

Maltese antiquarians of early-modern age and the cave church of Mellieha – Reflections on Christian sites dealing with Islamic presence throughout the Mediterranean

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Abstract. This article presents unpublished documents about Maltese Christian history and Middle Ages written by a Discalced Carmelite friar in the seventeenth century and recently discovered in the Archives of the Generalate of the Discalced Carmelites in Rome. This is the opportunity to reflect on the attitude of Maltese and European scholars regarding the Church of Our Lady of Mellieha, one of the most important Medieval sites of Malta, in order to underline how scholars and missionaries of the seventeenth century related with the archaeological sites of the island dating after the Islamic period. The essay aims therefore to describe how scholars of the seventeenth century approached the multicultural and often turbulent aspects of the Mediterranean history, contributed in assessing the nascent study of Arabic language and culture, and structured a shared Mediterranean cultural identity.

Keywords. Discalced Carmelites, Mediterranean Historiography, Malta, Our Lady of Mellieha, Mediterranean Middle Age

Introduction

This article deals with some unknown documents concerning Maltese historiographical research of the seventeenth century preserved in the Archives of the Generalate of the Discalced Carmelites in Rome (Archivio della Casa Generalizia dei Carmelitani Scalzi). The discovery of this material is primarily due to some extensive research into the Maltese Christian antiquity of the seventeenth century, carried out by the author since 2017 (CECALUPO 2020).

In the first section of this essay, the documents will be presented from a global perspective, starting with the historical context of the documents (the foundation of the Convent of Malta by the Discalced Carmelites in 1624) and of the author, Father Isidore of St. Joseph. Once the most salient parts of

the text are outlined and a preliminary explanation is provided, the essay will propose a brief historical-archaeological analysis of the main Maltese site to which the text refers, the cave-church of Our Lady of Mellieha.

The interpretations and studies concerning this site by other important Maltese historians of the seventeenth century (Marco Antonio Axiaq, Girolamo Manduca, Giovanni Francesco Abela) will follow, and this will lead to the critical section where the case will be taken as a paradigm to analyse the relationship between Christian scholars and the past of the island, as well as their vision for the survival of Christian places during the Islamic period. This analysis will then be used as a basis for a brief comparison with the Spanish *Reconquista*. This will be useful in outlining the relationship between the scholars and missionaries of the early modern age and the archaeological sites of the Mediterranean affected by close contacts with Islam. It will also help in assessing the nascent study of the Arabic language in terms of identity creation and the develop of the historiographical disciplines. The aim is to offer a different perspective on the work of the Maltese and European scholars of the seventeenth century in approaching the more multicultural and often turbulent aspects of Mediterranean history.

The Discalced Carmelites in Malta and father Isidore of St. Joseph

In the Archives of the Generalate of the Discalced Carmelites in Rome, there is a folder dedicated to the Convent and Seminary of Malta, whose unpublished material is particularly useful in understanding the birth and development of the Maltese Convent¹. In fact, there are various documents (letters, reports, notes, memoirs) which, together with those preserved in the archives of the Discalced Carmelites in Malta, are of great importance in reconstructing the events of this institution, especially in the nebulous moments of its foundation (ALT 2022).

The first steps towards the establishment of the Seminary of Malta date back to the arrival of the first Carmelites on the island in 1624. In 1625, thanks to the support of Pope Urban VIII and King Philip II of Spain, the head of the Italian Congregation of the Discalced Carmelites, Br Paolo Simone of Jesus Mary, sought consent to establish the order in Malta (AMBROGIO DI SANTA TERESA 1950: 285). They sought permission from the Order of St. John

¹ Archivio della Casa Generalizia dei Carmelitani Scalzi di Roma, 229c, Missiones – Sem. Miss. Malta, Notulae historiae quoad insulam Melitensem ac Sanctuarium.

and the local Bishop Baldassarre Cagliares, obtaining it through a public deed of foundation signed in the Curia of Valletta on December 11, 1625.

The Carmelite Fathers then moved in the new Convent of St. Teresa in Bormla, which was structured to function as a bridge for European missionaries to the East (BUSUTIL 1983: 371; DE MENDIOLA 2011: 677). To strengthen this objective, and thanks to the interest of the newly founded *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, the General Chapter of May 1632 approved the opening of the Maltese seminary for the study of the Arabic language².

The teaching of Arabic thus became the main purpose of the Maltese Carmelite Seminary, which was perfectly in line with the activity of translating and studying Arabic for assimilating people into Christianity in mission lands in the post-Tridentine era (GILBERT 2020: 151-153). This is of fundamental importance for this essay. In fact, it created a favourable environment for reflection on Arabic culture in relation to Christian one. In areas that were historically divided between European-Latin culture and North African-Arab-Islamic society like Malta, this reflection became of great importance for seventeenth century missionaries and scholars. This attention to the relationship between Christian heritage and local history, including the Arab period, the Norman reconquest, and the Ottoman attacks in the early days of the government of the Order of St John, can be seen from the text of the manuscript presented here. It is a group of notes that belonged to Isidore of St. Joseph, a little-known missionary friar. Born Livinus de Baes in 1596 and raised in Belgium, he entered the Carmelite Order in Douai on 4 April 1622³. Over the years he reached important positions within the Order. His career began as a teacher, he was then professor of philosophy, sacred theology, and controversies at Belgian colleges and then at the Roman seminary of St. Paul. He also held some administrative position within the Carmelites: during the General Chapter of January 13, 1642, he was elected Prior of the College and Seminary of Malta⁴. He had probably taught at the Maltese Seminary for some time already, but we have few handwritten sources of his period in Malta (ENRICO DEL SS. SACRAMENTO 1884: 363-364). There, he was elected Prior at least three times⁵. He eventually became General Procurator of the Italian Congregation on 11 May 1647, and this position took him definitively to Rome where he became Definitor General and died in

² Archivio della Casa Generalizia dei Carmelitani Scalzi, Roma, Acta Capituli Generalis, I, 298-299. It was not the only institution of this kind on the island: CASSAR 2015.

³ In Douai or in Dunkirk: ENRICO DEL SS. SACRAMENTO 1884: 363.

⁴ Archivio della Casa Generalizia dei Carmelitani Scalzi, Roma, Acta Definitorio Generalis, Subsidia 3, 350.

