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Οἱ Παῖδες Ἰσῆου **The Arabs in Malta: 870-1150**

*Stanley Fiorini and Martin R. Zammit**

Οἱ παῖδες Ἰσῆου is the phrase used by the mid-12th-century anonymous poet exiled on Melitogaudos to describe his neighbours on the island. As the publication of the long lament by this poet¹ did not give much attention to his unneighbourly neighbours, it is the object of this communication to take a closer look at this community, addressing the related questions of who, when and under what conditions were they there, in the light of what was happening at the time in Sicily, and to the South, in North Africa. We conclude with a hypothetical reconstruction of developments in Malta during the Arab period.

Ishmael, Abraham's son by his concubine, Hagar, evicted with his mother into the wilderness of Beersheba by Abraham's jealous wife, Sara, is foretold of him in *Genesis* that "he shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin".² According to legend, he went on to father a great multitude of disparate nomadic desert tribes,³ but, especially in the post-Qur'ānic tradition, he becomes linked to Mecca and the Arab world more closely than by the Qur'ān itself. Arab genealogists count him as the ancestor of the northern Arabs and, consequently, of the Arabized tribes (the *musta'riba*).⁴ The descendants of Hagar and Ishmael, coterminous

¹ J. Busuttil, S. Fiorini and H.C.R. Vella (2010).

² *Gen.* 16.11-12 N.R.S.V.

³ According to the Bible [*I Chron.* 1.29-31]: "The firstborn of Ishmael, Nebaioth; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael".

⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 4184-185 s.v. Isma'il. Cf. also P.K. Hitti (2002), 30-32, who elaborates: "The *Musta'ribah* are the Hijazis, Najdis, Nabataeans and Palmyrenes, all descended from 'Adnan, an offspring of Ishmael".

with Saracens and Moslems, were referred to in a rather derogatory way as *Agarenoí* by Western Medieval writers.⁵ This feeling of resentment and even of hatred surfaces clearly in the diatribe of the anonymous poet against them, the source of his suffering:

“... the children of godless Hagar - παῖδες Ἄγαρά θεοῦ - he had to live with their repugnant customs, unjust arrogance and insolence, hunger, thirst, seizure of belongings, repulsive customs like sleeping on mats; on whose account he was deprived of the drinking of wine which his stomach needed; they even denied him the singing of sacred hymns;⁶ [he lashes out at]

“... the impudence of the godless [sons of Hagar] - θράσος... ἄθέων

“... the heresiarch, all-abominable Mohammed –παμμάρων Μουχάμετ

“... [telling how] the [Christians finally] got rid of the hated things by which they used to invoke Mohammed - τὰ μὲν μισητὰ οἷς ἐκάλουν Μουχάμετ

“... and the places of the most hated Mouddibi - τῶν μουδιβίων δὲ μουσαρωτάτων τόπους”.⁷

The epithet ἄθεοῦ for Hagar and Ishmael, especially in their role of progenitors of the adherents to Islam certainly requires a word of explanation in view of the fact that Moslems, adorers of *Allāh*, are far from being atheists. The term is seen to be a pejorative appellative if we note a parallel description of Latin Christians in the *Vita* of Luca, Bishop of Isola Capo Rizzuto in Calabria [1035-1040], written by an anonymous Greek with an axe to grind against the Latins. For him, the Greeks were

⁵ Gal. 4.22-31. Diplomas of 1095 in S. Cusa (1868), 1.549; M. Amari (1982), 1.172.

⁶ J. Busuttil *et al.* (2010), xxiv-xxv.

⁷ J. Busuttil *et al.* (2010), 106-107, 166-167 (text ff.54, 84rv).

simply πιστοί, but for the Latins he reserves hard and harsh words like κακόδοχοι and, indeed, ἄθροιοι ἔχθροί, which they certainly were not.⁸

Who, then, were these *Agarenoί*, masters of *Melitogaudos* till Count Roger II's invasion and siege of 1127? The Maltese Islands had been held by Byzantium at least since the end of the Vandal domination of North Africa and ecclesiastically had pertained to the Byzantine Church since c. 756.⁹ Byzantine power came to an abrupt halt in 870 when the Arabs ousted them after a protracted siege. We need to look carefully at what happened in and after 870 in order to understand the nature and character of these people. The events of 869-870 are treated by various authors,¹⁰ citing well-known Arab sources which always speak about *Mālīṭa*, ignoring completely the neighbouring island of Gozo.¹¹ It is generally held that Malta suffered a terrible devastation evident in the total destruction of the fortress (its *ḥiṣn*, **not** its *madīna* – the city), arson at the Byzantine sanctuary at *Tas-Silġ*, the fact that the Bishop of Malta was found in chains at Palermo soon afterwards, and the important fact, cited by Talbi (and corroborated by al-Ḥimyarī), that an inscription at Qaṣr Ḥabashī in Sousse (Tunisia) vaunted the fact that the tower was built with the ashlar and marble columns recycled from the Church of Malta. This is all certainly compatible with the fact that, in the 9th century, Malta was governed by an *Archon kai droungarios*, that is, a military commander at the head of a force of some 3,000 soldiers.¹² The resistance by this Byzantine force was bound to provoke a retaliation, as described, by the attacking Aghlabids. Talbi notes, however, that the Church appears to have been singled out for exceptional ill-treatment when one is aware

⁸ G. Schirò (1954), 13, cited in L. Branco (1983). We should like to thank Prof. E.A. Mallia for bringing this latter publication to our attention. The epithet ἄθροιοι for the Saracens is encountered in other contexts; cf. Cusa (1868), 4: τῶν ἀθέων ἀγαρηνῶν (doc. dated 1097), and Cusa (1868), 396: τῶν ἀθέων σαρακηνῶν (doc. dated 1105).

⁹ T.S. Brown (1975), 72-73.

¹⁰ M. Talbi (1966), G. Wettinger (1986), J.M. Brincat (1991), C. Dalli (2006), S. Mercieca (2010), among others.

¹¹ Qazwīnī, Ḥimyarī, Nuwayrī, Athīr and the Cambridge Chronicle (as in M. Amari {1982}). Other sources, such as al-Jazzār, in M. Talbi (1966).

¹² T.S. Brown (1975).

that Moslems were, usually, more lenient when dealing with cultic and religious institutions. Talbi suggests that one cannot take a simplistic view of the way events evolved in 870. He cites evidence for a prolonged siege with an initial unsuccessful attack in 869, followed by the devastation of 28/29 August, 870, and a futile later attempt by the Byzantines to regain the island. He suggests that, after this, there would have been a treaty (*'ahd*) with the vanquished which was probably broken by and at the behest of the bishop with the evident consequences of reprisal.¹³ What Talbi fails to mention is that Ibn al-Khaṭīb records how in the month of the first *Jumādā* of the year 261/875, full four years after August, 870, the island's 'king' (*malik*) was made prisoner.¹⁴ This fully supports Talbi's suspicion and lends weight to the argument against an immediate retaliatory devastation on the part of the invaders.¹⁵ In view of this, Mercieca's assertion that the Aghlabids were in no mood to strike any deal with the vanquished does not appear to hold water,¹⁶ especially, judging by what happened both in Sicily and in Africa. Thus, in Africa, Ibrāhīm I [d. 812], founder of the Aghlabid dynasty, placed the bureaucracy of administration in the hands of *mawālī* (non-Arab Muslims) and *afāriqa*, the indigenous native Romanized Christian population of Ifrīqiya.¹⁷ In Sicily, several treaties (*amān*) were entered with local communities, such as Noto, Scicli, Agrigento,¹⁸ and here, in Metcalfe's view, the presence

¹³ M. Talbi (1966), 475-476.

