



# Marsaskala in Muslim Malta and the Return to Christianity

(Part II)

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According to the Arab chroniclers, the island of Malta and Gozo fell into the hands of the Arabs on 29 August 870 A.D. According to some writers, Malta was invaded by order of the Emir of Sicily, Muhammad Garaniq, and an Aghlabite from North Africa. Some African chroniclers attest that the invasion departed from Tunis, which was the centre and capital of the Aghlabite Empire.

This moment in the history of Malta represents a historic breakthrough in terms of faith and identity, as besides the fact that the Arabs were Muslims, they had a different culture to that of the Byzantines. It should be pointed out that until this time, Christianity was not yet divided and therefore there was no identity crisis within the Church. Very little is known of the allegiance of the local Church at the moment Malta was taken over by the Arabs.

The island of Malta seems to have kept to the end its religious connection with Syracuse as this city fell finally into Arab hands seven years after the take over of the island by the same power. Little is known about the history of the Arab domination in Malta. It was a long rule running for over 200 years. From the scarce documentation available, it is said, that the island ended up uninhabited for a period of time. The main and maybe the only, important issue of this period referred by historians is that the Arabs gave their language to the few people living in Malta. Therefore, historical information regarding this era, and in particular about Marsaskala, can be built upon Arabic toponyms.

The fact that the word Marsa, meaning harbour, was used for this locality, shows that the Arabs may have considered this area as a port of call for their vessels. The other name of this locality Wied il-Għajn is of Arabic origin, which means water spring. This can be an indication of the relation with the maritime aspect, as ships could have used this area to be supplied with water.

When it comes to religious practice among the Maltese, it is shrouded in great controversy. Some historians think that during the 200 years of Arab rule, the local inhabitants were not free to fulfil their religious duties, but some still remained Christian, either by accepting to pay taxes to the Emir or by practising their Christian beliefs in hiding. This meant that the Maltese were persecuted for their Christian faith. Others are more categorical. They affirm

that Malta became totally Muslim under the Arabs. This too meant that the island suffered great persecution.

It is interesting to note that a place name at Marsaskala refers to Christian ethnicity; I am referring here to Tar-Rumi. This name was used by the Arabs when referring to Byzantine Christians. There should be no doubt that, in Malta, there were Byzantine Greeks at least at the latter phase of the Arab period. In fact, these Greeks would have helped the Normans of Sicily, to take over Malta from the Arabs.

In the year 1091, Count Roger invaded Malta and took command of the island. It appears that he was welcomed by Greek captives as well as the Arab rulers. Whatever the case, Roger adopted a policy of tolerance towards these two ethnicities. First of all, during the last phase of Arab rule in Malta, the Christian world experienced one of the greatest schisms when, in 1054, the Eastern part got separated from the West on what appeared, at face value, a theological question of the Filioque subject, but in reality it hid also big political issues. Each side excommunicated the other; literary this meant that both had the right to treat one another as enemy, even if both considered themselves Christians. One is tended to think that this was the reason why the Byzantine Christians welcomed King Roger with the word of Kyrie Eleison that is, Lord have Mercy. Roger showed an expression of tolerance and let them go to their own destination even if they may have supported the Muslims. Perhaps fearing that Roger would attack them as heretics for supporting Orthodoxy, they left the island. The same policy of tolerance was expressed towards the Muslims who remained, on the condition that they pay tribute to him and allow freedom to the Christians. In fact, from this point onwards, the Christian expression in Malta is strongly attached to the Latin faith. In terms of chronology, King Roger II strengthened the Norman hold in Malta when he sent a military mission to the island in 1127. From this year onwards the Latinization of the island increased. Eventually, the island of Malta passed under the Swabians (1194-1266), the Angevins (1266-1283) and the Aragonese (1283-1530). The last was one of the longest foreign rulers over Malta.

During this late medieval period, Wied il-Għajn was practically uninhabited. It was very unsafe to live next to the coast due to the frequent piratical attacks. The nearest inhabited villages were those of Żabbar and Żejtun.

However, it is very difficult to speak about Wied il-Għajn in relation to this period as a spiritual wasteland. The expression of religion cannot be divorced from the people. Despite that this was a big area, near the sea, and exposed to constant threat of piratical attack, the few peasants still wanted to have a small church in the area. A small countryside chapel dedicated to St Thomas, from which the nearby bay seems to have got its name, appears dating back to the Late Middle Ages, serving the spiritual needs of the few farmers and peasants that worked in the area. Not much historical information survived about this church, but from what has been written about it, it appears to be an old church of the Late Middle Ages. The fact that this church was the only ecclesiastical building in the area, as indicated on a map published in 1565, indicates that this church is an old building.



The sixteenth century marks three important events, all of which had an impact on Marsaskala. These are, the arrival of the Knights of St John in Malta, the Turkish Siege of 1565, and the holding of the General Council of the Church in Trent, which was an international event. This Council brought new pastoral guidance to the Church and the decisions taken, shaped the religious life even on a small island as Malta.

An extract from M.A. Thesis – *Understanding a Pastoral Shift – The Historical Transformation of the Rural Village Wied il-Għajn into an Urban Conglomeration Marsaskala* (2013). This is the second part of Mr. Casingena's thesis where as the first part Wied il-Għajn in Prehistoric and Punic Age, was published last year.

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