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Reflections on the Literary Sources on Byzantine Malta

Biagio Vella

Byzantium was a Greek colony at the mouth of the Thracian Bosphorus, occupying an important strategic position. This site was chosen by Constantine the Great in A.D. 324 as his imperial residence and renamed *Constantinopolis nova* (or *altera*) *Roma*. Since it was a *nova/altera Roma*, the people called themselves *Romaioi*, and not Byzantines, and Constantine's successors continued to regard themselves as the legitimate emperors of Rome until its capture by Mehmet II in 1453. The 'Byzantine' nomenclature is a convention, coined by French scholars during the 17th century to describe the Roman Empire in the East. Up to the reign of Justinian I (527-565), the official language of this Eastern Empire was Latin, the language of Rome. However, after the death of this emperor, the language of the administration and of its literature was rooted in Attic Greek, in contrast to the spoken language that continued to develop and increasingly to diverge from Classical Greek. The widely spoken Greek that gradually replaced the local dialects after the establishment of Alexander's empire in the 4th century B.C. is the Koine (*hē koinē dialektos* 'the common language').

This great Eastern "Roman" Empire maintained its struggle against the barbaric invasions, although not always successfully, and throughout the centuries attempted many times to reconquer its lost provinces. Justinian I, who seemed to consider himself an *alter Augustus*, attempted and succeeded in reconquering and restoring some of the Roman territory which had been lost through the "age of migrations". However, after this great Emperor's death, all his reconquests were subsequently lost.

Malta came under Roman hegemony in 218 B.C. when, according to Livy, the Carthaginian garrison stationed in Malta was handed

over to the consul Tiberius Sempronius Longus.¹ The Maltese archipelago was given the status of *Civitas Foederata* for the island's loyalty to Rome during the Second Punic War, and later, the status of *Municipium*. Although sources are scanty during the Western Roman period, yet at least, we have a good description of the island given to us by Marcus Tullius Cicero² in his oration *In Verrem*. The Maltese archipelago was always considered as a part of Sicily under a Roman *propraetor*.³

How do these islands of *Μελίτη* and *Γαύλος* enter into the context of the twelve hundred years of the Byzantine Empire? Procopius of Caesarea, who was not only the advisor and secretary of Belisarius, but also an eye-witness of the wars carried by this general of the Emperor Justinian I, gives us a couple of lines about Malta and Gozo in his *Bellum Vandalicum*.⁴ He narrates that in 533 the Byzantine fleet under the command of Belisarius *προσέσχον* (put in/brought ships to land /touched at) the islands of Malta and Gozo on its way to North Africa in order to clear it of the Vandals as ordered by Justinian I. Many scholars⁵ have contributed and discussed this historical line, especially the significance of *προσέσχον*. To my mind, its meaning is to be derived only from the Classical usage of the verb, since Procopius was writing in the tradition of the best Greek of the educated people of his times. My opinion is that the Byzantines set foot on Malta, perhaps even leaving behind a small garrison, but left immediately in order to complete their principal aim – that of reconquering North Africa from the unsuspecting Vandals. T.S. Brown is right in stating

1 Livy, 21.51: *a Lilybaeo consul, Hierone cum classe regia dimisso relictoque praetore ad tuendam Siciliae oram, ipse in insulam Melitam, quae a Carthaginiensibus tenebatur, traiecit. aduenienti Hamilcar Gisgonis filius, praefectus praesidii, cum paulo minus duobus milibus militum oppidumque cum insula traditur.*

2 Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.4.

