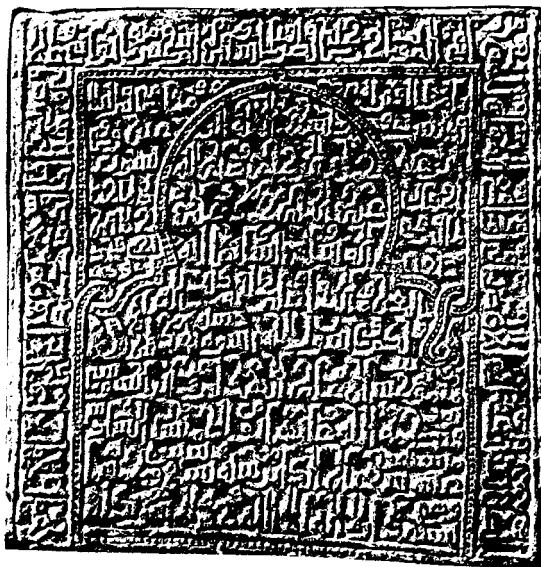


Fig. 5a: The Maymûnah Stone. Gozo Museum of Archaeology

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Fig. 5b: The florid Kufic Alphabet of the Maymûna Stone. After Grassi 1989.