¹⁴ *Centenario... Amari*, 2.439 (cf. M. Redjala {1973}, 205): *افتحت جزيرة مالطة واسر ملكها في جمادى الأولى سنة احدى وستين ومانتين. Wa-futiḥat jazīrat māliṭa wa-usira malikuhā fī jumādā al-uwla sanat iḥdā wa-sittin wa-mi'atayn* "The island of Malta was conquered and its king was taken prisoner in (the month of) the first *Jumādā* of 261 [11.2.875]."

¹⁵ This scenario is uncannily similar to that painted by the Maltese forger, the Abbate Vella, who, publishing his writings in 1789, a century before Amari's publication of Arabic sources, asserts that the island's Bishop Paulus' treasonable activity concerned sending, on 8 Ausah (*sic*), 264 / 878, two vessels with provisions for the besieged city of Syracuse, which fell on 15 *Ramaḍān*, 264 / 21 May, 878: A. Airoidi (1789), 1.2.174-175. It is J.b. Barnard's opinion ({1975}, 165, n. 22), that even if "we must ascribe to Vella a high talent for forgery, it is very plain that he falsified from a basis of knowledge".

¹⁶ S. Mercieca (2010), 100.

¹⁷ L. Chiarelli (2011), 8, 67.

¹⁸ L. Chiarelli (2011), 41.

of so many Christians working the estates in Western and Central Sicily proves that the conquering Aghlabids were more interested in procuring a source of labour to till the fields than in wanton destruction,¹⁹ stressing that, in Sicily, “the Aghlabids appear to have avoided replicating the worst excesses of the *jund* (‘standing army’) in Ifrīqiya, where their control over the countryside had occasionally threatened to destabilize overall Aghlabid authority. Rather, it was farmer-colonists from Ifrīqiya, along with indigenous Christians, who lived and worked on the land itself.”²⁰ Be that as it may, in spite of this...

Depopulation?

Two main texts are adduced by some in support of a hypothesis that the archipelago was completely depopulated and left in this state of abandon for a good 170 years after 870. These sources are al-Ḥimyarī, who asserts that “after that, the island of Malta remained an uninhabited ruin (*khirba*)... [but] after the year 440 A.H., the Muslims peopled it...”, and Ibn Ḥawqal who describes ‘*Mālīṭa*’ as “inhabited only by wild donkeys and sheep”. *A priori*, one can state that it is hard to accept that the Arabs, having managed to oust the Byzantines, should leave the place unattended and open for an easy retaking by the enemy, who were certainly interested in holding on to the strategic island. This is evident from the fact that, in 1053, the Byzantines made yet another bid at retaking the island when they attacked the recently settled Arab colony. It is to be remarked that often a certain degree of hyperbole is used in descriptions of tragic events such as the taking of the island in 870. Suffice it to mention one example concerning the Maltese Islands themselves which were purportedly devastated by Bernardus de Sarriano – *obsedit, combussit et disrobavit [eas]* – according to a document of 13 February, 1298, when a will of

¹⁹ A. Metcalfe (2009), 14. Incidentally, one can mention that on these estates there is evidence, albeit later, of Maltese and Gozitan serfs: S. Cusa (1868), 49, 164, 251, 253, 260, 276, 475, 521, 581, 583.

²⁰ A. Metcalfe (2009), 37.

exactly a year later is witness to a normal rhythm of life on Gozo.²¹ One can, perhaps, further excuse al-Ḥimyarī on the grounds that he was not exactly an eye-witness of events, writing as he did in the 14th-century (at the earliest) and basing his conclusions on the writings of others.²² On the other hand, even if Ibn Ḥawqal lived much nearer these events, being a 10th-century traveller who wrote c.980, his text is faulted on the grounds that it confuses Mālīṭa with other islands, Khālīṭa and Jālīṭa, palaeographically similarly written, located some 30 km. off the Tunisian northern coast near Bizerta. As to the confusion of Mālīṭa with Jālīṭa, it is to be noted that al-Dimashqī [13th-century] distinguishes very clearly between them: ‘*Malte... avec une ville du même nom* and, in the same paragraph, *Jalita, connue sous le nom d’Ile aux moutons.*’²³ It is plausible that Ibn Ḥawqal, who was not very likely a visitor to these islands, confused the two descriptions known to him only from other authors.

For Wettinger, however, this text is of pivotal and crucial importance in order to establish his pet theory of ethnic and consequent religious discontinuity with the islands’ Byzantine Christian past. For this reason, in his own words, he makes “a much needed public agonizing reappraisal” of Ibn Ḥawqal’s reference to Malta,²⁴ in order to counteract what other serious researchers had concluded. Already, in 1982, Luttrell had dismissed the text as one that “cannot be considered a reliable source for Maltese history”.²⁵ On the other hand, although both Dalli and Brincat do discuss the text and its inherent difficulties in their earlier writing, after

²¹ For the attack, cf. H. Finke (1922), 69, Doc. 32. For the will of 8.2.1299, cf. H. Bresc (1974), 317-320, Doc. I.

²² J.M. Brincat (1995), 33-34, 38. It is to be remarked that not all scholars interpret al-Ḥimyarī as rigidly as Wettinger does. Arabist Michael Cooperson (2015)’s more mature second communication on the subject (348) is a reconsideration of his earlier position, and concludes that “the argument against total depopulation seems at least tenable”.

²³ M. Redjala (1973), 204.

²⁴ G. Wettinger (2011), 372.

²⁵ A. Luttrell (1982), 160.

mature consideration, they opt to omit altogether every mention of it in their later work.²⁶ In this, Wettinger is isolated.

But these are not the only arguments against depopulation. Even if the period 870-1048 in Maltese History is practically shorn of all documentary evidence, a fact that has given scope for much speculation, favouring among others, the interpretation of al-Ḥimyarī's text that the island was entirely depopulated, some snippets of information can still be gleaned from a variety of sources, as will be discussed next.

Malta in the 10th century.

