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[p.181] THE ST. PAUL SHIPWRECK CONTROVERSY
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SOURCE MATERIAL

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The identity of the island of *Melita* on which, according to St. Luke (*Acts* xxviii, 1), St. Paul was shipwrecked, around 60 A.D.,¹ while on his way to Rome to face trial before Caesar (*Acts* xxv, 1-12), is a subject of debate among scholars but, since at least the Middle Ages, the Maltese have tenaciously maintained that it was Malla. The other chief contender to the honour is the Dalmatian island of Mljet, previously known as Meleda, off Dubrovnic, in the Adriatic, which was also called Melite (Melite Illyrica) in classical times.

The Journey and Shipwreck of St. Paul

The journey and shipwreck of St. Paul are vividly described in *Acts* xxviii. Around 58 A.D., the apostle was imprisoned in Jerusalem because of Jewish riots against his presence in the city (*Acts*, xxi. 26-34) but the tribune Claudius Lysias, on learning that he was a Roman citizen (*Acts*, xii. 25-30), rescued him from his enemies and sent him under escort to Caesarea to be tried by Felix, the governor, (*Acts* xxiii, 11-30) who detained him hoping that he would offer him a bribe (*Acts* xxiv, 25-26). When Procius Festus, the next governor, again brought Paul to trial, the apostle appealed to Caesar and his request was granted (*Acts*, xxv, 9-12). He was, therefore, sent to Rome even though it was clear that he was guilty of no fault that deserved death or imprisonment (*Acts*, xxvi, 31).

The account of the first part of the toilsome journey does not raise any geographical problems. Paul and some other prisoners, were embarked on a hoat from Adrumentum that was bound for the Asiatic ports (*Acts*, xxvii, 2). A first [p.182] stop was made at Sidon and then the boat coasted under the lee of Cyprus, skirting Cilicia and Pamphylia until it reached Lystra in Lycia.² Here the party changed ship boarding an Alexandrian boat that was bound for Italy (*fig.1*).

There were 276 men on board. Paul was accompanied by Luke and Aristarchus the Macedonian, and the centurion, who was called Julius and belonged to the Augustan cohort, treated him with courtesy. For many days, the boat made a slow voyage following a SE. course and reaching Cnidus with difficulty. Winter was approaching and sailing

¹ On the presumed date of the shipwreck: G. Riciotti, *Paolo Apostolo*, Rome 1946, 146, 490; P.P. Saydon, 'Id-Data tan-Naufragju ta' San Pawl', *Lehen is-Sewwa*, 13.2.1954; C. Sant, 'Is-Sena meta San Pawl gie Malta', *Lehen is-Sewwa*, 9.3.1955.

² 2 Several mss give Myra, which was a well known port, instead of Lystra which is otherwise unrecorded.

became hazardous. The wind beat the boat back and forced her to sail under the lee of Crete by way of Salome until she put in at Fair Havens, close to the city of Thalassa or Lasea. Paul advised the centurion to winter there, but the helmsman and the master wanted to sail further and winter in Phoenice³ and their opinion prevailed. A gale carried the boat out of her course, buffeting her for fourteen days and finally wrecking her on Melite (*Acts*, xxvii).

It has been suggested that this sea saga is plagiarised with modifications from a Hellenistic travel account,⁴ but even if allowances are made for literary accretions and possible textual alterations there is no valid reason to doubt the main points of the narrative.

The Shipwreck Controversy

The last leg of the voyage from Fair Havens to Melite has been the cause of controversy. St. Luke relates how the gale drove the boat under the lee of the island of Cauda and describes the fear of the sailors of being driven on to the Syrtis sands. The storm tossed them so violently that the boat was lightened and the spare tackle deliberately thrown overboard. They were driven off course and drifted about in the sea of Adria (Αδρια). For several days they saw neither sun nor stars. They gave themselves up for lost, but Paul inspired them with confidence and assured them that none would be lost though they were to be cast on an island. On the fourteenth night they approached land and the sailors, who were afraid of being cast ashore on some rocky coast, let down four anchors and, to lighten the boat, threw the corn into the sea. When day broke they sighted [p.184] a strange bay with a sloping beach and decided to run the ship ashore there. They cut away the anchors, unlashd the tiller and hoisting the main sail⁵ to the breeze, trust themselves to the mercy of the wind which drove the ship aground at a spot which is described as τοπος διθλασσος. Everyone on board escaped unharmed (*Acts*, xxvii, 6-44). On landing they found that the island was called Melite (*Acts*, xxviii, 1.)