⁵ Archivio della Casa Generalizia dei Carmelitani Scalzi, Roma, Acta Capituli Generalis, 35.

1666 (ENRICO DEL SS. SACRAMENTO 1884: 363). The contemporary chronicles describe him as a man of piety, doctrine and moral integrity, but above all as a connoisseur of Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian and French, and as a true scholar (DE VILLIERS DE SAINT-ÉTIENNE AND WESSELS 1927: 201). Furthermore, his erudition in fields such as ecclesiastical history and archaeology was evidently applied during his Maltese teaching activity, as clearly visible from the text we present here, the *Notula historiae quo ad Insulam Melitensem ac Sanctuarium*⁶. The document consists of nine pages of notes of generic historical reflections regarding the island of Malta and its Christian past, structured by specific themes. The first group of folios (fols. 1r-3r) is effectively an introductory bibliography useful for defining the historical and geographical features of the island. This is followed by brief notes on the pre-Roman history of Malta (fol. 4r), a very narrow and problematic episcopal list (fol. 4v)⁷, various notes of geographical nature, and finally some bibliographical references on the early Christian history of Malta and its relationship with the Italian and North African episcopate of the first centuries of Christianity (folios not numbered). In these pages, Isidore paid particular attention to various sources, and presented one key Christian location on the island: the cave-church of Mellieha, dedicated to the Virgin.

This material commented so far seems to be a preparation for the better structured and more complete text that appears in the final set of notes with the title *Della Veneranda antichità di questo santo luogo* (see Appendix). Both the dedication and the conclusion with the invocation to the reader give the impression that this text was at least intended for a general diffusion. It focuses on the cave-church of Our Lady of Mellieha: from the beginning it affirms the presumed importance of the church and highlights a recent archaeological discovery of which Isidore seems to bear witness:

Et in questi nostri tempi calamitosi per consolatione de fedeli si è ritrovato un marmo molto anticho la di cui inscrizione detta ven.da tradizione conferma con la forma de seguenti caratteri

III . IX . + che vuol dire

Nell'anno quattrocento e nove del Sig.re fu questa Cappella consecrata⁸.

⁶ Archivio della Casa Generalizia dei Carmelitani Scalzi di Roma, 229c, Missiones – Sem. Miss. Malta, Notulae historiae quoad insulam Melitensem ac Sanctuarium.

⁷ On the difficulty of offering a sequence of Maltese bishops that, if not correct, is at least verisimilar, cf. FIORINI 1961.

⁸ “And in these calamitous times of ours, for the consolation of the faithful a very old marble has been found, whose inscription confirms the venerable tradition with the following characters III . IX . + which means In the year 409 AD this Chapel was consecrated”.

Nothing is known today about the mentioned piece and we do not know which inscription Isidore referred to; however, it enabled the author to introduce and strengthen the common belief that the Melivetan Council of year 409 took place in the church of Melleiha⁹. From now on, the text briefly retraces Maltese history (Carthaginian and then Roman domination, the shipwreck of St. Paul and the evangelisation of the island, the arrival of the Vandals in 430 and the Byzantines of Genseric in 533, the Arab conquest in 870, and finally the arrival of the Normans with Roger in the eleventh century and the return of the Maltese episcopate) and outlines the geography of the island: “divisero li Cosmografi l’Isola melitense in quattro parti cioè nella sua città Notabile, nel tempio di Giunone, che era dove sta il Castel S.t Angelo, Nel tempio di Ercole a Marza Scirocco, et nel Chersoneso che vuol dire Isola d’oro”¹⁰.

Together with the list of favours and miracles granted in the seventeenth century in this holy place, the text introduces a more detailed description of the church in its environment:

Nel Chersoneso, sta situata questa venerabil Capella della B.ma Verg.e detta della Melleiha. La qual denominatione potrebbe derivarsi dal greco come dire melliflua per l’eccellenza del miele che pur hoggi in questi contorni dalle api si cava et la copia che anticamente si cavava p.a che li olivi si tagliassero. O per dir meglio per l’abondanza di quel miele et gratia celeste che Iddio per li meriti di sua madre dolcissima come una rugiada mattutina suol infondere a quelli che devotamente questo santo luogho vengono a riverire.

In Lingua Maltese Melleiha vuol dire [blank] e vuol dare ad intendere quella Lingua o braccio di terra che forma il posto vicino, assai capace e comodo¹¹.

The final part is followed by an indication of the conservation state and recent restorations:

⁹ Very widespread in Malta but already dismantled by some historical contemporaries: BUHAGIAR 2007: 65.

¹⁰ “Cosmographers divided the Island of Malta into four parts: the Capital city, the temple of Juno, which was where the Castel S.t Angelo stands, the temple of Hercules in Marza Scirocco, and the Chersoneso, which means Golden Island”.

¹¹ “In Chersoneso, there is this venerable Chapel said of Melleiha. The name could be derived from the Greek word mellifluous for the excellence of the honey that even today from the bees in this area is extracted, and the abundance that in ancient times was extracted before the olive trees were cut. Or to put it better, for the richness of that heavenly honey and the grace that God through his sweet mother, like a morning dew, gave to those who devoutly come to reverence this holy place. In the Maltese language Melleiha means [blank is on the original] and wants to refer to that stripe of land in the nearby, very generous and comfortable”.

Essendosi per sua antichità guasta una parette della roccha, et essendosi ruinata buona parte della roccha che la capella sosteneva et per di sopra la quale delle piogge havendo guaste le immagini de Santi che attorno vi erano depinti.

Il S.r Mario Vasi¹² mossosi dalla vener.a di questo s.to luogo e per l'amore et aff.o che porta alla Mad.a S.a l'ha fatto rifare e dipingere di sue spese nella forma che si vede, et molti per la commodità de pellegrini va accomodando una bellissima fontana che sta nel giardino vicino in rocca viva intagliato¹³.

The text therefore provides at least two previously unpublished indications, i.e. the precarious state of conservation that led to restoration and repainting of the decorative apparatus and the figures of saints in the apse during the seventeenth century, and the discovery – perhaps during this work – of a marble inscription with an engraving IIII . IX . + (of which no further evidence exists beyond Isidore's words). Such information can therefore contribute to the unclear conservation history of the church of Our Lady of Mellieha.