3 Pliny The Elder, *Natural History*, 3.8.

4 Procopius, *Bellum Vandalicum*, 1.14.16-17: *ἀράμενοί τε κατὰ τάχος τὰ ἰστία, Γαύλω τε καὶ Μελίτη ταῖς νήσοις προσέσχον, αἱ τὸ τε Ἀδριατικὸν καὶ Τυρρηρικὸν πέλαγος διορίζουσι. ἔνθα δὴ αὐτοῖς Εὐρου πολὺ τι πνεῦμα ἐπιπεσὼν τῇ ὑστεραίᾳ τὰς ναῦς ἐς τὴν Λιβύης ἀκτὴν ἤνεγκεν ἐς χωρίον, ὃ δὴ Κεφαλὴν Βράχους τῇ σφετέρᾳ γλώσσει καλοῦσι Ρωμαῖοι.*

5 Vd. Bibliography esp. Brown, Bonanno, Buhagiar, Dalli.

that Malta was not mentioned in the list of Hierocles' *Synecdemus*, compiled in 527-528, but had this list been compiled five years later, I am sure that Hierocles would have included both Malta and Gozo with the other lands of the Empire, since these two islands became part of the Byzantine Empire in 533. Procopius continues to narrate that the next day a north easterly wind arose. This strong wind was favourable to Belisarius' fleet to reach North Africa as early as possible and take the Vandals unawares. In fact, the fleet arrived safely, and disembarked the army at what is now Ras Kaboudia, the eastern port of Tunisia. This great haste of Belisarius precluded the Byzantine fleet of taking advantage of our natural harbour since his first and only objective was to catch the Vandals unawares and defeat them, thus reconquering North Africa for Justinian I. Whether it was the year 533, or later, the Maltese archipelago is sure to have come under Byzantine hegemony in the 6th century, and remained thus attached to the Eastern 'Roman' world until the Maltese archipelago was captured in 870 by the Aghlabids from North Africa. There is also the possibility that in 535-536, during the Gothic war and at the time Belisarius was besieging and attempting to recover Sicily, Malta could have helped Belisarius' fleet and forces by providing provisions.

Alexander P. Kazhdan states that by the year 592, Malta was the seat of a bishopric within the Sicilian province, initially under papal jurisdiction, but that by c. 756 it had been transferred to the patriarchate of Constantinople. However, there is no evidence that any bishop of Malta had ever taken part in any Roman synod or Oecumenical Council of the Orthodox Church, as sometimes claimed.

According to Nicephorus, by 637 A.D. Malta had its own *δούξ*.⁶ Schlumberger's interpretation of the seal of an '*archon kai droungarios*'⁷ suggests that owing to Malta's strategic position a Byzantine fleet was stationed in its natural harbour. There is also literary evidence that Malta was used as a place of exile.

Around the year 1050, during the reign of Constantine IX Monomachos of the Macedonian Dynasty, an attempt was made

6 For the Latin *dux*.

7 *Revue des études grecques* 13 (1900) 492.

to recapture the Maltese archipelago from the Arabs but which, as Himyari states, failed miserably.⁸

Mention ought to be made of the three letters sent by Pope Saint Gregory I to the Sicilian Church concerning Malta.⁹ While the letter of 592 condemned some doctrinal issues involving forms of heresies which were infiltrating Malta, the letter of October 598 chastised the rogue behaviour of Malta's Bishop Lucullus who was subsequently deposed in 599 and succeeded by the Benedictine Monk, Dom Trayanus, whose first job was to secure the return of all ecclesiastical property expropriated from the Maltese diocese by Bishop Lucullus and his son.

This is as far as the literary sources speak about the three and a half centuries of Byzantine rule in Malta. The lacunae, which, as is evident, are many, need to be filled in by archaeology, which, though meagre and difficult in such a disturbed land as Malta, has already added substantially to our knowledge of Byzantine Malta. Mention ought to be made especially of the *Missione archaeologica a Malta*, undertaken by the *Università 'La Sapienza'* of Rome, and which was fundamental in reviving archaeological excavations in Malta, especially at *tas-Silġ* in the 1960s. Mario Buhagiar's numerous publications have also contributed to making this period better known and understood, as well as also the efforts of the Department of Archaeology of the University of Malta under its distinguished heads of department, both past and present.

Dr Biagio Vella is a former lecturer in Classics at the University of Malta.

8 Brincat (1995) 13.

9 Borg (2008) 4.

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