

Charles Dalli

Satellite, Sentinel, Stepping Stone. Medieval Malta in Sicily's Orbit

[A stampa in *Malta in the Hybleans, the Hybleans in Malta. Malta negli Iblei, gli Iblei a Malta*, Proceedings of the International Conference (Catania, 30 September, Sliema 10 November 2006),

Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Catania, 30 settembre, Sliema 10 novembre 2006),

edited by / a cura di Anthony Bonanno and / e Pietro Militello, Palermo 2008, pp. 245-258;

anche in <http://malta.academia.edu/CharlesDalli/Papers>

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No discussion of Malta's pre-modern relationship with Sicily could afford to overlook the ten centuries of the Middle Ages. For more than one thousand years, the Maltese islands were intimately drawn into the wider sphere of influence of the largest Mediterranean island. A number of permanent factors converged to define the qualities and directions which would become evident as this relationship unfolded during that long period. Among these factors, geography takes pride of place; for it was the physical dimension and location of the Maltese islands which placed them and other small insular satellites in the orbit of their much larger neighbour. Geography set the stage for the individual and collective efforts of the central Mediterranean islanders stretching across millennial time, providing a fixed reference point in the ever-moving constellation of human actions and intentions making up history. The present essay investigates the relationship between Malta and Sicily in the Middle Ages. It sets out to outline the different aspects of this relationship, demonstrating how it evolved across the medieval centuries to make out of Malta's multifaceted ties to Sicily a defining feature of the archipelago's history. In the orbit of their large neighbour, the Maltese and other small insular satellites of Sicily played a role in its history, a history mirrored in their own experiences.

This essay reconstructs Malta's ties to Sicily mainly in terms of the surviving primary documents from the period. Insofar as it is possible, in historiographical terms, to take into account the centuries from the fifth to the fifteenth as constituting one fundamental framework for historical investigation, the one thousand years from ca. 500 to 1500 present for examination a spectrum of experiences shared across the sixty-mile channel between Sicily and Malta (Dalli 2006). The textual records in Maltese archives survive mainly from the fifteenth century – municipal records belonging to the Mdina town council (Wettinger 1993; Del Amo García – Wettinger 2001), proceedings of the Bishop's Court at Mdina, and notarial acts starting with the volume of deeds of Paolo de Bonello from 1467 (Fiorini 2005). A number of charters and official letters were copied in early modern times into volumes of privileges which encapsulated the islands' cherished access to Sicilian grain – the *tratte*. Research in the Palermitan archives has

widened the documentary base of Maltese history with hundreds of administrative acts dating from the 1350s to 1530. Documents pertaining to Malta's Angevin administration were fortunately published a decade before the destruction of the Neapolitan Archives (especially Laurenza 1935). Few acts survive from the Hohenstaufen period, including the royal reply to the report drawn by the islands' administrator at the time of Frederick II, Giliberto Abate (new edition in Luttrell 2002). Details gleaned from different chronicles of the kingdom of Sicily (e.g. Malaterra, Pontieri 1927) and from Arabic writings (Amari 1880-81) supplement the scanty materials of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries available to the historian.

Prior to the Norman annexation of Malta in 1091, described in detail by Geoffrey Malaterra, the written records are even sparser. Much of what is known about Muslim rule in Malta was collected by al-Himyarī in his encyclopaedic dictionary, collating information from al-Bakri, al-Qazwīnī and others, but oddly suggesting that Malta lay uninhabited for more than a century following its conquest by the Arabs in 870 (Brincat 1995). For the centuries of Byzantine rule in the islands, the search for a similar encyclopaedic summary of Byzantine Malta's history remains fruitless. For more than three centuries the written sources barely allow the historian to catch a glimpse of what was going on in the islands (collected in a documentary appendix in Bruno 2004). The same dearth of written evidence characterizes the intervening decades of Germanic control in the century of transition from Roman imperial rule to eastern Roman government. The situation is more promising where archaeological evidence for the period 500-1200 is concerned, related to the growing awareness of the importance of archaeology in medieval history (e.g. Bruno 2004; Cutajar 2001). For much of this period, there is little or no alternative to the systematic study of the material remains. A lot has been achieved over the past two decades, but Maltese medieval archaeology has still to receive the proper support that it deserves to come of age. Despite the serious constraints, a number of exciting discoveries have thrown new light on different facets of life in Malta and the island's wider regional links.