This text was written between Isidore's arrive in Malta (1642) and his departure in 1647. The redaction of this text is certainly connected to the author's personal interests, but also to his environment and the religious order he belonged to. Mendicant and missionary orders such as the Carmelites were always interested in recovering and reconstructing the history of the early Church. In general, these orders have a long tradition of negotiating the past and seeking historical justifications for their present status. This search for a past with which to identify themselves as continuators is a peculiar feature of orders such as the Carmelites, and is therefore a feature to be kept in mind if one is to understand the genesis of this writing by Isidore (JOTIS-CHKY 2002: 307, 332-338).

Our Lady of Mellieha in Maltese historiography

Although the village of Mellieha has been linked to the Pauline cult since the first centuries of Maltese Christianity, very few archaeological and histo-

¹² Probably referring to the homonymous lector of the Carmelite College: BUSUTTIL 1983: 376.

¹³ "Due to its antiquity a wall in the rock was damaged; given the fact that a good part of the rock that supported the chapel was ruined, and then also for the rain, the images of the saints painted around were damaged. S.r Mario Vasi, moved by the veneration of this place and for the love and affection that he brings to the Holy Virgin, has had it rebuilt and painted at his own expense in the form that can be seen now, and also for the comfort of pilgrims created a beautiful fountain that is in the nearby garden, carved in the rock".

rical-artistic indicators place the foundation of the cave-church of Our Lady in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (BUHAGIAR 2007: 101-102). The church, in its rock-carved appearance, is evidently connected to the spread of Basilian Greek monasticism on the island from southern Italy. The relationship with southern Italy and in particular with Sicily is part of a wider net of connections that brought Eastern Christianity to Malta throughout the late Antiquity and medieval periods (BUHAGIAR 2007: 66; DALLI 2006).

The church in fact belongs to a group of rural churches of Sicilian-Maltese style, it is one of the oldest remaining among these and one of the most venerated. From its early phase, we can still see the icon of the Madonna and Child (painted in stucco behind the altar, attributed by tradition to St. Luke, but actually a Sicilian-Byzantine work of the late thirteenth century, similar to some post-Muslim representations of eastern Sicily (BUHAGIAR 2007: 102)) and the Greek inscription on it (*Mater theu*). There were also seven red and golden crosses carved in stone, which were visible at least until the end of the nineteenth century (FERRES 1886: 521). The rest of the church has been altered due to the rebuilding works that have been carried out over the centuries. The first ones date back to the middle of the fifteenth century; in the *Quaternolus pro concordia taxarum*, written in 1436 by Bishop Senator of Mello to settle disputes concerning taxes and benefits for the Maltese churches, the church of Our Lady of Mellieha was elevated to parish, even if this was a time of significant depopulation throughout the whole area. In this context, the church was restored, architecturally renovated and put back into operation. Between the reconstruction of the mid-fifteenth century and those of the mid-seventeenth century witnessed by Isidore, it is possible to detail a sequence of restorations that involved both the church and the icon.

These restorations were also linked to the growing attention of the Order of Malta on the site and the increasing number of pilgrims. There was a first whitewash of the interior after a Ottoman raid of 1551, followed by a repainting of the icon during the 1580s. Again, there were various interventions in the mid-seventeenth century following the Turkish attack and pillage of 6 July 1614 including the total redecoration of the apse the reworking of the icon's frame, and the addition of a protective glass cover (witnessed in 1686) (FRELLER 2017: 27-28, 37-39).

Indeed, despite the total abandonment of the area after the pastoral visit of Bishop Pietro Dusina in 1575, in the late sixteenth century started a period of pastoral renewal (CASSAR PULLICINO 1956; VELLA 1969). The church was overseen for a short period by the Augustinian Fathers (1584-1587) and then became a sanctuary in 1588. On May 21, 1747, the church

status was changed to parish by Mons. Alpheran and, in 1834-1844, became a sanctuary again and was assigned a new parish community. This was a period of modernisation works which transformed the ancient cave-church into a crypt for a new, large, modern church (FERRES 1886: 521-522). Its archaeological and conservation history is complex and discontinuous, but legends and traditions linked to this place have enjoyed incredible longevity and persist to this day. These stories are all present both in Isidore's text and in those of other Maltese historians of the seventeenth century.

The first official historian of the Order of Malta was also the first author to explicitly link the church with the Melivetan Council in 1602. Giacomo Bosio, agent in Rome of the Order of Malta and its official historian, dedicates a few paragraphs to the Melivetan Council in the third book of his *Istoria Della Sacra Religione*, in which he reports the opinions of various scholars regarding its location, leaning towards identifying Malta as the seat of the Council. According to Bosio, the traditional stories regarding the church of Mellieha contributes to this identification:

Et i Vecchi Maltesi consacrata, per antica traditione de' Maggiori loro costantemente credono, che 'l detto Concilio fosse tenuto in Malta, e dicono ch'anco hoggidi se ne vegono alcune memorie, nella diuotissima Chiesa della Madonna della Meleca, la quale vogliono, che da Padri di questo Concilio fosse consecrata¹⁴.

In order of time, this was followed by a short but very informative text in the *Relatione* [...] *circa le cose dell'isola di Malta* (ca. 1635) by the Jesuit Girolamo Manduca, a text still unpublished in its entirety yet fundamental for Maltese archaeological historiography (LUTTRELL 1977, 119). Manduca was one of the first scholars of the island expert in ancient ecclesiastical history, and he has been a source of inspiration for many others over the centuries. In the brief description dedicated by Manduca to this church, both his strongly antiquarian attitude and his interest in historical toponymy are evident:

Chiesa della Melleha; ed alcuni vogliono si debba dire =della Melcha= senza l'e nel mezzo che vuol dire salata, e quello Salina, perché la Salina non è molto che si è principata, e non riesce, ed il nome è più antico;

¹⁴ BOSIO 1602: 92. "And the Old Malteses traditionally believe that the said Council was held in Malta, and they say that even today some memories of it can be seen in the very famous Church of Our Lady of the Meleha, which they say was consecrated by the Fathers of this Council".

onde per esser stato corrotto con l'occasione di tal mutazione a questo nome esser stato posto per la ruina di quella parrocchia, di cui era questa Chiesa la Capella¹⁵.