One thing that is obvious from the narrative is that Melite was not on the Alexandrian boat's route. It was only driven there by gale. The intention was presumably to reach the Sicilian coast by a more direct course.⁶ Three crucial objections which are used as arguments against its identification with Malta are a) the direction of the gale, b) the location of the Syrtis Sands, c) the presumed equivalence of Αδρια with the Adriatic Sea of today.

a) **The direction of the gale** - This problem involves a textual choice between the reading Εύροκύδων (presumably SE. gale-wind) adopted by the Authorised Version and

³ Now called Phoinikias.

⁴ G. Bornkamm, *Paul* (tr. D.M.G. Stalker), London (Hodder and Stoughton) 1971.

⁵ According to the Authorised and Revised Versions. The Knox Version prefers foresail. The word used by Luke can mean either.

⁶ F.P Rizzo, 'Malta e Sicilia in Età Romana - Aspetti di Storia Politica e Costituzionale'. *KOKALOS*, xvii - xxiii, i, (1976-1977), 180.

the variant Εύρακύδων (presumably NE. gale-wind) found in many of the early mss. Both are nautical compound words which raise philological difficulties but a recent study⁷ has built a strong case for Εύρακύδων which it approximates with ENE. The word seems to be a Greek transliteration of a nautical term that arose in Latin and was probably caught by Luke from a Latin-speaking seaman. That it is not a copyist error is proved by its appearance (*Euraquilo*) among the Latin wind names on a twelve-point windrose on a pavement at Thugga in proconsular Africa (CIL. viii. 26652) where it occupies the place of 30°N. of E.⁸ If the wind was off-shore (and therefore NE.) and if the Syrtis sands on which it threatened to drive the boat (*Acts*, xxvii, 17) are a reference to the Gulf of Syrtis, off Cyrenaica, there can be little reasonable doubt that Melite was Malta. The subject, however, remains one of academic debate and whether the wind actually blew off-shore or on-shore (and, therefore, S. of E.) is a philologically elusive matter which hinges on Luke's use of the preposition Κατά (against).⁹

[p.185] b) **The Syrtis Sands** - There does not seem to be any lexical justification for maintaining that Luke intended the words σύρτις as a common noun for sand bank. In the first century A.D. it apparently meant an exact geographical location off the African coast, which was a notorious navigational hazard.¹⁰ On the other hand the fact that the *Acts* (xxvii, 16-17) mention it immediately after the reference to island of Cauda makes its identification with the shallows of the Gulf of Syrtis, over 400 miles away, difficult.¹¹ As a result, it has been suggested that what Luke had in mind was the sand bank that lay between the two entrances to the harbour of Phoenice.¹² There is, however, no real evidence for a shoal hazard there.¹³ The question of the Syrtis Sands therefore remains open.

c) **Adria and the Adriatic Sea** - The references to the sea of Ἀδρία in ancient literature, are often ambivalent. To Heroditus and Strabo it was clearly the Adriatic. Ptolemy is more precise and distinguishes the ὁ Ἀδριατικὸς Κόλπος which presumably corresponds to the modern Adriatic, from the Ἀδριας by which he apparently meant the central Mediterranean area.¹⁴ Much would therefore seem to depend on Luke's intention. If by Ἀδριας he meant the sea S. and W. of Greece then the indications point to Malta, but if it can be proved that he had the Adriatic Gulf in mind, then Meleda would appear more probable.