The political scene of the Arab power at the time was a rather complex skein, a tangled mass, of relationships. The Fāṭimid Shī'ite caliphate established itself in Ifrīqiyah in A.D. 909 as a deliberate challenge to the religious headship of the Islamic world represented by the Sunnī Abbāsids of Baghdad. Ifrīqiya was then ruled by the Aghlabids, a splinter dynasty of the 'Abbāsids; it is recalled that the Maltese islands were incorporated in *Dār al-Islām* in 869-70 by the Aghlabids. 'Ubaydullāh al-Mahdī [909-934], the founder of the Fāṭimid caliphate, soon overran the whole of the Maghrib to the west of Ifrīqiyah and eastward as far as the Egyptian border; subsequently after 969, his immediate successors wrested the whole of Egypt from its rulers and established there the new City of al-Qāhira, modern Cairo, making it their capital. The Fāṭimid dynasty began to decline in strength after 996 with the coming to the throne of an eleven-year-old, Abū 'Alī Maṣṣūr al-Ḥākīm [996-1021], the sixth Fāṭimid caliph. Al-Ḥākīm's son and successor, al-Zāhir, was sixteen when he came to the throne and reigned till 1035, being succeeded by Ma'add al-Mustaṣir (the Victorious) [1035-1094] – whose name appears on the gold quarter dinar minted in Malta in 1079, recently discovered – who, like his grandfather, was only eleven on his accession. By this time, the Fāṭimid domains had shrunk to a little more than Egypt itself.

²⁶ C. Dalli (2002), 31. J.M. Brincat (1991), 17-18 and J.M. Brincat (1995), 41-43. For later writings, C. Dalli (2006); J.M. Brincat (2011).

The Arab historian Hitti asserts that under al-Mahdī, and therefore between 909 and 934, Malta and the other Mediterranean islands as far north as Corsica “felt the power of the fleet which he had inherited from the Aghlabids”.²⁷ Even if, unfortunately, he gives no precise archival reference for this precious information, one can narrow down the possible sources as follows. Relating al-Mahdī’s exploits, Hitti recounts chronologically how the Fāṭimid leader extended his rule over the whole North African territory from Morocco of the Idrīsids to the confines of Egypt, taking Alexandria in 914. In 916, he devastated the Delta. In that same year, he sent Abū Sa’īd Mūsāb. Aḥmad al-Ḍayf, of the Kutāma Berber tribe, as Governor of Sicily.²⁸ More importantly, Hitti asserts that al-Mahdī established friendly relations with the rebel Ibn Ḥafṣūn [*ob.* 917] in Spain,²⁹ which provoked a state of warfare between the Fāṭimids in Ifrīqiya and the Umayyads in Spain. Before c. 920, al-Mahdī took up residence in the new capital of al-Mahdiyya, and precisely in the slot 917-920, he gives the information that Malta, Sardinia, Corsica, the Balearics,³⁰ and other islands felt the power of the fleet which al-Mahdī had inherited from the Aghlabids. It is seen that the time-window for the event is rather narrow, and it is placed in the context of the conflict with Spain. He continues to relate how ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III [912-969], the vigorous new caliph of Cordoba, enlarged and renovated his fleet, making it second to none other at the time, with Almería as its chief harbour, with which he disputed with the Fāṭimid navy the supremacy over the Western Mediterranean. He cites Ibn Khaldūn for a Spanish attack, in 956, with seventy ships, devastating the North African coast in retaliation for a raid by the Sicilian fleet.³¹ This raid, according to Amari, took place when al-Mu’izz b.al-Manṣūr b.al-Qā’im bi-amr Illāh, fourth Fāṭimid Caliph, in 344 A.H. (27.4.955 – 14.4.956), ordered al-Ḥasan

²⁷ P.K. Hitti (2002), 618.

²⁸ On al-Ḍayf [916-918], cf. L. Chiarelli (2011), 80, nn.75-82.

²⁹ On Ibn Ḥafṣūn and the relation with Spain, cf. P.K. Hitti (2002), 518-520. For the Fāṭimid context of relations with Spain, cf. M. Brett (2001), 226-231.

³⁰ The Balearic Islands became attached to the Umayyad Emirate since 903 (P.K. Hitti {2002}, 548). Corsica and Sardinia were certainly targeted by the Fāṭimid navy in raids returning from Genoa during 934 (A. Metcalfe {2009}, 49).

³¹ P.K. Hitti (2002), 521.

b. ‘Alī, ‘*āmil* of Sicily, to attack the Spanish coast around Almería, which he did successfully, devastating the land and carrying back with him much booty and prisoners.³² Unfortunately, the earlier attacks on the islands, mentioned, only figure in Ibn Khaldūn in an imprecise manner. Amari’s rendering is:

*I Musulmani... insignorironsi di tutte le isole staccate dalla Terraferma come Maiorca, Minorca, Ivisa, la Sardegna, la Sicilia, Pantelleria, Malta, Creta, Cipro e tutti i reami dei Rum.*³³

This episode certainly attests to the bad blood that existed between the Shīʿite Fāṭimids in Ifrīqiya and the Sunnī Umayyads of Spain. But confrontation also existed with the Sunnī Sicilians. The early days of the Fāṭimid rule in Sicily witnessed moves by al-Mahdī to change the style of government, introducing various innovative measures, including new taxes, which were resented by the Sicilians. These, who already under the Aghlabids were yearning for independence from Ifrīqiya, now openly revolted in 912-913, led, apparently, by Aḥmad b. Ziyādat Allāh b. Qurhub.³⁴ In the following year, this resentment culminated in a surprise attack on the Fāṭimid fleet, berthed at Lamta, by Ibn Qurhub’s son, Muḥammad. This was followed by a second attack for which al-Mahdī was better prepared.³⁵ Ibn Qurhub soon lost favour in Sicily. Signs of dissatisfaction appeared first in the Berber stronghold of Agrigento which, in 916, sent messengers to al-Mahdī offering their allegiance to the Fāṭimids. The revolt spread to Palermo, the capital, and a Fāṭimid army landed at Trapani to assert its domination. It is significant that, faced with this situation, Ibn Qurhub planned to flee to Spain,³⁶ seeking the protection of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III, the Fāṭimids’ enemy.

So here we have evidence of Fāṭimid aggressive action from Ifrīqiya aimed at Siculo-Spanish common interests, creating the right context in

³² M. Amari (1982), 2.169.

³³ M. Amari (1982), 2.161 (adh-Dhahabī) and 164-165 (Ibn Khaldūn).

³⁴ Ibn ‘Idhārī, as in M. Amari (1982), 2.22-23.

³⁵ L. Chiarelli (2011), 78-79.

³⁶ Ibn ‘Idhārī, as in M. Amari (1982), 2.24-25.

which to interpret al-Mahdī's asserted attacks on the western islands, including Malta. Against this background, it is very plausible to suggest that rebellious Sicilian forces were present on the island, in the early 10th century, for al-Mahdī to attack, probably with his favoured supporters, the Kutāma Berbers that formed the backbone of his *jund*. This is highly suggestive of a continued Sunnī presence on the island for half a century after 870 with the effective Shī'ite control of the island not happening before 920. It can consequently be plausibly asserted that the Maltese Islands saw, as a result of this event, a 'changing of the guard' from Aghlabid to Fāṭimid occupiers and defenders in the form of Kutāma Berbers.

