

Wettinger has been vindicated, but why do historians still disagree?

Godfrey Wettinger sealed the debate on the continuity of Christianity in medieval Malta, and yet historians still disagree. So what we do about that, asks Prof. Yosanne Vella

Actually, historians not agreeing is not such a problem. History teachers are accustomed to historians hardly ever agreeing.

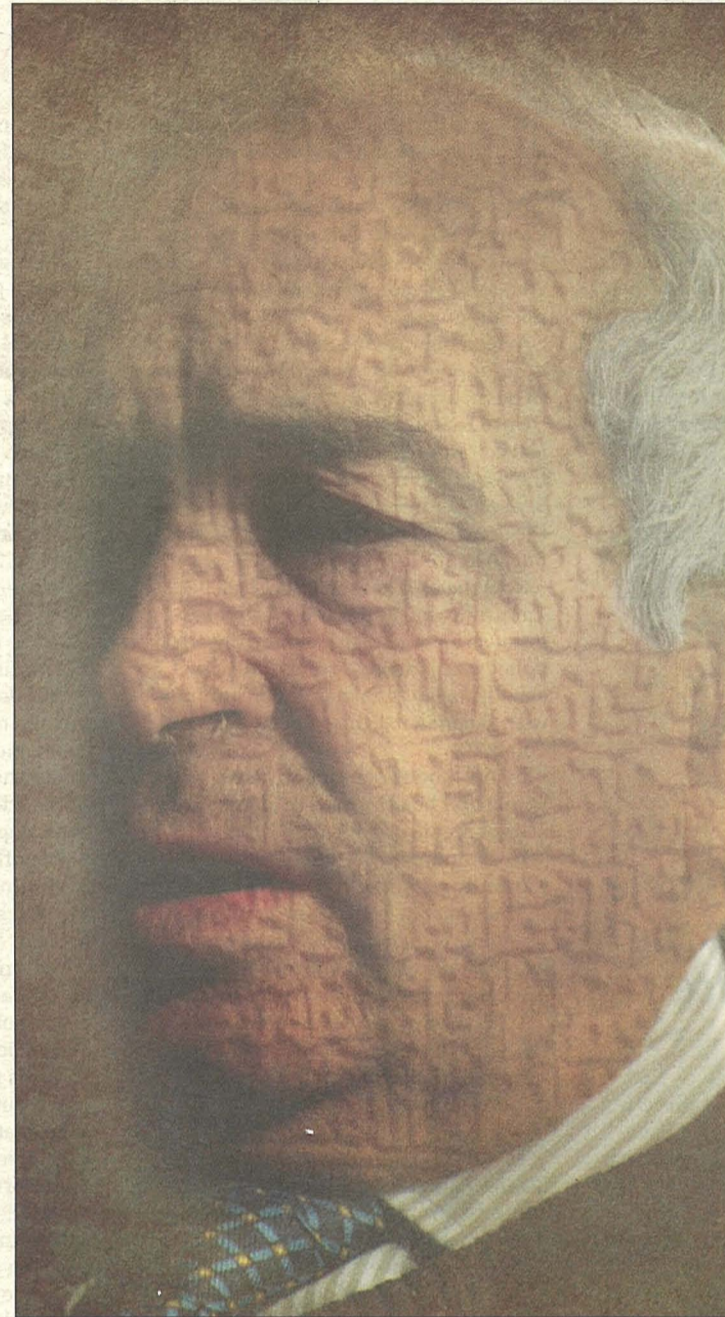
By its very nature history is not a quest to find the ultimate truth, it is a never-ending investigation and the most a historian can hope for is to provide a valid interpretation based on reliable evidence.

But there are then those moments in academic studies of history where historians do not just provide mildly different interpretations, but disagree in a spectacular way, and that is when history becomes terribly interesting and exciting. This is what makes history special and these strong disagreements provide great learning opportunities in the classroom which good history teachers use to their full potential.

Here's an example from European history that has been turned into a school history activity. I particularly enjoy going through the Battalion 101 exercise with my teacher trainees because it provides excellent pedagogical approaches on how to deal with historians' disagreements.

Battalion 101 was a troop of German soldiers who were like the German home guard in many ways – middle-aged men who took care of low key military tasks during World War II. They were definitely not the SS troops, however on one fateful day they came across a village and massacred all the villagers because they were Jews.

Historians have longed asked: 'why did they do it?' It is also similarly a good idea to have a question when teaching history in schools, it helps to create an inquiry and focus pupils' thought. In this case why did a group of German men, most of them just ordinary policemen, teachers, postmen, milkmen and tailors in their everyday lives, murder all



Medieval historian Godfrey Wettinger

the villagers?