Satellite

The history of the Maltese islands in the aftermath of the fifth century dissolution of Roman imperial rule has been reconstructed largely on the pattern of Sicily. In the absence of written evidence, it is presumed that, closely following the fate of Sicily, from 440/445 until the 530s the archipelago was integrated into the dominions of competing Germanic kings. The vacuum created by the demise of the western Roman empire was hastily filled by the growth of the Vandal and Ostrogothic kingdoms which carved up much of the central Mediterranean region

between them. As a result of the Byzantine victory against the Vandal kingdom in 533, the north African territories were annexed by the eastern Roman empire. Two years later, Justinian's forces took Sicily, laying the foundations of Byzantine government in the island which was to last for more than three centuries. Following the events of 549-551 under Totila, the final resistance to Byzantine domination in Sicily was repelled and imperial control was consolidated. There can be little doubt that this command was extended to the Maltese islands by the mid-sixth century. The new masters of the central Mediterranean sea would make use of the Maltese archipelago as a strategically located naval and military base in their programme of regional expansion. The archaeology of the period supports this impression (Bruno 2004), drawing also attention to the substantial evidence from the island's ancient ports and anchorages of commercial exchange between Malta, Sicily, and north Africa.

Malta's local political and administrative regime in the sixth to ninth centuries will have followed the system attested in different parts of the Sicilian province. There is some indication that local administration in Byzantine Sicily evolved in relation to the changing balance of power in the central Mediterranean area. Major developments in this regard may have been spurred by the westward expansion of Islam against the African possessions of Byzantium. Perhaps at the end of the seventh century the Sicilian province was set up as a separate unit of military administration – a Byzantine *thèma* under the unified command of the strategos at Syracuse, who was assisted by a hierarchy of provincial dukes and turmarshs. A Gozitan seal mentioning a certain Theophylact may point to a late Byzantine official in the island's administration. A more controversial seal recording an archon and droungar named Niketas may also be related to the administration of the archipelago in late Byzantine times, but the dangers of extrapolating information from isolated items are obvious. The Byzantine sources are largely silent on the Maltese islands, although a handful of records group them together as the nominal Gaudomelite (Buhagiar 1994). A place of relegation and exile, Malta's role in the imperial framework will have changed substantially in the wake of the Muslim expansion in north Africa. From a military base and trading emporium linking Sicily and the other Byzantine possessions in the Italian peninsula to the north African exarchate, the islands were transformed in the eighth century into an outlying satellite and sentinel of Sicily – a Sicily coming frequently under Muslim attack. It was a role which would recur, in various forms, at different moments in the next one thousand years of Christian-Muslim conflict in the central Mediterranean. Since the Byzantine sources are largely silent and the Arab sources only provide details on the Muslim conquest of the islands in 869-870, one has to surmise from the regional framework without providing direct evidence that Malta fulfilled an increasingly military role in the strategy of the Byzantine empire to combat and counteract Muslim expansion.

In the course of the Aghlabid conquest of Byzantine Sicily, launched in 827 and completed with the fall of Taormina in 902, the central Mediterranean waters became an expanding theatre of war. The Muslim conquest of Malta in 870 lay in the logic of the war unfolding in Sicily. Taking place four decades after the occupation of western Sicily, but eight years before the fall of Syracuse, the event was noted by different annalists and described in detail in the late medieval compilation ascribed to al-Himyarī. It seems unlikely that the Maltese islands were spared the brunt of warfare in the decades up to 870. It is equally unlikely that the Byzantines will have wasted the opportunity to recapture Malta had the Muslims simply taken the island and reduced it to 'an uninhabited ruin', as stated by al-Himyarī. Nested in their strongholds, Byzantine forces defended parts of eastern Sicily for the next three decades after 870, even managing to notch some temporary successes in the early tenth century by regaining footholds in the Val Demone.