In order to understand better the reasons behind the struggles for power that enmeshed also the Maltese Islands, one needs to look deeper beneath the overarching Sunnī-Shī'a rivalry and come to grips with the ethnic composition of the grass-root populations involved. Maltese sources being practically non-existent and shedding precious little light on this matter, one needs to extrapolate from what was happening around the island, to its north in Sicily and to its south in North Africa. The Arab settlers in North Africa came from the East – Arabia, Syria, Yemen. Having dominated the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa, the Berbers, most of whom became, to varying extents, Arabicized and Islamized, fanned out west into Spain and north into Sicily, engulfing Malta. In their expansion into Sicily, the Arabs, by far less numerous than the Berbers, represented the dominant ruling class, the aristocracy and large land owners who settled primarily in urban centres, while the mass of Berber tribes settled mostly, but not exclusively (cf. Agrigento, for example), in the countryside.³⁷ From what is being said, on the assumption that the Maltese Islands were settled at this time (for more on this argument, *infra*), one is already led to think that in Malta, likewise, there were more Berbers than Arabs, a hypothesis that finds confirmation in the islands' rural toponymy.³⁸

³⁷ L. Chiarelli (2011), 153.

³⁸ G. Wettinger (1973), wherein the following toponyms are recorded: *Tal-Berbri* (at *Il-Għassiewi*, at *L-Għargħar* and on Gozo), *Wied Berbri* (near *Mtaħleb*), *Rdum ta' Għar Berbri*

The Berbers were the backbone of the *jund*, for which reason they commanded considerable power, at times in competition with the Arab élite whose haughtiness in their respect was often the cause of resentment.³⁹ On the other hand, they suffered from a perennial weakness due to the deep-seated tribal rivalries among them. Thus, whereas during the Aghlabid (Sunnī) invasion of Sicily the Berber tribes of Zanāta and Hawwāra were in the ascendancy, within a century they lost their primacy to the rival tribes of Kutāma and Ṣanhāja who favoured and were favoured by the Fāṭimid (Shīʿa) regime that ousted the Aghlabids at the turn of the 10th century.⁴⁰ This dichotomy is, of course, a very simplistic representation of the forces at play. There existed various under-currents and cross-currents of other affiliations along religious lines. Foremost among these was the Ibāḍite trade network that flourished in North Africa and carried over into Sicily where it was very active in the political, economic and religious life.⁴¹ This network was based on the confession and tribal association, comprising the Hawwāra, Nafzāwa and Zanāta Berber tribes, embracing also others like the Barqajāna, the butt of Ibn Ḥawqal's criticism, but excluding altogether the Kutāma and Ṣanhāja tribes, the latter embracing the Zīrid dynasty of Ifrīqiya that emerged after 973.⁴² As will be seen, from Malta's perspective, it is especially important to note that among the North African localities dominated by the Ibāḍites, there was the Island of Jerba.⁴³ It is worth noting that, in the 7th-8th centuries, the Ibāḍites, together with the Ṣufrīs, constituted the main Berber resistance against the invading Arabs, by whom they were hated and despised as Khārijites (outlaws and rebels).⁴⁴

and *Xagħra ta' Għar Berbri* (at *Bir Nuħħala*), *Qortin ta' Għar Berbri* (at *Wardija tan-Nadur*) and an unlocated *Bur tal-Berberi*.

³⁹ L. Chiarelli (2011), 5-7.

⁴⁰ L. Chiarelli (2011), 72.

⁴¹ L. Chiarelli (2011), 134.

⁴² L. Chiarelli (2011), 115. M. Amari (1982), 1.430, n.3; 2.60, n.2.

⁴³ L. Chiarelli (2011), 97, 286, n.517.

⁴⁴ A. Metcalfe (2009), 7.

Evidence from Archaeology

Returning to the depopulation hypothesis, it is worth recalling that the Museum of Archaeology holds the copper head of a signet stamp with an inscription in Arabic reading:



Front view of the signet stamp showing the copper head



Side view of the signet stamp

Inscription: مختار اول قرية لونتقية علي محمد ١١٣

Transcription: *Mukhtār awwal qaryat lūntifiyya ‘Alī Muḥammad 311*

Translation: ‘Alī Muḥammad the first mayor of the village of Lūntifiyya – (year) 311.⁴⁵

It bears the Year 311 of the *Hijra*, corresponding to 923-924 of the Christian era,⁴⁶ and was found at *Għerixem (Rabat)*. Could *Lūntifiyya* be an early form of *Għajn Tuffieħa*, occasionally recorded as *Antifa*?⁴⁷

One can, of course, certainly counter that this object does not prove anything as the conditions under which it was recovered, in the absence of a proper stratigraphic context, are not scientifically unchallengeable. However, more secure archaeological data can be adduced to show that the 9th-11th centuries can no longer be thought of as sterile, as has consistently been claimed in the past. In their preliminary survey of the ceramics found at Mdina, Molinari and Cutajar conclude that “Mdina is clearly occupied throughout the 11th century and possibly in the late 10th century as well”.⁴⁸ Furthermore, more recent independent investigations leave little room for doubt on this matter. Joint work looking into the Holocene climates and human impact on the Maltese Islands analyzed sedimentary and palinological data collected from three cores from the Holocene and shallow-marine deposits of the archipelago. The pollen analysis shows deforestation from *Pinus-Cupressaceae* woodland in the early Neolithic, and then a long, but relatively stable history of agriculturally degraded environments to the present day, consistent with continued cereal agriculture, excluding a hiatus in human occupation. Admittedly, the researchers cautiously recommend “higher resolution and better-dated studies” before dismissing the depopulation theory conclusively.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Museum object no. 23,000.

⁴⁶ It has been objected that the numeral 311 need not refer to the year, but this is readily ruled out if one compares the stamp with another modern stamp, referring to the first *mukhtār* of Gaza’s Burayr village, bearing an identical legend, in Arabic and in English, in which, corresponding to 311, there is clearly the date ‘1356/1938’ (<http://www.palestineremembered.com/Gaza/Burayr/picture18492.html>).

⁴⁷ S. Fiorini (1999), Docs 266, 267 [1399]; S. Fiorini (2004), Doc. 7 [1401], Doc. 109 [1407], *et passim*.

⁴⁸ A. Molinari and N. Cutajar (1999), 11.

⁴⁹ F.A. Carroll *et al.* (2012).

The third line of research investigated the substantial amount of amphorae unearthed in these islands as an indicator of economic activity in Early Medieval Malta. In abstract, it is concluded that “the Maltese Islands played a significant role within the Byzantine maritime strategy, especially in terms of the inter-regional trade in staple goods”. The *Tas-Silġ* site alone produced no less than 3,200 rim-sherds dateable continuously from the 3rd century B.C. to the 12th century A.D. In the *Mdina* excavations, then, this is “even more intensely attested for the later 9th and early 10th century – that is, in the century that followed the Arab military takeover of 870”. The amphorae from this period “appear similar to those of North African production”, which, if confirmed, “would represent a significant indicator of a revival of trade within a region that had supposedly stopped exporting agricultural surplus overseas since the fall of Carthage to the Arabs in the end of the VIIth century. This would be even more remarkable in that it would represent the arrival of North African products to a Byzantine territory even after the end of the 7th century.” Furthermore, “in the later strata of Mdina, dating to the 9th and 10th centuries, a few examples have also been identified... [indicative] of the existence of some form of commercial exchange between Malta and either South or Central Italy”. By way of conclusion, the researchers assert that “well into the 10th century, the archaeology of Malta is characterized by large quantities of globular amphorae of probable Eastern / Aegean origin,... despite the islands being formally Arab territories during this period”.⁵⁰ This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the Muslims, having gained control of the whole of Sicily and the islands, became more interested in trade than in *jihād*; in Ibn Ḥawqal’s words, “the Kalbid rulers engaged more in the marketplace than in the battlefield”.⁵¹

Malta after 1000 A.D.