Historians give very opposing reasons for an answer. One historian, Christopher Browning, says that they did this because they were ordinary men. Like

most people they took the easy

option, doing what everybody else did to protect themselves. The men of Battalion 101 weren't evil, or even Nazis for the most part. They were victims of an

extraordinary situation.

On the other hand Daniel Goldhagen's interpretation of this event strongly disagrees with Browning's. Goldhagen vehemently asserts that it is rubbish to excuse them. You cannot blame the circumstances they were in. They knew what they were doing and did it willingly because at the time they believed it was right to kill Jews.

A clear case of historians being poles apart in their interpretation of the same event.

The Maltese Christian continuity debate

Now in the case of Malta we have a number of historical incidents and explanations where historians are not in agreement, but perhaps none so strongly as the one on whether Christianity continued uninterrupted from the 1st century right up to today, or whether there was a time in history from the 1st century to today when the Maltese islands were not Christian.

For hundreds of years, Gian Francesco Abela's idea that Maltese Christianity can be traced back directly and continuously to the 1st century, from the coming of St Paul right up to today, prevailed.

However, medieval historian Godfrey Wettinger dropped a bombshell in the 1970s when he started to present his interpretation, which basically said that there is nothing to indicate the continuity of Christianity from the late 9th century to the 11th century on the Maltese Islands.

In all probability Christianity died out during Arab times except for the occasional captive, and the local Maltese integrated with the Arab newcomers and became Muslim.

It is difficult to uproot one strong paradigm and replace it with another, especially when there is strong emotional investment behind one or the

other. It is inconceivable for religious Catholics to even contemplate that their own countrymen and women converted to another religion and, to top it all, became Muslim!

So this interpretation was resisted and up to quite recently no history teacher ever tackled the issue in the classroom and for almost 40 years all history teachers opted to ignore Wettinger's interpretation and continued to teach the 17th century paradigm offered by Gian Francesco Abela and countless others.

The Battalion 101 exercise gave me the idea to try and tackle the problem in a similar way and I produced a pack published by the History Teachers' Association. Similarly to the Battalion 101 exercise, pupils have to analyse the evidence and take a stand as to which historian is the most reliable and has the strongest claim.

Historians dig in their heels

But the work for this pack was carried out in 2009 and published in 2010, precisely the time when Tristia ex Melitogaudo came out. This book by Stanley Fiorini, Horatio Vella and Joseph Brincat challenged for the first time Wettinger's interpretation.

I remember I excitedly attended the first presentation of the book where the now famous poem by the 12th century exiled poet in Malta and written in Greek, was presented by Stanley Fiorini and Horatio Vella.

I was very curious to see what the authors had found in this poem, for the poster announcing the event boasted a title which claimed, no less, "Evidence of Christian continuity during Arab times!"

Wow, what an amazing declaration, for up to that point in time, it had been just opinions and extrapolations of what might have happened, and no hard evidence as such. Apart from

possibly Joseph Brincat's work, which linguistically showed there were no sub-stratas in the Maltese language apart from English, Romance and Arabic languages. Very strange, considering our history goes back thousands of years.

In any case I found Stanley Fiorini's presentation a bit strange too, for it was a talk on how Byzantine words can still be found in our Maltese language today. He was mentioning a number of religious words.

Any school history secondary pupil will tell you that the arrival of 400 Rhodians with the knights in 1530, together with the slow but steady influx of Christians from Sicily (who followed the Greek rite) would account for these Greek Byzantine religious terms. Definitely not hard evidence of Christian continuity from before the coming of the Arabs.

Finally in the last 20 minutes of the talk Horatio Vella stood up and started to read parts of

bishop had come out together with a Christian community to greet Roger.

I asked as part of the audience who the 'he' mentioned in the poem was, and Fiorini answered that it was actually Roger the 2nd, King Roger not his father Count Roger who came in 1091. I wish they had explained that before because I thought Roger 2nd came to Malta more than 30 years after the first coming of the Normans, so it is not as significant as Roger the Count being greeted by a Bishop.

But still, maybe this was evidence that a Christian community with a Bishop had survived, although the fact that this is after all a fictional poem posed another challenge. How far can we say it is historically accurate? Can one say there are ghosts in Denmark because Shakespeare wrote about them in Hamlet? Maybe. After all, we do know a lot about the Ancient Greeks from what Homer wrote in his poems.

Wettinger was not to be outdone and in December 2010 he gave a paper at Castille where he made what he famously called an 'agonising reappraisal' of his own work. But if people thought he was going to say the Maltese might not have become Muslims, they were in for a shock.

On the contrary he said he had made a mistake in saying the Maltese under Arab rule had probably become Muslims, because there were no Maltese left! After the battle the Arabs had killed everybody and left the island empty, a complete genocide!

The evidence he presented seemed quite solid and holds up to scrutiny. He quoted from an array of Arab

historians and geographers Al Baqri, Al Himyari, Ibn Hauqal, Qazwini etc who all seemed to be in agreement that "the island of Malta remained after that a ruin without inhabitants".