A comprehensive understanding of what happened in the islands in the aftermath of the conquest of 870 will only be possible if and when seemingly conflicting archaeological evidence of rupture and continuity is properly evaluated and interpreted. The indications at present (Cutajar 2001) make it safe to assume a degree of urban continuity with the Byzantine town making way for a Muslim *madīna* from the late 800s to the eleventh century - a walled settlement emerging from the ruins of the siege of 869-870 which served as the island's chief centre, and perhaps the only significant settlement. Unfortunately there has been very limited presentation or discussion of the evidence concerning this urban community in Malta in the tenth and eleventh centuries, including the material unearthed at Mdina which is said to signal continued trading activities with Kalbite Sicily and Fātimid Ifrīqiya. By unquestioningly accepting al-Himyarī's claim, one would be isolating Malta from the events of the Fātimid Mediterranean, contrary to Ibn Khaldūn for whom Muslim control of the islands, including Malta, was a sign of Muslim mastery in the region.

A mid-eleventh century episode recorded by al-Qazwīnī and described in greater detail after him, by al-Himyarī, consisted in a late Byzantine attempt to regain Malta. The attacks, may have reflected flickering Byzantine hopes of retaking a central Mediterranean foothold following the nearly-successful campaign of George Maniakes in eastern Sicily in 1039-40. In contrast to the help which reached the Muslim besiegers of Malta in 869-70, assistance from their Sicilian counterparts, gravely weakened by civil war, was not apparently forthcoming this time. The Rūm, or Byzantines, were about to take the island, and refused to grant safeconduct to the *ahrār*, or Muslim freemen. The *ahrār* only managed to win the day by making their *‘abīd*, or slave-soldiers (whose identity is elusive), their social equals in return for fighting the Rūm.

In the wake of the Norman conquest of Sicily – a protracted process which dragged on for three decades between 1060 and 1090 – the days of Muslim control of Malta were counted. The annalist of Roger's deeds, Geoffrey Malaterra (Pontieri 1927), noted Robert Guiscard's intention to attack the island early on in the campaign. It was, perhaps, the lack of men and means which prevented Roger from taking Malta in the course of the war in Sicily, but these became readily available with the successful completion of the conquest. In 1091 a fleet under the command of the Norman leader sailed to Malta and took the island, forcing the Muslim inhabitants to come to terms. Led by the *gaytus*, or governor, the townsmen negotiated their surrender, handing over to the Count their weapons, beasts and money. Roger reduced the inhabitants to tributary status, and sailed away with their Christian captives, sacking Gozo on his way back and similarly subjecting that island to himself. According to Malaterra, upon reaching Sicily Roger freed the captives and offered to grant them a free town where they could settle down. The freedmen declined the Count's generous offer, preferring instead to take his concession of a free passage to return to their various homelands 'singing the Count's praise'.

The new Norman ruling class presided over composite dominions in southern Italy and Sicily where different languages were spoken, and religions practised. The one thing giving the various lands a degree of unity and coherence was Norman authority, but this did not necessarily go uncontested, nor was it expressed everywhere in the same manner. Following their annexation by Roger, twelfth century Malta and Gozo were gradually drawn into the new political, economic and social realities of Latin Christian rule. The annalist Alexander of Teleso attributed the conquest of Malta to Roger's son, Roger II, an episode taking place by 1127. So did Ibn al-Athīr, who credited Roger II with the conquest of Malta, Pantelleria, Djerba and the Kerkenna islands. Furthermore, the fifteenth century author al-Maqrīzī mentions the conquest of 'the islands lying between al-Mahdiyya and Sicily' by a Norman fleet commanded by Roger II's admiral George of Antioch in 543 AH (1148/9) (text in Johns 2002, 80-2).

Stepping Stone

Malaterra's account of Roger's annexation of Malta and Gozo underlines the Norman leader's ambition to be seen as a great Christian conqueror capable of vigorous initiatives at a relatively advanced age. There can be little doubt that the same motive was shared by Roger II's annalist, though the action in the latter case was credited to a youthful ruler seeking to assert his authority. George of Antioch's exploits in the central Mediterranean formed part of the process of Norman

expansion along the north African coastline – the admiral played a key role in creating a short-lived domain subjected to Roger II in Ifrīqiya. The expedition led by Roger’s admiral presumably intended to affirm Norman naval superiority in the region. The Maltese base would have provided Sicilian fleets with a useful stepping stone in view of Roger’s African ambitions. Nevertheless, documentary evidence of Malta’s role in the Norman conquest of Djerba in 1135, and of the north African territories in the 1140s, remains lacking.