When the Fāṭimid Abū Tamīm Ma’ād al-Mu’izz [952-975] moved his whole government to Cairo in 973, he left the governorship of Ifrīqiya

⁵⁰ B. Bruno and N. Cutajar (2013).

⁵¹ A. Metcalfe (2009), 62; L. Chiarelli (2011), 134.

in the hands of the Ṣanhāja Berber⁵² Buluqqīn [972-984], the son of Zīri, founder of the independent Zīrid Dynasty. Sicily remained under its own provincial Governor, the Arab Kalbid, Abū al-Qāsim. Sicily was now accorded the same status as the Zīrid state in North Africa, that is, having the island independent of the governing power in Ifrīqiya, but only nominally under the authority of the Fāṭimids in Cairo.⁵³ The Fāṭimid move to Egypt, and consequent autonomous administrative responsibility for the whole of Sicily, meant increased pressure on the Kalbids to cater for all their needs. The Kalbids were not at all enterprising. They stopped thinking of *jihād* and conquest for Islam, limiting their military activities to razzias against southern Italian towns in order to sustain a modicum of external income to keep the *jund* happy. The real power of government in Sicily was in the hands of the army formed mainly of Kutāma Berbers and, to a lesser extent, Ṣanhāja Berbers⁵⁴ and the Ṣaqālība⁵⁵ or white slave soldiers of European origin.⁵⁶ These ensured continued Fāṭimid control over the island. Yet fiscal demands kept increasing. The solution to this problem was sought in taxation which was not all justly spread out over the whole population. This resulted in violent and repeated revolts to an extent that the rulers lost their grip on the situation.

The revolt of 1015 against the Governor Jaʿfar Tāj al-Dawla by his brother ʿAlī, supported by the remnants of the Kutāma Berber regiments that had not followed the Fāṭimids to Egypt, was an important turning point in the political and military power balance in Sicily. ʿAlī was defeated and the Kutāma and Ṣanhāja soldiers deported with their families. These, probably, joined the main force of the Fāṭimid *jund* in Egypt and the vacuum created in the Sicilian army was filled by other ʿSicilians'.⁵⁷

⁵² M. Amari (1982), 1.430, n.3.

⁵³ L. Chiarelli (2011), 120.

⁵⁴ The Sanhajah Berbers included the Zīrids: M. Amari (1982), 2.60, n.2.

⁵⁵ M. Cooperson (2014), 39-54.

⁵⁶ L. Chiarelli (2011), 111.

⁵⁷ A. Metcalfe (2009), 73; L. Chiarelli (2011), 121.

How ineffectual this new army proved to be can be gauged from the havoc wrought by Maniākes' campaign in Eastern Sicily in 1038⁵⁸ which, in effect, spelt the beginning of disintegration of Muslim Sicily. Muslim factions struggled in internecine warfare to empower themselves at each other's expense by resorting to alliances with the Zīrids, with Byzantium and, eventually, with the Normans themselves. Thus, faced with a Byzantine invasion of Sicily in 1025, the Sicilian Kalbid Governor, al-Akḥal [1019-1035] forged a defence alliance with the Zīrid al-Mu'izz Ibn Badīs [1016-1062], a pact that held for almost a decade. This alliance heralded the beginning of a much greater Zīrid influence and interference in Sicilian affairs. This temporary measure to safeguard against external infiltration did provide temporary stability in Sicily but, in effect, also posed a serious threat of internal division. This internal threat led al-Akḥal to conclude a peace treaty with Byzantium in 1034 consequent to which Sicilian-Ifrīqiyan relations rapidly cooled off. One detail in this treaty was the bestowal of the title of *Magister* – a Byzantine honorific military title – on al-Akḥal, which may have raised the suspicions of the Zīrid leader al-Mu'izz that a Fāṭimid-Byzantine plot, abetted by the Kalbids of Sicily, was afoot with the aim of dislodging him from power. This may have led al-Mu'izz, at the instigation of al-Akḥal's rivals in Sicily, to organize an expedition, under the command of his own son 'Abd Allāh, against Sicily in 1036, besieging al-Akḥal within the recently erected al-Khālīṣa fortress in Palermo. Sporting his title of *Magister*, al-Akḥal looked northward for support to the Byzantine Governor of Calabria, Leo Opos, who entered Sicily and marched on Palermo in an attempt to reconcile the two factions. This did not prevent al-Akḥal's enemies to enter al-Khālīṣa and assassinate him. It is Chiarelli's opinion (p. 125) that even though the crisis was instigated by the Sicilians, the Zīrid leader al-Mu'izz b. Badīs still intended to exploit the situation to his own end of subjugating Sicily to Ifrīqiyan control. Al-Akḥal was succeeded by the last weakling Kalbid member of the dynasty, al-Ḥasan b. Yūsuf, known as Ṣamṣam al-Dawla [1037-1044].

One can only speculate about what was happening in Malta during the twenty years between 1015 and 1035. On the assumption that Kutāma Berbers had held the island for the Fāṭimids for a century, their

⁵⁸ A. Metcalfe (2009), 81-83.

deportation from Sicily in 1015 may or may not have meant deportation also from Malta. Likewise, replacement of the vacuum, created in Sicily in 1015 by 'Sicilians' or Zīrid Ifrīqiyans, may or may not have meant the same happening in Malta. One can, however, attempt to understand what may have taken place in view of what actually happened in the following five years.

In 1037, the Byzantine Emperor Michael IV [1034-1041] made a ten-year agreement with the Fāṭimid Caliph al-Mustanṣir in Egypt. The agreement made no explicit mention of Sicily which may have, according to the Genizà documents, spurred Ṣamṣam al-Dawla to send a messenger to Cairo soon afterwards. It is very likely, however, that Byzantine ambitions on Sicily, which had been kept alive throughout the Arab domination, came to be recognized by the Fāṭimids.⁵⁹ This may have been at the root of the major invasion of Sicily by George Maniákēs in 1038. The invasion lasted almost a year, by the end of which the Byzantines had occupied thirteen cities in the East of Sicily including Messina, Rametta and, finally, Syracuse. In 1039, Maniákēs was finally faced by a strong Zīrid army headed by 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mu'izz b. Badīs from Palermo, which force Maniákēs confronted and routed completely near Mt Etna. At this juncture, discord broke out in the Byzantine army which was formed entirely of mercenaries, including Normans, Varangians and Lombards. The Norman contingent opposed the general over the distribution of spoils and, not making any headway, they deserted to Europe together with the Varangians. At the same time, Maniákēs quarrelled also with the Emperor's brother-in-law, whom he insulted and for which he was recalled (in chains) to Constantinople. Thus ended the Byzantine effort at retaking Sicily, leaving the Muslims still in control of the whole of Sicily. Maniákēs' invasion, however, served to destabilize the Muslims in Sicily as is evident by its aftermath.