⁷ C.J. Hemer, 'Euraquilo and Melita', *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. xxvi (1975), 101-106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 103

⁹ For two opposing views on the matter: A. Ackworth, 'Where was St Paul Shipwrecked? A re-examination of the Evidence', *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. xxiv (1973), 190-195, and C.J. Hemmer, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Hemmer, *op. cit.*, 105.

¹¹ Though not impossible for a sailing-boat driven before a persistent gale blowing NE (Hemer, 105).

¹² A. Ackworth, *op. cit.*, 192.

¹³ Hemer, 105.

¹⁴ Hemer, 106-108. Ptolemy sometimes calls the modern Adriatic τὸ Ἀδριατικὸν πελάγος.

A good case for Malta was made by Captain James Smith who in 1856 published in London *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*. Smith had a sound knowledge of sailing boats and he argued on navigational evidence. Most of his observations are still valid but the question remains open. Perhaps Malta's greatest claim does not, after all, derive from a scrutiny of the ill-starred journey but rather from the simple fact that from Melite the shipwrecked party departed for Syracuse to continue its journey to Rome from there (fig.1). Had the shipwreck taken place on Meleda such an itinerary would not have made geographical sense. The [p.186] logical stop would have been Brundisium or some other port along the Adriatic coast.

History of Malta - Meleda Controversy

The shipwreck story was a popular topic in patristic commentaries which drew moral lessons from it but provided little useful information and are therefore of negligible value in the quest for the true identity of Melite.¹⁵ A typical example is St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) who in Homily 53 on the *Acts of the Apostles* comments that the great honour which the natives showed Paul and his companions is indicative that many of them embraced Christianity.¹⁶

There is as yet no sure evidence for a Pauline cult in Malta before 1299 when the dedication of Mdina Cathedral to the apostle is first recorded.¹⁷ The suggestion that Konrad of Quernfurth's account of 1194 refers to Malta as the island of the shipwreck,¹⁸ must be treated with reserve since a careful reading of the text makes it apparent that the place indicated is in fact the island of Capri. The account, in typical late Medieval romance fashion, unscientifically mixes, together mythical and legendary lore with the Biblical story and is, therefore, of dubious scientific interest.

It is significant that in the tenth century, the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (945-959) indicated the Dalmatian island of Meleda as the place of the shipwreck.¹⁹ This

¹⁵ The Greek texts are listed in J. Busuttil, "Fonti Greche per la Storia delle Isole Maltesi", Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, *Missione Archeologica a Malta : Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1968*, Rome 1969, 15-26

¹⁶ J.R Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus... series graeca*, vol. lx, col. 350.

¹⁷ H. Besc, "Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano", *Melita Historica*, vol. vi/1, Malta 1974, 318.

¹⁸ Quernfurth's text is in I.M. Lappenberg (ed.), 'Arnoldi Abbatis Lubecensis Chronica an.1172-1209 [=Chronica Slavorum]', *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Scriptorum 21)*, New York 1963, 196, is reproduced in T. Freller, *St. Paul's Grotto and Its Visitors - Pilgrims, Knights, Scholars and Sceptics - From the Middle Ages to the 19th Century*, Malta 1995, 30. A cursory reference to it is given in H. Besc, 'Sicile, Malte et Monde Musulman' in S. Fiorini and V. Mallia Milanese (eds.), *Malta -A Case Study in International Cross Currents*, Malta 1991, 51, f.n. 10. Quernfurth was the advisor and confidant of Frederick II. His account, a fantastic description of the Apulia, Calabria and Sicily, seems to be essentially based on secondary sources

¹⁹ The reference is made in the *De Administrando Impero* [*Corpus Scriptorum Byzantinorum*, xxxvi, Bonn 1840, 163] in which the emperor speaks about the pagani

may hint at a long established Byzantine tradition. [p.187] There could, none the less, have been a rival Latin tradition that favoured Malta, which is very probably the island mentioned by the Roman subdeacon Arator, in his verse paraphrase of the *Acts of the Apostles*, composed around 544 A.D. (*De Act. Apost.* ii, 1121-1127).

