

Legends linked to St Paul's Shipwreck



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This coming Wednesday, 10 February, Malta will be celebrating the feast of St Paul's Shipwreck

Although usually celebrated with particular fervour in Valletta, it is a public holiday across the whole country, for this feast has for centuries held a special significance for the Maltese people.

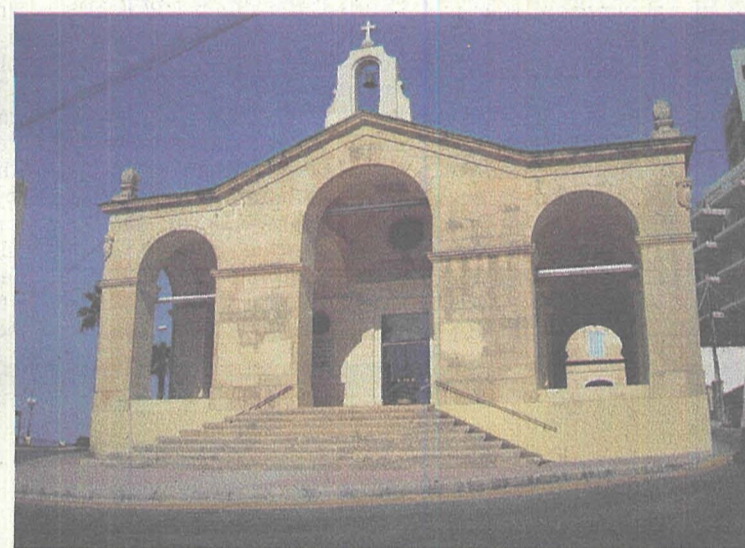
According to the Acts of the Apostles, in the year 60AD, St Paul was on a ship headed to Rome, where he was to face trial. At one point during the voyage, the ship was caught in a violent storm, which eventually led to the vessel foundering off the Maltese coast. St Paul and everyone else aboard made it safely to shore, where they were welcomed and looked after by the locals. St Paul remained here for three months, during which time it was claimed that he performed a number of miracles, but most importantly, he was also credited with introducing Christianity to Malta and to

have converted the local people.

This, at least, is what tradition claims. Some academics are more sceptical; for starters, the earliest archaeological evidence of Christianity in Malta has been dated to the fourth century AD, several hundred years after the shipwreck. One also has to bear in mind that following the Arab conquest in 870AD, Islam would have become the dominant faith here for quite some time, before Malta was eventually re-Christianised. It was then, perhaps, in an attempt to emphasise Malta's Christian roots while encouraging a breaking off from Islam, that some stories associated with St Paul's visit started to gain popularity. His cult grew and was strengthened even more with the arrival of the Knights of St John, who found the perfect opportunity to win over the locals by championing their patron saint, not to mention that being in possession of a number of Pauline sanctuaries would also have increased their own prestige. Thus, with time, many Pauline legends sprung up.

The site of the shipwreck

One thing that has long been debated is the exact location of the shipwreck. According to tradition, this took place in St Paul's Bay, and more specifically near St Paul's Islands, where in 1844 a



prominent statue of the saint was erected. Pope John Paul II even toured the area by boat during his visit to Malta in 1990. However, there is no hard evidence to back this up and many studies have been carried out to glean what little information is contained in the Acts of the Apostles, in an attempt to identify the real location.

Back in the 1960s, a number of Roman-era anchors were found lying on the seabed just off St Thomas Bay. These were claimed by some to have come from the shipwreck, especially because the location seemed to match some of the details mentioned by St Luke. However, this hypothesis could not be proven.

More recently, in 2005, a similar anchor was discovered in Salina Bay. Although once again there is no way to prove that it was related to St Paul, it did have carved inscriptions with the names of two Graeco-Egyptian gods: St Paul is known to have been travelling on an Egyptian grain ship. Salina Bay was also an important Roman port since the sea used to come up all the way to the area of Burmarrad, another interesting point, as that is where it is traditionally believed that the survivors spent their first three days on Malta. Despite all these theories though, for now, at least, the

real location of St Paul's shipwreck remains a mystery.

Ghajn Razul fountain

An interesting legend is the one linked to the Ghajn Razul fountain in St Paul's Bay. While its upper part, consisting of a statue of St Paul inside a niche, was added by Grand Master Vilhena in 1725, it is not certain when the fountain was first erected. According to tradition, however, this was done on the spot where St Paul made water come forth, in order to provide for the thirsty survivors of the shipwreck, simply by tapping the ground with his stick.

An interesting point is that the word *rasul* in Arabic means messenger, which has been interpreted as a reference to St Paul - God's messenger - although it could also have originated from the first name of whoever originally owned the site. While the location of Ghajn Razul strengthens the claim that St Paul's Bay truly was where the saint came ashore, it is worth noting that the fountain was moved slightly from its original spot during road widening works in the 1900s.

The Church of the Bonfire

Another important site in St Paul's Bay is that known as the Church of the Bonfire, which is

believed to have been constructed on the site where, as recounted by St Luke, the Maltese lit a bonfire to help the survivors warm themselves up, shortly after they came ashore in the vicinity.