Discord, however, also erupted between the Zīrid commander 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mu'izz and the Sicilian Muslims of Palermo who, probably, suspected that the Zīrids were out to occupy and dominate the island. The clashes left some 300 Zīrid troops dead forcing 'Abd Allāh to retreat to Ifrīqiya with his army. In the meantime, in Palermo, the weakling Ṣamṣam

⁵⁹ L. Chiarelli (2011), 126.

al-Dawla soon faded out of the scene and appears to have been replaced, by 1044, by a foursome of *qā'id*s in control of the four respective corners of the island: (i) Abū Muḥammad b. cUmarb. Mankūd in control of the west of Sicily, including the coastal cities of Trapani, Mazara, Marsala and Sciacca; (ii) 'Alīb. Nī'ma, called Ibn al-Ḥawwās, ruling the environs of Enna, Agrigento and Castronovo; (iii) Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. al-Thumna, commanding the area around Syracuse, and (iv) Abū al-Futūḥb. al-Maklātī, holding Catania and its surroundings. Metcalfe argues that several unaccounted-for pockets on the north coast of Sicily, in the south-east Val di Noto and around the hinterland of the north-west were being held by Zīrids, arguing for a rough West-East divide into Zīrid-Sicilian split of influence.⁶⁰ Chiarelli⁶¹ makes the very valid point that the names of the emergent Sicilian leaders are highly suggestive of their common Ibāḍite origins among the Berber tribes of the Hawwāra, the Banū Matkūd, the Nafzāwa and the Barqajāna. These tribes were hostile to the group of Berbers, foremost among which were the Kutāma and the Ṣanhāja that comprised the backbone of the Fāṭimid fighting force.

It is important to keep in mind that the Ibāḍite Berber trade network that flourished in North Africa extended to Sicily where it must have been in competition with the Arab political and economic élite of the island. According to works by Brett, Lewicki and Savage, the Ibāḍite trade network was based on the confession and tribal association, thereby placing it in direct competition and confrontation with the Arab élites. Ibāḍite sources actually state that this community prospered in Sicily and had close organizational ties in North Africa, especially with the community on the Island of Jerba.⁶²

Malta after 1040

At this juncture and turbulent moment of Muslim Central Mediterranean history, an important event for Malta is recorded. The recent publication

⁶⁰ A. Metcalfe (2009), 84-85.

⁶¹ L. Chiarelli (2011), 127-128.

⁶² L. Chiarelli (2011), 134-135.

by Prof. Leonard Chiarelli highlights this important piece of data when he purportedly cites⁶³ Ibn 'Idhārī's *Kitāb al-Bayān al-Mughrib*, stating the following:

“Before that time [i.e., 440/1048] there was a small Muslim military presence [on Malta] which goes back to the Aghlabid period and seems to have been reinforced in 431/1040 when the Zīrīd amīr al-Mu'izz ibn Badis sent a large army there.”⁶⁴

If we consult the text itself, however, we see that Ibn 'Idhārī gives the following notice for the year 431/1040:

وفي سنة ١٣٤، دخلت جيوش مَالِيطَة جزيرة جَزْيرة؛ ففتحتها وقتلت كثيراً من أهلها.

Wa-fī sanat 431 dakhalat juyūshmāliṭa jazīrat jarba fa-fataḥatha wa-qatalat kathīran min 'ahliha.

which translates as:

And in the year 431, the army of Malta entered the Island of Jerba. They conquered it and killed many of its people.⁶⁵

Surprisingly, there is no mention here of Zīrīd amirs.⁶⁶ Chiarelli, clearly, interprets this text in order to make it dovetail with existing hypotheses he favours, like those of Wettinger and Brincat, which he cites,⁶⁷ and on which he relies for his information on Malta. In so doing, he misinterprets the Arabic, giving the crucial sentence, (*dakhalat*) (*juyūshmāliṭa*) (*jazīrat jarba*), the meaning opposite to that intended by Ibn 'Idhārī. This, of course, gives a completely different colouring to the picture of what was happening in the Maltese Islands at the time.

⁶³ L. Chiarelli (2011), 130, n.189.

⁶⁴ This rendering is uncritically repeated by G. Wettinger (2011), 377.

⁶⁵ This is typical verb-subject-object syntax, where *dakhalat* ('entered') is the verb, *juyūshmāliṭais* the subject consisting of a construct state: *nomen regens* 'juyūsh' and a *nomen rectum* 'māliṭa' (i.e. the armies of Malta) and *jazīrat jarba* is the object (also in the construct state); hence, 'the island of Jerba'.

⁶⁶ One cannot help remarking about other inaccuracies of Chiarelli's concerning Malta, such as his allusion to the quarter dinar minted in Malta (131), citing (n.194) a work that is completely irrelevant; for this coin, cf. Appendix, *infra*.

⁶⁷ L. Chiarelli (2011), 130, n.191; 42, n.153-155, *et passim*.

It must be stated that two versions of the text exist in which the place of origin of the attacking force is given variously as Malaga and Māliṭa, both very similar palaeographically in Arabic. With Chiarelli, we rely on the very dependable editors of the text, Colin and Lévy-Provençal, who opt for Māliṭa.

The obvious rivals of the Ibāḍites of Jerba were the Zīrids who were in conflict with them already on Sicilian soil,⁶⁸ and who were still fighting them in 1053-56.⁶⁹ One tends to deduce, therefore, that even if there was an evacuation of the island after 1015, sometime before 1035, the Zīrids had come to occupy it and to use it, in 1040, to take revenge on their Sicilian rivals. One can also immediately conclude from this that Malta was far from being a deserted island between 870 and 1040 if it had already a sizeable army strong enough to devastate Jerba.

After 1043, further to other secessions in the East, the Fāṭimid African provinces, governed by the Zīrid Berbers, were severing their tributary connexion and passing into open independence or even reverting outright to their old allegiance to the ‘Abbāsids by 1051. The proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back of al-Mustanṣir’s tolerance appears to have been precisely the Zīrids’ outlawing of Fāṭimid coinage in Ifrīqiya and, as a symbolic rejection of Fāṭimid suzerainty, began minting their own coins in 1049.⁷⁰ In response to this defiance in 1052, al-Mustanṣir unleashed the troublesome Arab tribes of the banū-Hilāl (the tribe of Hilāl) and banū-Sulāym in Upper Egypt, instigating them to move westward against the rebellious Zīrids, where for years they ravaged Tripoli and Tunisia. Arriving in Ifrīqiyah “like a swarm of locusts”, according to Ibn Khaldūn, they overwhelmed the eastern Maghrib, pushing it to the verge of collapse

⁶⁸ L. Chiarelli (2011), 127.