In the age of crusading, it was to be expected that authors would interpret events taking place on small islands, and having little effect beyond their shores, in terms of the wider Christian-Muslim conflict. An unidentified Greek exile crafting verse to lament his plight referred to Malta and Gozo – Melitogaudos – as his place of banishment (Fiorini – Vella 2006). Datable perhaps to the mid-twelfth century, but preserved in a copy of c.1300, the poem makes reference to the islanders as ‘children of godless Hagar’, and extols the virtues of the unnamed leader who had intervened to expel the Muslims and destroy their cult, to the conceited joy of the island’s Christians. The literary work draws contemporary parallels with the story of Paul’s shipwreck on Melite. Despite the triumphant claims of the Greek exile’s verse, Frederick Barbarossa’s emissary to Saladin, Burckhardt von Strasbourg, described Malta around 1175 as being ‘inhabited by Saracens’. Moreover, it is well known from a report drawn by Giliberto Abate, an administrator of the islands under Frederick II, that more than eight hundred Muslim families still lived in the Maltese islands around 1240. It seems that the Greek writer shared with Geoffrey Malaterra and Alexander of Teleso the desire to portray the Norman leaders as formidable Christian soldiers.

About the same time that the Greek poet was evoking his grief in Maltese exile, Muslim natives of Malta were addressing verse in Arabic to Roger in Palermo. They were among the numerous writers and artists coming from Roger’s dominions and beyond, now drawn to the cultural crossroads of the Sicilian capital. Only short fragments have survived from the poetry of Abū al-Qāsīm Ibn Ramadān al-Mālītī, ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Samtī al-Mālītī, ‘Abd ar-Rahmān Ibn Ramadān, and ‘Uthmān Ibn ‘Abd ar-Rahmān. At least one poet, ‘Abd ar-Rahmān Ibn Ramadān, was said to plead with Roger to grant him leave to return to Malta, but the sovereign always declined his petition. ‘Uthmān claimed to have learned the humanities from his father in Malta before pursuing his studies in Palermo. Although Islam survived in Malta at least up to the mid-thirteenth century, it is these mid-twelfth century poets who sum up the only documented chapter of cultural achievement in a community now subjected to Norman rule.

The bishops of Byzantine Malta – documented in pope Gregory’s letters in the 590s and thereafter in Byzantine episcopal lists – were suffragans of Syracuse, and

seem to have resided mainly in the islands (Aquilina – Fiorini 2005). The successor to Lucillus, Trajan, was allowed the company of fellow monks to make it easier for him to take up residence in Malta. A bishop of Malta reported by Theodosius to be languishing in a Palermitan jail was possibly captured following the fall of Malta in 870. From the mid-twelfth century onwards, there are clear signs of a Latin Christian church taking shape in the Maltese islands, in line with ecclesiastical developments across Sicily. The Latin Christian bishops were rarely in residence in the diocese, more often than not fulfilling what they deemed to be more important duties in Sicily. The perilous distance between the two islands was occasionally cited in justification of absence by ecclesiastics, and Malta's Arabic speaking Christian population was truly located between two worlds.

Distance and insularity help explain late medieval cultural differences between Sicily, Malta and Pantelleria. The majority of people in the Maltese islands and Pantelleria continued to speak Arabic as their mother tongue, whilst Sicilian was normally used as the written medium for communication in all spheres of life in the Regno. In Sicily, language was a mark of difference: Arabic was spoken (and sometimes also written, in Hebrew characters) by the Jews of Sicily until their expulsion in 1492. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether spoken varieties coincided (Wettinger 1985), in Malta and Gozo Arabic was not really a dividing factor between Jew and Christian, since it continued to be the mother tongue of the Christian majority. In Pantelleria a sizeable Muslim population survived until at least 1500, and Arabic was a common language among the island's three religious communities – Jews, Muslims and Christian converts from Islam. All the same, Sicilian cultural influence in the Maltese islands was not a negligible factor at all. The upper social strata lived in constant contact with their Sicilian counterparts, and Maltese ecclesiastical and municipal institutions were modelled on the Sicilian ones. The islands' townsmen mixed with their Sicilian counterparts, while promising young men were dispatched to Sicily to pursue their academic and/or ecclesiastic careers. Lower down the social ladder, Maltese seasonal labourers found their way to Sicily, while a growing number of islanders settled permanently in the Val di Noto and elsewhere. By 1500 Sicilian influences had filtered down the social scale, becoming evident in material life and in different forms of behaviour.