Interestingly, rather than paying attention to the icon, Manduca focusses on the location of the site and the seven engraved crosses to discuss the history of clergy and episcopate in Malta over the centuries.

Longer and more devout, although strongly inspired by the words of Manduca, is the *Dissertatiuncula De Venerabili et antiquissimo Specu S. Mariae a Melleha Deque Concilio Secundo Melivetano Anno Domini 402 Celebrato*, attributed to Marc'Antonio Axiaq from Gozo, a surgeon who wrote about historical-archaeological discoveries in Malta in 1630s-1640s. The first part of Axiaq's description of the church is the most interesting so far because it gives erudite indications about its wall decoration:

In camera huius Sacrae Criptae Immago B. M.V. opere prae ceteris mirabili est, aevo tamen nostro crusta pyrropea murum colores gypsum post tot Saecula in loco maxime humido, ei subterraneo iam pene deserverint, quam in hospitalitatis teesseract Pauli Comes, et Publij Hospes parrasius, et characteribus Grecis inscripsit Mitritu Oer. Matri Dei, et credibile est, jussu Apli ad Melitensium solarium, qui iam tum recenter Christo crediderant, ex eodem Manduca loco, et capite citato¹⁶.

He also tells us that he saw the seven crosses engraved in the wall, which he dated back to the passage of Belisarius¹⁷. The final part of the dissertation is dedicated to the icon itself, repeating the attribution to St. Luke and expanding its history¹⁸.

All this material then flows into the main work of Maltese historiography, *La Descrittione di Malta, Isola del Mare Siciliano* by Giovanni Francesco Abela (CECALUPO 2020: 41-58). Abela was born in Malta in 1582 into a family of Sicilian origin who gave him an excellent education. He entered the Order of St. John as a young man, in the Langue of Castile and Portugal. In 1606 he obtained his doctorate *in utroque iure* at the University of Bologna and for many

¹⁵ National Library of Malta, Lib. 25, fols. 100v-101r. "Church of the Melleha; some want us to say =della Melcha= without the e in the middle, which means salty, and from here Salina, because Salina is not long that has been started, while the name is older; so that, for having been corrupted by the change of name, he was connected to the ruin of that parish, of which this Church was the Capella".

¹⁶ National Library of Malta, Lib. 515, fols. 35r-35v.

¹⁷ National Library of Malta, Lib. 515, fols. 35v-36r.

¹⁸ National Library of Malta, Lib. 515, fol. 37v.

years held numerous high positions within the Order; he finally became Vice-Chancellor in 1626, becoming the first Maltese to hold this position. In 1640 he decided to retire from political life to focus on cultural activities, like the publication of *La Descrittione di Malta, Isola del Mare Siciliano* in 1647. This is the first complete work on the history of the Maltese archipelago and represents the consecration of Abela as the father of Maltese historiography. No theme is left out: Abela explored the historical and contemporary geography, the populations who dominated the island, the archaeological and monumental sites of every chronology (which he investigated on person), the Maltese language, the illustrious Maltese people, the episcopal chronology, and much more.

The description of the Church of Our Lady of Mellieha can be found in *Libro III, Notitia IV*, dedicated to parish churches throughout the diocese of Malta (ABELA 1647: 371-373). Here, Abela reports the construction technique of the church and what he has seen of the icon and its arrangement; then he presents its history and the events connected to it (in particular the Melitetan Council) referring to previous authors, in particular Giacomo Bosio, without critically addressing the issues. Instead, like Isidore (who wrote his text almost in the same years) he refers both to the seventeenth-century restorations and additions and to the manifestations of popular piety linked to the miracles attributed to the icon. Abela pays particular attention to the help given to the Virgin of Mellieha in avoiding an attack by the Turks in 1640, describing in detail the defeat of their ships by the armies of Knights coming from all over Europe (ABELA 1647: 373).

Even the few Maltese scholars who provided extensive descriptions of the site in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did that in an inconsistent manner. The first example is Giovanni Antonio Ciantar who, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, published an extended new edition of Abela's *Descrittione di Malta* with new discoveries. His text about the sanctuary of Mellieha can be found in the volume of 1780 and differs very little from Abela's original text (CIANTAR 1780: 198-202). Instead, the description in Achille Ferres' historical description of the Churches of Malta and Gozo is markedly different. This work was written and published in 1866 and therefore contains many novelties and updates, as well as first-hand descriptions of the crypt. The author presents the topic in the chapter CLII, dedicated to parish churches, presents the history, traditions and devotions connected to the underground areas, the recent restoration and works for the new sanctuary in the upper part of the crypt (FERRES 1886: 519-528).

European travellers at Mellieha

In light of the bibliography and archival data presented so far, it is evident that all studies concerning the sanctuary of Mellieha in the seventeenth century focussed on a few of pivotal moments for Maltese Christianity. In fact, it can be seen that scholars and travellers looked at the sanctuary and its direct dependencies due to repeated traditions which gradually became standardised through time. The common ground of the whole tradition, however, is the indissoluble link between the site, with its apparent connection with Maltese early Christianity, and the “resistance” both during Islamic rule and to the attacks of the Turks. These events gained significant interest among European scholars.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, therefore, the study of the sanctuary of Mellieha developed by exalting the apostolic origins of Christianity in Malta in contrast with the Islamic domination of the island (870-1109) as well as with the Turkish incursions occurred when the Order of St. John was establishing his rule over the island. It is in fact possible to use Mellieha’s case to identify certain ways in which seventeenth century scholars approached the “Arabised” and “re-conquered” artistic and archaeological heritage in Malta. In this regard, scholars and travellers reported the popular traditions of the numerous miracles attributed to the icon of Our Lady against the Ottoman attacks over the centuries and amplified them in the wider European cultural context, giving them a more general role in Catholic anti-Islamic propaganda. In fact, the texts of the Maltese authors always try to present how the apostolic tradition of the island was so uncorrupted over the centuries that it survived both the Muslim period of the ninth and tenth centuries and the sixteenth-seventeenth-century raids and looting.

However, there are also European authors who transmitted this relationship beyond the borders of the island in the following centuries. The accounts of two German travellers deserve special attention here: both of them date back to the very end of the seventeenth century and were published in the following centuries.