⁶⁹ Genizà documents show how, (i) in 1053-1054, the ‘master’ of Sicily [probably, Ibn al-Thumna] sent an army to assist in a revolt against al-Mu‘izz b. Badīs that had broken out in Sousse (M. Gil {1995}, 118), and (ii) how, in 1056, a vessel with merchandise sent from al-Mahdiyya was attacked by Ibn al-Thumna’s troops near Girgenti (M. Gil {1995}, 119).

⁷⁰ N.K. Singh (2005), 1016-1017. Recently, a gold dinar coined at Qayrawan in 1049-1050, bearing the name of the Zīrid al-Mu‘izz b. Badīs, estimated to fetch a quarter of a million American dollars, was up for auction in New York (<http://www.icollector.com/Islamic-coins-Zīrid-al-Muizz>).

and sacking Qayrawān in 1057. The Zīrids, none the less, held on to the coastal strip including al-Mahdiyya and al-Manṣūriyya. The rupture with the Fāṭimids appears to have been healed as indicated by the existence of a coin struck in al-Mahdiyya in 1068 bearing al-Mustanṣir's name.⁷¹

The colony of 1048

This brings us to another important event that is closely related. The period we have been discussing coincides with the well known Maltese episode, attested to both by al-Qazwīnī and by al-Ḥimyarī, that shows how a small Muslim colony, according to Brincat counting some 2,000, settled in Malta in 1048, rebuilt Mdina and were soon afterwards threatened by the Byzantines whom they managed to ward off with the help of their *cabīd*.⁷² It must have been precisely this dominant community, a mere 25 years after this episode, that was responsible for the minting of our coin, fully acknowledging the sovereignty of the far-away Caliph al-Mustanṣir in Cairo.

What do we know about this community? They were certainly affluent. This can be deduced from several observations. They certainly owned a numerous retinue of slaves, more numerous than the menfolk of the colony. They had a lot of money, enough for Count Roger I to be able to demand of them in tribute *infinita pecunia* in 1091, according to Malaterra (4.16). A huge cache of their money in a large copper vase got hidden away on this occasion and only came to light at Mdina, in front of No. 1, Archbishop's Square, in 1698, when the foundations for a new house were being dug.⁷³ This collection of at least 2,000 coins (which could possibly be as large as 5,000 in view of their total weight of 35 *libre 6 onze*, which is known) was described by Gian Antonio Ciantar in *Malta*

⁷¹ M. Asolati (2005), 132 no. 4.

⁷² J.M. Brincat (1995); M. Cooperson (2014).

⁷³ Details in A. Luttrell (1992), 19-25.

Illustrata (1771).⁷⁴ According to Helen Brown,⁷⁵ who analysed Ciantar's description, the coins were minted in the period 1038-1087, most of them bearing al-Mustanşir's name and coming from the Egyptian mint. This large amount of coins belonging to the 'Arab' colony, with which we can now include our precious tarī minted in Malta, is a sure sign of economic activity.

Economic considerations

The minting of coins certainly addresses the practical reality of trade. The need to mint coins on this island is clear evidence of commercial activity. Gold coins in particular point towards trade beyond one's shores by contrast with copper coins used for small local transactions. This is confirmed by the archaeological evidence from the amphorae, noted above. It is well known from Idrīsī's description of Malta that the island 'abounded in pastures, fruit and honey'.⁷⁶ Al-Qazwīnī, too, testifies to the prosperity of the island at the time when he speaks highly of its population, villages, trees and fruits, calling it "*ricca d'ogni ben di Dio*".⁷⁷ From al-Ḥimyarī's account based, probably, on Idrīsī, it is known that the landscape was typically Mediterranean with an abundant cover of olive, pine and juniper. This *macchia mediterranea* was exploited for the building of vessels, according to al-Ḥimyarī, but probably also to create arable clearings to favour agricultural production by the community. In the stratification of the Maltese lexicon into Semitic and Romance, it is clear that agricultural terms, by contrast with fishing and general marine terminology, as shown by Aquilina, belongs to the older Semitic stratum and must therefore originate in the period under consideration.⁷⁸ Thus, for example, just as in Sicily the Arabs are known to have produced sugar, salt, paper and cotton, so here in Malta we have toponomastic evidence

⁷⁴ G.A. Ciantar (1771-1780), 692-693.

⁷⁵ H. Brown (1992), 1-18.

⁷⁶ M. Amari (1982), 1.53.

⁷⁷ M. Amari (1982), 1.240.

⁷⁸ G. Aquilina (1988), 6-12.

of early cultivation of sugarcane evidenced by toponyms like *Il-Fiddien* (Arabic for sugarcane field)⁷⁹, a name surviving till this day by contrast with *Wied il-Qasab Helu* last recorded by Abela in 1647. The production of salt must also date from Arab times as is clear from the Arabic toponym *Il-Mellieħa*. *Burdi* is Arabic for the papyrus plant used for making paper, and *Għadir il-Burdi* is where today lies *Il-Pantan (għadira)* near *Tal-Mirakli, Lija*. Our countryside abounds in place-names like *Ta' Kittenija*, and *Ta' Kittiena*, associated with the production of flax, and *Tal-Qoton*, and *Tal-qattan*, indicating the production of cotton.⁸⁰ Indeed, by the 1160s, Maltese cotton introduced by the Arabs is already documented as appearing on the Genoese market.⁸¹ This is not to mention newly introduced fruits, as was likewise done in Sicily – oranges, grapes, figs, pomegranates, peaches, nuts, pears and so many others – all of which in Maltese bear an Arabic name as witness of their early origin in these islands.

Another piece of information that is relevant and needs to be taken into consideration is an aside in Malaterra (2.45) who notes how in 1071, when the wily Guiscard reached Catania where he met his brother Roger, he spread the word among the Moslems of Catania that his next objective in the Sicilian campaign was Malta when, in fact, his target was Palermo which he actually took next. This he did to divert attention of the Eastern Sicilian Arabs from the West of the island. It does, however, imply that the Muslims of Catania, somehow, had an interest in their Maltese co-religionists. Although the Sicilians had reverted to 'Abbāsid sovereignty with the Norman occupation, after c. 1070, Cairo had practically lost all power over Sicily and seems also to have lost interest in it to the point that the Norman conquest was tacitly accepted and contacts with the Normans were, initially, friendly.⁸² It is useful, therefore, to consider what was happening in Catania after 1040. In brief, in the fracturing of government of Sicily into four *ṭā'ifas* headed, as noted, by Ibādīte Berbers,

⁷⁹ H. Bresc (1972), 81; C. Trasselli (1982), 43ff.; G. Caracausi (1983), 225.

⁸⁰ For toponymic documentation, cf. G. Wettinger (2000).

⁸¹ D. Abulafia (1975), 106.

⁸² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2.855 s.v. "Fatimids".