Cultural influences were particularly difficult to neutralize when their vehicle was the Church. A John bishop of Malta features as witness in a Latin summary of a lost Greek-Arabic diploma of 1132 but doubt has been cast on the authenticity of the document (Johns 2002, 93). The Maltese diocese was made suffragan of the Palermitan archdiocese in 1156, and a bishop of Malta was active in Palermo in 1168. The undated endowment of the Maltese church with estates near Lentini provided additional resources for the upkeep of the Maltese see. Beneath the upper

hierarchy of the diocese, which included a chapter of canons attached to the cathedral church in Mdina documented in the thirteenth century, there unfolded the grassroots activities of Christian missionaries among the Muslim serfs in the Maltese countryside. Some of the Byzantine and paleochristian sites around the islands provided the ideal habitat for a troglodytic Christianity marked by the presence of Greek anchorites (Buhagiar 2005). There is also textual evidence of the conversion of Muslim places of worship into Christian churches.

Comital rule was another leading vehicle of cultural change. From the last decade of the twelfth century, the Maltese islands were set up as a county under feudal rule. In 1191 the admiral Margaritus of Brindisi, a prominent councillor of king Tancred, the last Norman ruler of Sicily, was using the title *comes Malte*. Following the change of regime to Hohenstaufen rule in 1194, the Genoese corsair Guglielmo Grasso obtained the Maltese county from Henry VI. Local resistance to Grasso was muted by 1202, when the county was acquired by his son-in-law Henry de Castro. The Mediterranean activities of Count Henry have been studied in detail. A prominent Genoese corsair, Henry received the full backing of the maritime republic especially in his short-lived lordship of Crete. As in the case of another significant Genoese lordship in the Regno, that of Alamanno da Costa at Syracuse, Genoese interests in the central Mediterranean were well served with Count Henry firmly in control of the Maltese base. Henry's appointment as admiral further consolidated his role as a chief figure of the young Frederick II's court, and restored a link visible since the days of Margaritus between the Maltese county and the Sicilian admiralty. The comital family held rights in the Maltese islands until the early fourteenth century, when a descendant of Count Henry, Lukina de Malta, married the Catalan nobleman Guillem Ramon de Moncada, who had substantial interests in Tunis.

Frederick III gave Moncada the town of Augusta and other revenues in Sicily in exchange for his wife's county. A series of Catalan Counts of Malta followed, including Alfonso Fadrique (1330) who played a prominent role in the Catalan Duchy of Athens. Under the Catalan-Aragonese kings of Sicily, Catalan merchants could make use of their Maltese base in their trading activities in north Africa and the Levant. In the late fourteenth century the islands exchanged hands between Sicilian magnates. In particular, Manfred Chiaromonte's control of Malta in the 1370s and 1380s fitted perfectly with his wider regional designs. Aragonese patronage from the 1390s onwards led Iberian servants of the Crown to the Regno (Corrao 1991), a development which was also echoed in the Maltese islands.

Around 1300 Ramon Llull remarked on the strategic value of Malta for the crusading movement. Nevertheless, the more long-term success of Malta was in getting itself in the charts and portulans of mariners and the logbooks of traders.

Maltese cotton found its way to international markets in Genoa, Barcelona and beyond, thanks to the regional connectivity provided by Italian and Catalan traders. Malta's commercial ties with Sicily, vital in view of its constant needs, were already noted by Idrīsī in the mid-twelfth century (Amari 1880). Maltese association with the Regno also paved the way for wider commercial links. Genoese, Pisan and other traders found their way to Sicily and its islands, pursuing the lucrative trade in luxury goods, but also the vital traffic in cereals. In parallel to their substantial trading privileges in Sicily, Count Henry granted ample rights to Genoese traders in Malta (Abulafia 1977). In the mid-thirteenth century trading activities generated substantial income to the Crown, second only to the revenue from Muslim serfs. There is no reason to doubt the ability of later administrators in the islands to take advantage of local and regional trade (for divergent views on regional developments, Bresc 1986; Epstein 1992).