Architect Lambert Friedrich Corfey’s 1700 travel report focused heavily on the presence of the “Turks” in the sanctuary area, using a devotional tone fully in line with the general discourse made so far: “The Turks had tried very often, however in vain, to land here. Once they managed to land but when they tried to enter and destroy this chapel they became paralysed and could not move away”¹⁹. However, he also reports an observation of archaeological

¹⁹ LAHRKAMP 1977: 242. English translation by FRELLER 2017: 81.

nature. The Ottoman troops are seen as responsible of damages to some ancient statues which were reused (and are still visible) to decorate a cave inside the sanctuary area, still in place in the seventeenth-century and considered to be statues of saints: "In the grotto is a natural spring with fresh water. Also in this place one sees many statues of saints, all of whose heads the Turks had cut off"²⁰.

The description of the sanctuary of Mellieha as a whole, its conservation and the historical events linked to the passage of the Turks to Malta also recurs in the report of the visits of the Bavarian Franciscan missionary and military chaplain Theodor Krump, who examines the passage of the Turks and the damage they did:

This grotto is 20 strides long and approximately 15 strides wide. There are several statues of saints; all of them lack ears, eyes, and arms. The cause for this damage is the attack of a certain Turkish pirate [...] They also tried to pull down the statue of the Holy Virgin from the pedestal and to destroy it completely²¹.

What is noted is therefore a centuries-old Christian continuity attributed to the sanctuary of Mellieha which according to popular and erudite tradition maintained its Christian apostolic character throughout the Middle Ages, a period marked by two centuries of Islamic occupation, and by the Saracen and Ottoman incursions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This attitude has certainly helped to define the importance of this tradition in the construction of the Maltese identity with its uncorrupted apostolic roots, one of the pillars on which the Order's theocracy was structured. It is precisely the incessant statement of the continuity of the holiness of the key Christian locations, always made explicit by local scholars, handed down by foreign travellers and flanked by the first complete (and always imaginative) episcopal genealogies, that helps to structure this identity. The idea that the Maltese Episcopal See was occupied without interruption of any kind, starting with Bishop Publius chosen by the Apostle Paul, appears to be entirely an invention of the late-sixteenth century and is linked in general to the rebirth of Catholic historiography during Counter-Reformation (LUTTRELL 1977: 119).

²⁰ LAHRKAMP 1977: 242. English translation by FRELLER 2017: 82.

²¹ KRUMP 1710: 472. English translation by FRELLER 2017: 87.

A wider framework

Nonetheless, this is a phenomenon that must also be read on a wider and Mediterranean scale: given the due differences, it is in fact possible to make a plausible comparison between what happened with the Spanish scholars and the historiographical study of the well-known issue of el-Andalus and the *Reconquista* of the fifteenth century by the Catholic sovereigns.

Even in the case of the Andalusian regions, archaeological and monumental sites (both those already known and those that were discovered at the beginning of the seventeenth century) have been used to understand and distinguish medieval Christian remains from Islamic ones. One well-known case is the explorations of the settlements and ecclesiastical structures on the banks of the Guadalquivir, just outside Cordoba, reported and described by two seventeenth-century Spanish scholars, Pedro Diaz de Riva and Fernan Perez de Torres (GARCÍA-ROMERAL PÉREZ 1998). Both authors focus on the identification of archaeological traces of continuity of Christian cult during the Arab period, in particular the various burials are seen as typically univocal of religious continuity (RODRÍGUEZ MEDIANO 2009: 14-18). The idea itself of *Reconquista* contains an unavoidable connection with the pre-Islamic past, in a panorama of contradictory narration of the Islamic heritage by Spanish Christian scholars. Indeed, the need to handle el-Andalus in the frame of Spanish history was very much felt by scholars, who were always divided between rejection and acceptance, especially when studying monuments and archaeological remains. In spite of the religious contradictions that accompany the whole of Roman, Visigothic and Arab history in the territories of central and southern Spain, the tendency of scholars was to look at national history as designed by Providence, recapturing all traces of continuity of Christian life and accepting both Mozarabic Christianity and the Orientalism inherent in the earliest Spanish history (GARCÍA ARENAL, RODRIGUEZ MEDIANO 2013: 353, 363, 369).

The action of reconquering recalls the gesture of reconnecting the thread of Spain's Christian history, a history of ancient origin with an apostolic tradition (like the attribution of Iberia to one of the last journeys of St. Paul and to the coming of the apostle James (SOTOMAYOR 1979)), despite the long Arab presence in Andalusia. The scarcity of pre-Islamic sources led Spanish scholars and religious to confessional archaeological research (OLDS 2019: 169), which in the case of Spain resulted in fictitious findings if not outright forgeries. From the end of the sixteenth century onwards, relics of local saints and martyrs attributed to the first centuries of Christianity were claimed to

be found. In addition to these, a large number of medieval stories (especially hagiographies and *passiones*) were recovered and pre-dated to the apostolic period in order to favour the reconstruction of Christian origins of cities (DITCHFIELD 2012: 84-92), individual devotions and liturgical continuity (VAN LIERE 2012: 139-140). The highest point of this process was obviously the creation of the legend of the apostles James and Paul preaching in Spain. The first chronicles that gave attention to Paul and James in order to affirm pre-Islamic, apostolic Christianity date only from the late sixteenth century: these merged historiography and popular devotion and, despite their historical untruthfulness, became the basis for narratives of national identity and Spanish Catholic orthodoxy (VAN LIERE 2012: 136-139). Great was the need to prove the apostolic origins of the Spanish Church and to recall the uninterrupted continuity of local devotions in the El-Andalus area, but scholars from Rome regarded with suspicion and scepticism these “ancient sources” regarding James in Spain²².

In post-Tridentine Spain, Arabic and its translations formed the basis of evangelisation and were perceived as a linguistic as well as political object. The widespread feeling of problematic and unfixed history gave impetus to historiography, which in the seventeenth century was also based on translations of Arabic texts used to produce authoritative historical sources. The desire to find useful material for this great political and historiographical reconstruction also made use of false sources (GILBERT 2020: 185-197, 211). Real forgeries were also quite common. The most famous case is obviously that of the *plomos* of Granada, fictitiously found in the nearby *Sacromonte*: these are lead tablets written in a kind of ancient Latin and Arabic, which were said to report a long Marian revelation with the chronology of the Christian faith going back to St. James and the first-century martyrs (OLDS 2015: 127-128). The *plomos*, played a crucial role, and are also a clear example of the ideological institutionalisation of the use of Arabic in the telling of the history of Spain (GILBERT 2020: 213)²³.