Catania came to pertain to al-Maklātī. Soon after his coming to power, he was turned on by Ibn al-Thumna (who held Syracuse and who invited the Normans into Sicily), who not only deprived him of his power, but also of his life and of his wife.⁸³ Ibn al-Thumna's turn came in March, 1062,⁸⁴ when he was killed having suffered a calamitous defeat in his struggle against the third leader, al-Ḥawwās.⁸⁵ Al-Ḥawwās was killed in action by the Zīrid Ayyūb who, in turn, had to leave Sicily in 1069.⁸⁶ It is reasonable to expect that the Catania citizens in 1071 had Ibādīte leanings.

Reconstruction

We now attempt to put together the various tesserae of this mosaic in as satisfactory a way as possible. Taking up events from 1015, when the Kutāma and Ṣanhāja were banished from Sicily, on the assumption that they were the inhabitants of the Maltese Islands at the time, two scenarios are possible: (i) that the Kutāma left Malta as well, and (ii) that they continued to hold Malta. These, in effect, reduce to the same situation because, if the Kutāma abandoned Malta in 1015, someone must have replaced them in order for the 'forces of Malta' to be able to attack Jerba in 1040. Given that Jerba was Ibādīte, the obvious candidate would have been the Zīrids who belonged to the Ṣanhāja Berber tribe, so that, in effect, these never left the island. Who then were the colonizers of 1048? One can exclude the possibility that this Moslem community originated in Fāṭimid Egypt, for it is to be noted that there had been a 10-year peace treaty signed between al-Mustanṣir and the *Basileus* in 1038 which was renewed in 1048; the existing truce certainly held beyond this as, in 1051, when the ambassador of the rebel Zīrid Mu'izz b. Badīs was returning from Baghdad, he was arrested by the Byzantines and handed over to al-Mustanṣir. Till 1054, al-Mustanṣir was supplying Byzantium

⁸³ M. Amari (1986), 2.616-617.

⁸⁴ M. Amari (1986), 3.89.

⁸⁵ A. Metcalfe (2009), 84-85.

⁸⁶ M. Amari (1986), 3.113, n.1.

with wheat.⁸⁷ Yet, the colony in Malta was attacked by the Byzantines in 1053-1054, so that it could not have been seen by the Byzantines as Fāṭimid at the time. Yet our coin shows that by 1079 the Maltese Muslims were acknowledging the Fāṭimid caliph, al-Mustaṣṣir. One concludes that the colony originated either in Ifrīqiya or in Sicily.

The North African possibility is flawed because there could have been no empathy (shown in 1071) between the Ibāḍites of Catania and the Zīrids and, furthermore, the cache of coins found in Mdina in 1698 shows that all the coins belonging to 1038-1087 bore al-Mustaṣṣir's name when it is known that the Zīrids had begun minting their own coins in 1049-1050. This reasoning would also exclude the Sicilian alternative as Ibāḍites would, for the same reason, not have been welcome on a small island in the hands of their enemies, the Zīrids, unless, that is, the Kutāma and Ṣanhāja reprisal attack on Jerba in 1040 was not undertaken on their way out of the island to join the rest of the tribes in Egypt. This would have meant only a temporary abandonment of the island for a short while as the Sicilian colony settled there within the decade. If we accept this possibility, then things begin to fall into place: (i) the interest of Catania's Moslems in Malta in 1071 will have been explained by the fact that both were Ibāḍites; (ii) so can the antagonism of the Byzantines, likewise, if the attack on the Ibāḍites in Malta is viewed as an attempt at regaining lost ground in Eastern Sicily after George Maniákēs' successes against them there between 1038 and 1043; (iii) the timing of the move tallies perfectly with events in Sicily whereby the Ibāḍites took control of most of Sicily in c. 1044 and, probably from Catania, spread out into Malta within a few years of the island's desertion; (iv) the motivation for the move could have been the escape from the looming civil unrest resulting from the fratricidal aggression between the new potentates (recall how Ibn al-Thumna of Syracuse devoured Ibn al-Maklātī of Catania); (v) the affluence of the community is explained by the very successful trade network of the enterprising Ibāḍites. It is entirely possible that, as a reaction to the Banū Hilāl invasion of 1050, the numbers in the community swelled by immigration from Ifrīqiya which is known to have happened in the direction of Sicily, possibly also involving Malta. Even if the Arabs in Malta

⁸⁷ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2,855, s.v. "Fāṭimid".

had come to include rebellious Zīrids from Ifrīqiya, who had problems with the Fāṭimids over the minting of coins, these rifts were healed by 1068, as seen, so that by the time of the minting of the coin in Malta in 1079, the Maltese colony was Fāṭimid.

Conclusion

This Moslem community, which was allowed by Roger I to stay on in Malta after 1091, was certainly the same found by Roger II in 1127 and which the anonymous poet of the 1140s described as having had its leaders exiled together with their families and slaves, had been harbouring in their midst a covert Christian community around its bishop, had their mosques turned into churches for the use of its priests who had never stopped adoring the Holy Trinity. Roger II's attack of 1127 is not well understood. But if the reconstruction of events proposed is correct, then light is shed on this obscure episode. If the Arab community on the islands was Ibāḍīte, then they would have shared interests and ideals with the Ibāḍītes on Jerba. It is recalled how these were subject to a similar violent attack in 1135 by Roger's Admiral, George of Antioch. Metcalfe so sizes up the Ibāḍītes there:⁸⁸

In the minds of contemporary Arab-Muslim chroniclers and geographers, Djerba was a byword for unruliness and piracy, confirmed by its population of Kharijite Ibadis who, according to Idrisi, spoke only Berber. Agriculturally poor due to its lack of water resources,... Djerba had been a safe haven for outlaws and refugees, and was also home to a significant Jewish community that had been there since the sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁸⁹ The threat posed by the Djerbans to trans-Mediterranean shipping was the most likely cause of the fierce attack which Roger launched against them in 1135.

⁸⁸ A. Metcalfe (2009), 161.

⁸⁹ Links of this Jewish community with Malta are evident in the Judaeo-Arabic script used on the Island and in the several Jewish surnames originating in North Africa, such as Misurati, Berberi, de Tripuli, Nifusi, Girbi and others; cf. G. Wettinger (1985), 174-189, 205-207.

The assessment by historian Hubert Houben of the Malta events in 1127 dovetails perfectly with this description by Metcalfe of the Jerba population in 1135:

Moslem pirates were a more dangerous threat to Sicily than was Byzantium. In July 1127 they plundered Patti and Syracuse; the inhabitants of Catania were only saved at the very last moment. To limit the pirates' operations, the little islands of Pantelleria and Malta which served them as bases had to be brought under control."⁹⁰

The slaves of the shaykhs exiled by Roger II could well have been captured as booty in piratical activities.

In fine, it has been shown that the Arabs practically never left the Maltese Islands after 870. In their great majority, they were Arabicized Islamized Berbers of the Zanāta and Hawwāra tribes till around 920, followed by Kutāma and Ṣanhāja Berbers till 1040. Thereafter, Ibāḍite Berbers colonized the islands and never left.

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⁹⁰ H. Houben (2002), 41.

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