Sentinel

In 1524 the Hospitaller commissioners sent to report on the condition of Malta and Gozo remarked on their vulnerability, being totally exposed to enemy attack with the exception of their derelict fortifications. At the same time, they noted the great potential of the Maltese harbour, and advised its defence. On the eve of the Hospital's establishment in Malta, the islands were defended by obsolete fortifications which, save for limited periodic repairs and minor adjustments, had been standing at least since the days of Frederick II – the *castrum maris* at Birgu, the walls of Mdina, and the castle on Gozo. A former second castle on Malta, the *castrum civitatis* defending Mdina, was pulled down in the 1450s by the universitas, the governing body of the municipality. The same town council sought royal authorization to defend the island of Comino and the port of Burmarrad with towers, but these projects did not materialize. Some notable landowners built towers to protect their country estates during enemy landings, but for the vast majority of the population there was no alternative to seeking shelter behind the walls of Mdina or the castle at Birgu.

The limited late medieval fortifications of Malta had implications beyond its shores, for the archipelago's defence was also important for Sicily's defence. At the time of Giliberto Abate's report (text in Luttrell 2002) the island's castles employed 220 *servientes*. Their number, which had gone up from 150 serving under Paolino de Malta's administration, was set to increase to 240. A further sixty *servi et ancille* were also employed in the castles. The garrisons included twenty-five crewmen serving on two armed vessels kept for the archipelago's defence. The *castrum maris* took the lion's share of the budget (around 366 uncie out of a total of 500 uncie collected in revenues), a situation which probably did not change

much under Charles of Anjou, in view of the importance attached to the *castrum maris* and its castellan in 1268-1283 (Laurenza 1935). The Crown's defence expenditure in Malta would be drastically curtailed in later times. During periods of feudal control, it was the Count who was expected to foot the bill. In the 1400s it continued to represent the most significant royal expense in Malta – the garrison of the *castrum maris* in the early fifteenth century drawing an annual total of 222 uncie in salaries. Castellans had frequently to fight reluctant secreti and other local detractors, including antagonistic townsmen fearful of their authority, to get their annual allotment (Wettinger 1993).

Despite the limitations in men and means, the islanders made a collective effort to patrol Maltese and Gozitan coasts. The captains of Mdina mobilized the adult male population to man the coastal watch posts around Malta. Together with village constables and watchmen on duty in the countryside, the coastal guard alerted the population at the first signs of an enemy landing, but it could hardly keep Saracen marauders and other raiders at bay. The incidence of attack as well as the threat of invasion had a dramatic effect on the human settlement pattern of the islands. The population on Gozo huddled in the Castle and its Rabat, while the north-western part of Malta beyond the great fault was practically uninhabited. It may be hypothesized that, were it not for the *castrum maris* at Birgu, the island's south-east would have been similarly depopulated. Significantly, the only viable coastal settlement up to 1530 was the castle's borgo.

Corsairing was a major activity in Angevin times; in the wake of the Tunisian crusade of 1270, Naples specifically ordered Maltese privateers not to break the newly-signed Truce with the Hafsid emirate. Relations with Tunis deteriorated rapidly in the fourteenth century. A number of Gozitan captives in Tunis addressed a tearful petition to Martin of Aragon in 1392, appealing for his intervention to relieve their plight. The islands' corsairs played a significant role in the overall strategy adopted in the 1400s, attack being perceived as the best form of defence. Some of the leading families of Malta armed galleys and invested considerable sums in the corsairing business, operating in the Sicily-Africa channel, along the Tripolitanian coast, in the waters of Cyrenaica and in the Ionian sea. Profits from privateering could be lucrative, but the reprisals it attracted were harsh and regular. In 1429 a large Tunisian force invaded the islands and besieged Mdina. Lacking provisions and assistance from Sicily, the town was about to succumb when the north Africans decided to call it the day, sailing back home with several thousand Maltese captives. In 1488 an Ottoman squadron sacked Birgu, prompting the Crown to impose a 15% levy on absentee landlords. The revenue from this levy was to go for the repair of the town walls and the island's defence, but Malta's major landholder, the Bishop, was soon petitioning King Ferdinand to be exempted from this new obligation. Increasingly, Sicilian captains-at-arms took their place

next to the town captains to see to local defence, while village labour was enrolled to repair the fortifications. Foreign soldiers deployed in Malta's defence had to be billeted with private households. Despite these efforts, the next four decades to 1530 were marked by repeated landings, culminating in the sack of the central village of Mosta by Sinan's men in 1526.