One final consideration in the claims of Malta concerns the much publicized “secure archaeological evidence” for an early Pauline tradition at San Pawl Milqi. The excavations carried out in the course of the 1960s, by a Missione Archeologica from the University of Rome, on this Roman villa site, are, however, complicated by many factors and the testimony is both inconclusive and of a dubious nature.²⁰ In the present state of our knowledge there is, in fact, no justification for dating the Maltese Pauline tradition to a period before the late Middle Ages.

Another aspirant to the honour was Mitylene (Mitilini) on the Greek Island of Lesbos (*fig. 1*) which Konrad of Quernfurth confused with the island of Capri. Mitylene’s claims were hurriedly dismissed in the early seventeenth century by the Maltese Jesuit Girolamo Manduca.²¹ Manduca was writing at the time when the claims of Malta were seemingly uncontested. It was not until 1730 that they started being seriously challenged by the publication in Venice of an erudite treatise which reopened the case for Meleda.²² The author, Ignazio Georgi, was abbot of the Benedictine abbey in Veliko Jezero on Meleda, and a scholar of repute. His book was in many ways a remarkable academic achievement which stands out as a model of eighteenth century dialectic. His spirit of philosophical inquiry made him question and discard Malta’s most cherished traditions and his arguments for Meleda reveal his intimate knowledge of that island and his profound familiarity with Biblical commentaries, Patristic studies and classical authors.

[p.188] Public opinion in Malta was alarmed and clerics and intellectuals, assisted by distinguished European authorities on ecclesiastical history produced a plethora of

who held possession of the Dalmation islands among which was Meleda which was also called Malozeatae.

²⁰ On the excavations of San Pawl Milqi: Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto preliminare della Campagna 1963 [etc.] 8 vols., Rome 1964-1973, and, especially, Michelangelo Gagiano de Azevedo, Testimonianze Archeologiche della Tradizione Paolina a Malta, Rome 1966. For a reassessment of the excavations: Mario Buhagiar, Christian Catacombs, Cult Centres and Churches in Malta to 1530, unpublished Ph. D. thesis presented in the University of London, 1993, 169-176, 183-190

²¹ G. Manduca, Relazione o sian tradizioni avute e trasmesse dalli antichi circa le cose dell’isola di Malta e di quanto s’è potuto cavare da scritture antiche degne di fede. [National Library, Malta, ms. 25, 179.]

²² I. Georgi, Divus Paulus apostolus in mari, quod nunc Venetus sinus dicitur naufragus, et Melitae Dalmatanensis insulae post naufragium hospes, sive de genuino sigtuficatu duorum locorum in Actibus apostolicis, cap. 27: 27, cap. 28:1 inceptions anticriticae, Venice 1730.

pseudo-scientific *disertazioni* to refute Georgi's arguments.²³ The most noteworthy were *Guyot de Mearne 1731, Kirchmeier 1731, Wandalinus 1737, De Rhoer 1743, Regnaud 1749, San Floriano 1757, Pagnini-Lanfredini 1763, and Floder 1769*.²⁴ Typical of the emotionally charged content of some of these treatises is the passage in *Wandalinus 1737* in which the Meleda theory is mocked as "a hypothesis born in the darkest of centuries and worthy of remaining buried in the darkness of the blackest night"²⁵ The campaign to discredit Padre Georgi was well concerted and largely effective, but the Benedictine monk found the support of academics such as the Abbé Ladvocat, librarian of the Sorbonne²⁶ and the Dalmatian abbot S. Sciuliaga²⁷ who both published works to uphold his thesis.