Although the veracity of the *plomos* was immediately denied by the Catholic hierarchy (OLDS 2015: 128), it cannot be ignored that they fully represented the need to make the historical continuity of the Christian faith in Spain visible to all, both scholars and the devout. The need of Spanish scholars, even in these distorted expressions of their beliefs, was always to recover

²² VAN LIERE 2012: 122-123, and, for examples, for the case of Higuera's Chronicles: VAN LIERE 2012: 143-144; OLDS 2015: 133-142.

²³ Regarding the *plomos* see BARRIOS AGUILERA, CARCÍA-ARENAL 2006; BARRIOS AGUILERA, CARCÍA-ARENAL 2008; BARRIOS AGUILERA 2011.

tradition, identity and Christian antiquity. In this need to re-establish links with the most ancient local Christianity during the post-Tridentine period, we therefore see a very close comparison to what was previously outlined for Malta. The seventeenth-century phenomenon of traditional and erudite promotion of the Christian past insisted on an uninterrupted continuity of life; consequently, it appeared to be a persistent issue in historiographic reconstruction of the European areas that were most markedly characterised by the long and pervasive presence of Arabs during the Middle Ages.

At this point, it is necessary to underline the last features that gives wider importance to the *Notula historiae quo ad Insulam Melitensem ac Sanctuarium* of Father Isidore of St. Joseph. Particular attention has to be given to its compositional context. It seems of great importance to underline how the archaeological and historical interest of Isidore, a scholar and professor in the Maltese seminary, funded to teach Arabic to the Carmelite missionaries leaving for the East, focussed on the sanctuary of Mellieha, a site which is in the Maltese imagination the proof of the survival of Christianity despite all the historical changes experienced by the island. It is precisely from this perspective that we should examine the study of Arabic language and culture in regions such as Spain and Malta.

Here comes to mind the interest for the Arabic language of the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, the most influential European Baroque scholar (FINDLEN 2004), who lived in Malta from 1637 to 1638. Starting from Arabic language, he undertook translations and studies of many ancient Oriental languages and phenomena such as the Kabbalah. Throughout his life, Kircher was seen as a point of reference for scholars interested in the Arabic language, especially Spanish ones (GARCÍA ARENAL, RORDIGUEZ MEDIANO 2013: 348-349). Kircher's interest in the East and its languages was linked not only to his stay in Malta, but also to his life in Rome. A great emphasis in his interest in Arabic passed through his study of the hieroglyphics of the great Roman obelisks. Indeed, the majestic Egyptian obelisks still visible in the central points of the city stimulated the fantasies of many Roman scholars, because of their long inscriptions believed to have magical and evocative power (GRAFTON 1993: 118-121). The Egyptian obelisks in the centre of the great squares in front of Roman Christian basilicas could still symbolically place the Eternal City at the centre of the Mediterranean.

Under the same cultural framework, the main ecclesiastical missionary institution in Rome, the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*, was founded by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to deal with the evangelisation of peoples in all known lands and to supervise the missionary activity of all orders and the

Church as a whole (*Compendio* 1974). Thanks to the cultural and religious work carried out over the decades by *Propaganda Fide*, the Arabic language in Europe was linked throughout the seventeenth century both to the erudite concerns of individual scholars and to the evangelical occupations of the missionary orders (GILBERT 2020: 217).

From the foundation of *Propaganda Fide*, the Holy Land and the Near East became spiritual centres towards which new missions were directed, and orders like the Carmelites were able to establish new convents, schools and hospitals there with papal permission. A growing symptom of this presence was the increase of schools in response to educational concerns and the need for brothers who spoke Arabic for a vast work of evangelisation led by the Congregation from Rome (ARMSTRONG 2021: 271-292).

In the attempt to use the Arabic language for evangelisation, many friars and religious carried out in-depth studies and institutionalised the teaching of Arabic at university level (GARCÍA ARENAL, RODRIGUEZ MEDIANO 2013: 335-342). These two activities met regularly, and religious missionaries of great scholarly fame were also involved in creating Arabic textbooks and dictionaries. It was the case of the Maltese Oratorian Domenico Magri, secretary of *Propaganda Fide* and author of a well-known translation of the Bible into Arabic (LUTTRELL 1977: 112), or the Franciscan friar Tomaso Obicini, author of a fundamental *Grammatica Araba* (1631) and the *Thesaurus Arabico-Syro-Latino* (1636). It is interesting to underline the presence of the Franciscan friars in this historical phenomenon (BEAVER 2012: 274-278). The Franciscans were very much involved in the cultural circles of the seventeenth century and, from an archaeological point of view, played a very important role in the archaeological rediscovery of biblical sites in the Holy Land and the Near East (ARMSTRONG 2021). In that period they could create, actually, relevant historical essays on the Holy Land that gave Europe a new historical interpretation of the area (RITSEMA VAN ECK 2019: 178). The scenario in which they moved was similar to that of Spain and Malta: the strong desire to locate the remains of the Old and New Testaments applied to a geographical context strongly Islamised by Mamluks and Ottomans. Moreover, they were locating remains and monuments in a context that resulted from the destructions of the first century AD and the Constantinian and medieval renovations.

This is therefore a global context of ideological reconstruction, where missionaries played a crucial role. These religious orders endeavoured to produce highly trained preachers and confessors who could work profitably in non-Christian lands (or in land with a strong Islamic tradition) and produce,

at the same time, a sacred historiography that recalls the church's original past (ARMSTRONG 2021: 260-265).