To me that sealed it. In my view, balancing that avalanche of evidence against one line in a poem tipped the scale completely in favour of Wettinger's new claim, that is, that there was absolutely no continuity whatsoever, Christian or otherwise, of the Maltese prior to 870 and after. It also fitted in quite nicely with Joseph Brincat's explanation of no further sub-stratas beyond Arabic in the Maltese language, a very rare occurrence in languages unless there was a drastic sudden cut from one period to another.

Wettinger's vindication at Jeremy John's presentation

It might have sealed it for me but it was not the case for a lot of other people. For the next four years the debate raged on. Despite



Battalion 101: Since these German troops were not SS soldiers, why did they slaughter an entire Jewish village?

Wettinger's strong position Stanley Fiorini et al could be right and it is true there was room for doubt.

I thought I would just update my teaching pack for school children to include the new evidence: mainly Wettinger's Arab historians and more parts from the poem. But then another earth-shattering event occurred in the world of Medieval Maltese history and that was Jeremy Johns' talk on 20 May this year.

Jeremy Johns is an archaeologist at Oxford University, with special interest in the history of the Islamic Mediterranean world. Johns' presentation was based on two parts, one part dealt with Constance of Sicily, while the second part focused on the book Tristia ex Melitogaudo and the poem which had been used to challenge Wettinger's theory.

According to Johns the translation from Greek was incorrect and the statement on which Fiorini et al's whole interpretation rested did not say what the authors claimed! Jeremy Johns also referred to a Marc Lauxtermann paper published in 2014.

Marc Lauxtermann is a professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek language and his paper entitled Tomi, Mljet, Malta Critical notes on a Twelfth-Century Southern Italian Poem of Exile does not beat about the bush. Lauxtermann says that while the poem is 'an admittedly difficult text' the translation lacked 'philological rigour' and that it was wrongly translated. What it actually said was the following:

"He selected pious settlers for this place together with a bishop, who, moved by the Hand of Heaven, turned the hateful (mosques) where they called upon Mohammed into most holy churches and installed, in place of the most despicable mu'addibs, holy and good priests who worship the Holy Trinity in the ways of the Fathers".

The atmosphere in the Old Aula Magna University hall on that fateful evening of the 20 May was electrifying. The audience became fidgety and people

glanced at each other and as my teenage children would say, OMG.

Now there was no longer a shred of doubt Wettinger had got it absolutely right. The one sentence that had stood as the only evidence against his theory no longer existed but had been transformed into further evidence to consolidate his interpretation. After the Norman takeover, a bishop with a Christian community had been sent to Malta to convert it to Christianity.

Mgr Joseph Farrugia wrote in The Times of May 27th (incidentally on the day Wettinger's funeral was held, for Wettinger sadly passed away early Friday morning on the 24th, but fortunately not before being visited by Jeremy Johns and told the good news) that he (Mgr Farrugia) heard "relatively little of significance" during Jeremy Johns' talk.

In my opinion Mgr Farrugia either needs his ears tested or he is living in a parallel universe.

There was no longer a shadow of doubt that Wettinger had it absolutely right

But back to history teachers

What do history teachers do now? At this point in time I do not think it is any longer possible to present an 'either' or 'scenario, at least not until other evidence, if ever, comes to light. Getting your facts rights is not interpretation and it is unfair for history teachers as well as

pupils to start to query whether a translation is done well or not. As E.H. Carr says, "To praise a historian for his accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building. It is a necessary condition of his work."

Now the only way Wettinger's interpretation will be challenged is if some awesome new evidence comes along. Until that happens as the Disney song goes 'let it go'.

I understand perfectly Stanley Fiorini's complaint in his article Christianity controversy published in The Times on 19 June when he writes about his surprise that without warning their book Tristia ex Melitogaudo was removed from competing in the Book Prize of the year, alleging it was done by supporters of Wettinger's interpretation.

I also experienced something similar, but of course by those who, I believe, support the Christianity continuity theory promoted by Fiorini et al: I was very disappointed when a book I wrote for school children on St Paul was suddenly refused publication by a Maltese publication house which had commissioned the work in the first place.

I have no doubt that including one small page in the whole book casting doubt on uninterrupted Christianity by mentioning Wettinger's work played not a small part in my work being rejected, with no explanation ever given. The book is long finished but still to this day, lacking a publisher.

I have no allegiance to either interpretation, my only allegiance is to history. History is based on evidence and it is a sacrosanct rule that your interpretation is based as much as possible on sources and their correct translations – hidden agendas should not be the driving force and censoring people's work is not the way forward.

Yosanne Vella is Associate Professor at the University of Malta and the History and Social Studies co-ordinator of the Faculty of Education