While it is not known exactly when the very first church was built on this site, several mentions in historic documents are evidence that it was one of the oldest churches in Malta, and it was known to attract a large number of pilgrims. The church was given particular prominence during the time of Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt, a pious man who demonstrated great devotion towards this particular saint. Wignacourt had the church rebuilt, probably to the designs of architect Vittorio Cassar, who also oversaw the construction of the nearby tower. Unfortunately, the 17th century church was bombed during World War Two, although it was rebuilt according to the original designs in 1957.

St Paul and the viper

The bonfire is also significant because it forms part of perhaps the most enduring local legend associated with St Paul. Once again, according to the account by St Luke, as St Paul was helping to gather firewood, he was bitten by a viper, to the shock of all those present, who expected him to die a painful death from poisoning. Convinced that he was a criminal whom the Gods were determined to punish, the superstitious locals soon changed their mind when it became clear that he had suffered no ill effects; surely he was a god, who could not be harmed by anything. This played a huge role in converting them to his faith. The legend further states that from that day, all snakes in Malta lost their venom.

Unfortunately, this is not entirely accurate: there are four species of snakes found on the Maltese Islands and one of them is venomous. The cat snake is quite rare and difficult to come across. Normally only growing to



a length of 75cm, it is not dangerous to humans, as its venom is only enough to kill small prey that it can swallow whole, such as small rats, mice or lizards.

The Roman Villa of San Pawl Milqi

In Burmarrad, there is an archaeological site known as San Pawl Milqi, which includes the ruins of a Roman villa and temple, as well as a more recent Christian church. This 17th century structure is known to have replaced an older church from the 14th century, which was also dedicated to the Welcoming of St Paul. Clearly, the site has long been connected to the local Pauline tradition. This is because it is believed that it was here that, as mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, Publius, the island's governor, hosted the survivors of the shipwreck during their first three days in Malta. It is also claimed that Paul cured Publius' father of dysentery here, which

prompted Publius to convert to Christianity.

So what does the archaeology say? The area has been in use since prehistoric times, with the first structure probably having been built by the Phoenicians. During the Roman period, the site's position on the slopes of a fertile valley and its vicinity to the harbour at Salina, made it ideal for the production of olive oil, as attested to by the strong archaeological evidence. But could it really be where Publius received St Paul? That is something that cannot be confirmed, although, crucially, there is no evidence of Christian worship at this site prior to the 14th century church.

The Mdina Cathedral

Another location linked to St Paul is the Mdina Cathedral, which is dedicated to him. Rumoured to have been the site of the first Christian church in Malta, legend has it that it replaced a palace owned by

Publius, who, it is said, went on to become Malta's first bishop.

The present cathedral is the result of reconstruction following the devastating 1693 earthquake. It is well recorded that during excavation works in April 1698, a hoard of Arab and Byzantine gold coins worth some 9,000 scudi was discovered among the rubble. While this would lead to a dispute as to how the treasure was to be shared between the ecclesiastical and the secular authorities, word immediately went round that St Paul had performed a miracle and permitted the finding of the treasure in order to help finance the construction of the new church!

Among the highlights of the cathedral are two paintings by the renowned Italian artist Mattia Preti: one shows the Conversion of St Paul, while the other depicts his shipwreck. A less well-known painting by the same artist hangs in the nave and depicts another legend. In 1429, Mdina was besieged by a large force of Tunisian Saracens. They were eventually beaten back after three long days of bitter fighting, although not before around 3,000 of the inhabitants had been killed or captured. The story goes that at one point, St Paul miraculously appeared on a white horse, sword in hand, to help vanquish the enemy. Centuries later, the Cathedral Chapter commissioned Preti to represent this particular episode.

St Paul's Grotto

Not too far away, Rabat's parish church is also dedicated to St Paul. It too has a very rich history, as well as connections to St Paul, particularly through the grotto located underneath it, which is believed to have been where St Paul lived during his three-month stay on the island. Perhaps not surprisingly, St Paul's Grotto is one of the most venerated sites in Malta, and whether the story is true or not, it has over the years attracted many high profile visitors, including two popes.

The grotto was also the source of

a highly prized medicinal product that became very popular during the time of the Knights of St John: St Paul's Earth was made from powdered stone chippings obtained from the site and was believed to be effective in the treatment of venomous snakebites and poisons, as well as smallpox and fevers when administered mixed with wine. Clearly, this was linked to the story of the viper. The substance would have been found in the inventory of the Sacra Infermeria pharmacy and was also considered a worthy present to give to distinguished personalities. Interestingly though, the legend also claims that no matter how much of the rock was chipped away, it always seemed to grow back and the grotto always remained the same size!

In conclusion, although the short account in the Acts of the Apostles provides us with very few details, meaning that we are left with a long list of Pauline legends that cannot be proven, there is no doubt that the cult of St Paul, though not always backed by clear archaeological evidence, is deeply embedded in the Maltese culture.

Colour my Travel will be organising a cultural family-friendly event on Wednesday 10 February at 10am, to commemorate the feast of St Paul's Shipwreck. Should you wish to join this spe-



cial one-off guided tour, kindly visit www.colourmytravel.com for details and tickets.

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