In this panorama, the effort to use material culture to illustrate Christian origins of the Mediterranean was consolidated. Historical geography and monumental topography of faith-related places began to assume great importance. The expansion of studies on the Christian past of the Arabised areas and the increase of erudite travellers and pilgrims led to the growth of antiquarian and humanistic texts with clear exegetical purposes, continuously connected to the reconstruction of local Christian history (BEAVER 2012: 270-275). History served to create a spiritual union with the Catholic Church by incorporating peripheral areas, those under Muslim attack, or Christians in Ottoman lands (ARMSTRONG 2021: 296). It was a history that encompassed sacred spaces, that intended to associate history and collective memory with physical places through the recovery of ancient and medieval tradition (RITSEMA VAN ECK 2019: 9-12). In areas such as Spain and Malta, this interest was predominantly encouraged by the constitution of local identity. In Malta, especially during the seventeenth century, the ideological rejection of the Arab past and -at the same time- a general interest in Christianity in Maltese Middle Ages influenced the archaeological and historiographical research of the island. The text produced by Isidore of St. Joseph is therefore another valuable resource for developing the holistic study and knowledge of the past in Mediterranean regions characterised by centuries-old multiculturalism.

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Appendix

Archivio della Casa Generalizia dei Carmelitani Scalzi di Roma. 229c,
Missiones – Sem. Miss. Malta

Notulae historiae quoad insulam Melitensem ac Sanctuarium.

[fol. 1r]

Cavato dal Libro intitolato:

L'Isole più famose del mondo descritte da Tomaso Porcacchi da Castiglione in Padua 1620 nella descritt.e dell'Isola di Malta a carte 59.

Sotto Papa Innoc.o p.o fu in Malta celebrato un Conc.o di 214 vescovi contra Pelagio heretico nel quale vi intervennero tra gli altri S. Agostino et Silvano Vescovo di Malta.

Dal libro in foglio intitolato:

Tempio Eremitano de Santi et beati dell'ordine Agostiniano di fr. Ambrogio Staibano

Datato del med.mo ord.e in Napoli per Tarquinio Longo. 1609.

Nel cap.lo 17 a carte 57 dice così delli concilii nelli quali intervenne Santo Agostino.

Il settimo fu il Milevitano celebrato in Malta nel quale principalm.te si trattò contro l'heresie Pelagiane.

In un marmo vecchio si vedono queste lettere con molte Vescovali attorno

IIII.IX +

Che vuol dire conservata nel C.C.CC.IX quaranta et nove.

[fol. 4r]

Della Madonna della Melleiha et antichità di Malta.

[Fol. N.n]

Della veneranda antichità di questo santo luogo.

Al devoto Lettore.

Questa Venerabile Cappella fabricata in sasso vivo fu secondo la verità di trad.e antichiss.a nel pontificato di Innocenzo primo da molti Santi Vescovi qui per voler di Dio contro l'heresiarcha Pelagio in compagna di S.to Agostino ragionati, consecrata e dedicata alla B.ma Vergine Maria Madre di gratia. Et in questi nostri tempi calamitosi per consolatione de fedeli si è ritrovato un marmo molto anticho la di cui inscrizione detta ven.da tradizione conferma con la forma de seguenti caratteri

III . IX . + che vuol dire:

Nell'anno quattrocento e nove del Sig.re fu questa Cappella consecrata.

E vi sono auctori gravissimi e nella historia sacra molto pratici li quali non senza fondam.to affermano in questo divoto luogo essersi tenuto il celebre Concilio Melivetano nel quale da S. Sylvano Vescovo di Malta e S. Agostino et altri 214 Vescovi fu l'inimico della gratia condannato.

F. Lorenzo Surio dell'ordine de Certosini nel primo tomo del Concilij lo conferma con queste parole Melivetanum Concilium plerique omnes viri docti arbitrant uno celebratum in civitate Melita quam vulgo Maltam dicut. Quasi tutti li huomini dotti sono di opinione che il Conc.o Melivitano sia stato celebrato nella città di Melita, la quale volgarm.te si chiama Malta.

Stanno nel med.mo parere l'Abb: Maurolyco nella sua typografia Thomasso Procacchi nel suo libro intitolato l'Isole più famose del mondo a carte 49.

Fra Ambrosio Staibano nel suo Tempio Eremitano nel caplo 17.e dell'ordine di S. Gio: Geros.no fra Gio: Quintino et fra Paolo del Rosso, nelli libri delli statuti et stabilimenti del suo ord.e. Li quali unitamente abbracciano e riveriscono l'antica traditione de Maltesi, che questo santo luogo sia da S. Silvano et S. Ag.o et gli altri Padri nel Concilio Milevitano.

La detta trad.e:

E benchè Baronio nelle sue note al Martyr. Rom. Non habbia voluto seguitare il senso de più antichi per credere egli che questa Isola di Malta non sia situata in Numidia, nella quale S. Ag.o: Scrive il Conc.o Melivetano essersi celebrato. Nondimeno cosa certa è che nel tempo di S. Ag.o La Numidia comprendeva l'Isola di Melita, come costa dalle tavole di Cl. Ptolomeo, et era molto distante da quella che nel mappamondo da moderni Numidia viene chiamata, et volgarm.te detta. Altrimenti non haveria potuto S. Aug.o contare med.mo tra li Vescovi Numidi (come egli fa nel epistola 192) e essendo la città di Hippona Reggio hoggi Bona, dalla moderna Numidia un gran tratto discosta.

Fu l'Isola di Malta con diversi nomi intitolata et anco [fol. n.n.] nel cap. 28 delli atti Apostolici viene suo nome, secondo la diversità da testi grechi e latini in molte maniere variato, cosa che nelle città e terre antiche suole comun.te accadere, massimam.te quando il pastor l... per esser barbaro Vero è che le chiese d'Africa tra le quali allora si numerava Malta non è da letterati inteso, o per esser anticho resta corrotto o totalm.te mutato.