Malta's potentially strategic role in the defence of later medieval Sicily had already been highlighted during the War of the Vespers, especially with the battle between the Angevin and Catalan-Aragonese fleets in the island's main harbour in July 1283. Admiral Roger of Lauria learned that the fleet of Charles of Anjou had found its way to Malta, where the Angevin garrison of the *castrum maris* was reinforced. Lauria rushed to Malta with his fleet, benefiting from Gozitan reconnaissance on the way, and supported by pro-Aragonese forces which had already taken Mdina. He won the naval encounter which followed, defeating the admirals of Charles of Anjou and capturing their ships and their men. The Catalan chroniclers Ramon Muntaner and Bernat Desclot wrote vivid descriptions of the battle, both emphasizing the large numbers of slain fighters. 'With Malta in our hands', Lauria tells his troops before the battle, 'the sea will be ours'. After hours of battling, the corpse-strewn waters in the port had turned red. Acting in Peter of Aragon's name, Lauria received the homage and fealty of Malta and Gozo, leaving Manfred Lancia as captain of the islands and stationed Catalan garrisons in Malta and Gozo. Nevertheless, the Angevin defenders of the *castrum maris* held on for at least another six months until they were forced to put down their arms. In 1287 an Angevin fleet made an unsuccessful attempt to recapture the strategic Maltese base.

Besides the constant fear of major Moorish attacks, the islands would be periodically plunged in the apprehension of an oncoming onslaught by the political enemies of the Regno, be they Angevin, Genoese or Venetian. Maltese brigantines would frequently report sightings of enemy shipping in neighbouring waters, and might return home carrying the Viceroy's biddings for a redoubling of the defensive effort in the archipelago. A Catalan-Aragonese fleet sacked Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria in 1298 to punish Frederick III of Sicily – an Aragonese prince who had accepted the island's Crown, challenging the international commitments of his elder brother James, king of Aragon and former ruler of Sicily. In a sad twist to events, Catalan ships were attacking Catalan-held islands. Irony was painted in even larger terms in later medieval Genoese attacks against the Maltese islands; for instance, a Genoese fleet sacked Angevin-held Gozo in 1274, in a reversal of the days of Count Henry, when the islands were considered a secure Genoese base. A Genoese fleet backed Frederick IV's intervention against Jacobo Pellegrino's control of the Maltese islands in 1372. Major Genoese attacks were expected during Alfonso's conquest of Naples.

There was little which could strike greater fear in the hearts of the islanders than the prospect of capture and captivity. Located perilously along the *fronteria barbarorum*, the Maltese islands were within reach of Moorish attacks, and the fifteenth century petitions to the Crown did not mince words about the grave need for protection against the *cani Mori*. To the ever-present Hafsid threat there was added, from the 1470s, the terror of an approaching Ottoman invasion of the Regno, which seemed a matter of time when Ottoman forces took Otranto. Although the Porte's plans for an invasion were shelved, an Ottoman squadron sacked Birgu in 1488. In the early 1500s, Ottoman-sponsored privateers like the Barbarossa brothers operated from Djerba and other centres in the Maghrib, their efforts radiating out across the central Mediterranean in an ever-expanding circle, attacking Christian interests both at sea and on land.

On the eve of the Order's establishment in Malta, the islands had a population of about twenty thousand, at par with a medium-sized town in Sicily. Local production of cereals and other consumables was normally limited to a few months of the year, the bulk of Maltese demand being satisfied by tax-free grain imports from Sicily. Thousands of salme of wheat, barley and legumes were imported yearly to feed the island's population and livestock. Care was taken to ensure that the islands had enough provisions stored for emergency situations caused by enemy action, epidemics or inclement weather. In periods of crisis the municipality would compel visiting ships to unload foodstuffs and other merchandise (Wettinger 1993). While it took a relatively large force to subdue and control the islands, a small squadron could effectively blockade Malta and Gozo for weeks, disrupting their commerce and communications. In 1530 the government of Malta and Gozo was transferred to the Hospitallers, although the islands continued nominally to be a feudal limb of the Regno. From then on, the islands' administration would no longer be overseen from Sicily; political control and decision making, together with the growing burden of defence, would now be shouldered by the Order. The move from a peripheral community under viceregal rule (Fiorini 1999; Fiorini 2004) to an island under the direct administration of the Knights of St John was truly revolutionary. Malta's structural dependence on the Sicilian granary for the *tratte* remained a hallmark of the Hospitaller polity, keeping the archipelago economically, if not politically, in Sicily's orbit for centuries to come.

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