Li primi fondatori della antica Città di Malta furono li Cartaginesi li quali nell'Isola con il suo popolo, valore e costumi. La nativa lingua punica tradussero, così afferma Diodoro Siculo e dalle antiche inscrittioni si può fa-

cil.te cavare. Quindi è che tanto nelle cose profane quanto nelle sacre ha corso per molti secoli la medesima carrira de varij nemij ... con l'Africa e Cartagine ancorche più da essa che dalla Sicilia sia discosta. Et già molti anni avanti la venuta di Christo guerreggiando li Romani contro li Cartaginesi Sempronio console passò nell'Isola di Malta la quale teneva per li Cartaginesi, et la prese insieme con Amilcare figliuolo di Gisgone Capitano delle genti che vi erano alle guardie con poco meno che due migliaia di soldati. Come da Tito Livio nel p.o libro della p.a decade si vede registrato, e quando l'Apostolo Paolo venne per singolar benef.o di Dio portato dalla tempesta e naufragio per honorarla con sue gratie e miracoli et illuminationi con il splendore della sua fede [fol. n.n.] li trovò non di costumi ma di lingua barbaria et assieme con Cartagine et il resto dell'Africa all'imperio romano sottoposti. Patirono medesimamente dall'anno 430 la persecut.e Vandalica con le altre Chiese Africane soggiogate da sotto Genserico come dalla R... lettera che Paschascino a S. Leone Papa (apud Leonem post epist. 63) scrisse si può facilmente congetturare fino tanto che quando nel 533 furono da Belisario alli Romani assieme con tutta l'Africa rivendicati. La med.ma incirca del 546 vennero sotto il giogo dei Sarracini et per la perfidia di C... ricaderono di nuovo sotto la tyrannia de Sarracini nel d... ... della Ribellione di Eufemio al med.mo giogo trassero per la sua vicinanza la Sicilia.

Sotto il quale stettero fino l'anno 1089 dal vittorioso Rugero liberati, ricuperorno la cathedra Vescovale et assieme l'anticho titolo di Vescovo Melitetano in persona di Gualterio come si vede in una bolla del 1090 e nel stylo della Romana curia da tempo immemorabile con tal titolo Li vescovi di Malta vengono domandati.

Conservasi tra le tenebre della heresia de Vandali et infedeltà de Sarraceni, la luce di questa veneranda Cappella della B.ma Vergine et [fol. n.n.] e per intercess.e sua et privilegio singolare di S. Paolo restò nel popolo Maltese la vera et incorrotta fede abandonando Iddio per giusto suo giudicio il resto dell'Africa divisero li Cosmografi l'Isola melitense in quattro parti cioè nella sua città Notabile, nel tempio di Giunone, che era dove sta il Castel S.t Angelo, Nel tempio di Ercole a Marza Scirocco, et nel Chersoneso che vuol dire Isola d'oro, così d.o perché con due bocche di mare che assai avanti entrano in terra viene a formarsi quasi un'Isola molto fertile e d'acque dolci abbondante, in Cl. Ptolomeo, Gerardo Mercatore et altri.

Nel Chersoneso, sta situata questa venerabil Capella della B.ma Verg.e detta della Melleiha. La qual denominatione potrebbe derivarsi dal greco greco come dire melliflua per l'eccellenza del miele che pur hoggi in questi contorni dalle api si cava et la copia che anticamente si cavava p.a che li olivi si

tagliassero. O per dir meglio per l'abondanza di quel miele et gratia celeste che Iddio per li meriti di sua madre dolcissima come una rugiada mattutina suol infondere a quelli che devotamente questo santo luogo vengono a riverire.

In Lingua Maltese Melleiha vuol dire e vuol dire ad intendere quella Lingua o braccio di terra che forma il posto vicino, assai capace e comodo. Nel quale l'anno del S.re 1614 alli 6 di Luglio, essendosi sbarcata l'armata Turchescha di sessanta galere senza portar rispetto alla madre di Dio si diedero a fracassar le porte [fol. n.n.] e finestre della Chiesa et intratisi dentro a tirar moschettate e lanciate, de quali ancora appaiono li segni alla di Lei veneranda effigie che sta nel muro depinta. Anzi, uno de d.ti Infedeli da Spirito diabolico incitato ad un'altra imagine pur della B.ma Verg.e fatta di rilievo, tronchò il collo, mani et braccia con il Bambino che fra esse teneva.

Et ecco quella che è spaventevole come un essercito schierato fece sentir alli nemici di Dio la potenza del suo braccio et in un attimo stacchò le membra di quel scelerato, il quale portato da compagni in galera vedendosi in tal estremità rivolto et disperandosi di trovar rimedio humano contro il castigho divino alla med.ma Vergine fece voto e da levante, per adempirlo mandò doi antorci, li quali per memoria si conservano.

Sentirono nel med.mo istante gl'altri Infedeli che nel campo stavano grand.mo rimbombo i tamburi e trombe, e videro venirci di sopra Cavaglieri vestiti di bianco de quali la campagna appariva ripiena.

Onde istigostiti fugirono con fretta e confusione, e chi a nuoto e chi con li scifi si salvarno nelle galere abandonando robba e bagaglio.

Ma quelli, li quali dentro questa veneranda Capella o suo giardino vicino alcun guasto havendo fatto dall'invisibil mano dell'onnipotente restarno talmente costretti, che uscire non poterono fin quando dal Curato furono presi e fatti schiavi.

[fol. n.n.] Essendosi per sua antichità guasta una parette della roccha, et essendosi ruinata buona parte della roccha che la capella sosteneva et per di sopra la quale delle piogge havendo guaste le immagini de Santi che attorno vi erano depinti.

Il S.r Mario Vasi mossosi dalla vener.a di questo s.to luogo e per l'amore et aff.o che porta alla Mad.a S.a l'ha fatto rifare e dipingere di sue spese nella forma che si vede, et molti per la commodità de pellegrini va accomodando una bellissima fontana che sta nel giardino vicino in rocca viva intagliato.

[fol. n.n.] Nel 1640 stava tutta l'Isola piena di spavento e timore tanto pur l'apparenza di gran sterilità dell'annata quanto per havessi havuti avvisi certi che si preparava con tutte le sue forze risoluto di venirci assediare, et perciò ricorrendo alla B.ma Vergine et fattole voto con processione molto solenne venne

a questa veneranda Capella Mon.s Vescovo con il Clero e popolo al primo di Maggio mostrò Iddio quanto grata li fosse la devotione verso sua madre Sant.ma con una fertilità straordinaria e morte insperata del fiero nemico de Christiani.

[fol. n.n.] Innumerabili sono li beneficij e garantie che in ogni tempo la B.ma Verg.e va concedendo a quelli che divotamente la vengono riverire e supplicare in questo santo luogo li quali in questa tavola non possiamo capirsi.

Ma tu o Divoto Lettore potrai in te medesimo sperimentarli se con humil affetto e cuore contrito nelle tue necessità tanto spirituali quanto temporali invocherai la Vergine madre di gratia.