Unwittingly Georgi had achieved notoriety as an archenemy of Malta where he was regarded as *nostro indefesso e pertinace antagonista*,²⁸ who tried to cheat the island of the greatest *gloria del suo popolo, ed oggetto principale della nostra venerazione*.²⁹ His most tenacious and best prepared opponent was Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar. Ciantar was a scholar of considerable repute who studied in prestigious universities in Italy and specialised in law and Theology. [p.189] He was also a refined poet as well as a distinguished historian and antiquarian. His most important defence of Malta, painstakingly composed in polished Latin, was published in Venice in 1738 and received the acclaim of Grand Master Ramon Despuig (1736-1741) and other Maltese civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries.³⁰

²³ Their services were, probably, in part solicited by the Knights of St. John who had a vested interest in ensuring that the Malta theory would prevail: Mario Buhagiar, *op. cit.*

²⁴ G.C. Guyot de Mearne, *Vindiciae Melitensis*, Rome 1731; J.C. Kirchmeier, *Dissertatio de Requie Pauli in Melitae Insula*, Marburg 1731; J.F. Wandalinus, *Dissertatio de Melite Pauli*, Hafniae 1737; J. de Rhoer, *De Sancti Pauli ad Insulam Melitam Naufragio*, Rhenum 1743; G.M. Regnaud, *Le mire benefiche della grazia nella caduta in sulle vie di Damasco e le nacce amorevoli della Provvidenza nel naufragio in sulle rive di Malta dell'Apostolo Paolo primotutelare dell'isola di Malta e Gozzo*, Rome 1749; C.S. di San Floriano, *Navigazione dell'Apostolo Paolo da Cesarea a Malta - Dissertazione Cronologica - Geografica*, Milan 1757; G. Pagnini - Lanfredini, *Descrizione Idrografica che contiene la Navigazione ed il Naufragio dell'Apostolo S. Paolo nell'Isola di Malta*, Naples 1763; J. Floder, *Acta Pauli in Insula Melita*, Upsala 1769.

²⁵ The 10th century. The reference is to Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. The passage is reproduced in O. Bres, *Malta Antica Illustrata cò Monumenti e coll'Istoria*, Rome 1816, 374.

²⁶ O. Bres, *op. cit.*, 375.

²⁷ S. Sciuliaga, *Il Naufragio di San Paol Ristabilito nella Melite Illirica*, Venice. 1757.

²⁸ G.A. Ciantar's amplified edition of G.F Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta* [Malta 1647], as *Malta Illustrata ovvero Descrizione di Malta*, I, Malta 1772, 649

²⁹ G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, *Discorso apologetico contra la dissertazione storica e critica in lingua francese e descritta dal Signor Abbate Ladvocat*, Venice 1758, iii.

³⁰ G.A. Ciantar, *De Beato Paolo Apostolo in Melitam, Siculo-Adriatici Maris Insulam naufragi Ejecto Dissertationes Apologeticae in Inspectiones Anticriticas Ignatii Georgii*, Venice 1738.

Ciantar returned to the battlefield in 1763 when he published in Venice a renewed challenge to Georgi and his apologists.³¹ His fellow countryman, the librarian and historiographer Can. Gio. Pietro Agius de Soldanis had meanwhile published a *Discorso apologetico* in answer to the writings of Ladvoat and Sciuliaga,³² and, at later period, Mgr Onorato Bres undertook an analysis of the arguments in favour of Malta which he printed in Rome in 1816.³³

In England the controversy became a popular subject for theses at Oxford and Cambridge Universities.³⁴ A Cambridge Don called Jacob Bryant supported the case for Meleda³⁵ but was contested by James Rennell in a paper published in *Archaeologia*.³⁶ Rennell was a leading geographer and the validity of his arguments was eventually demonstrated by Captain James Smith.³⁷ The topicality of the subject is demonstrated by references to the shipwreck in nineteenth century literature such as, for example, Henry Kingsley's novel *Ravenshoe*, published in 1861 (ch. li, 329).³⁸

In the suspicious politico-religious climate which prevailed in Catholic Malta throughout most of the nineteenth century, arguments in favour of Meleda were often glossed over as Protestant fabrications. The publication of a study by the [p.190] Rev. J.M. Neale, Warden of Sackville College,³⁹ which received favourable comments in the Protestant inspired *Maltese Observer* did not help matters.⁴⁰ The next serious threat to Malta's claim came, none the less, from a Catholic quarter. This was a book by Mgr. V. Palunko, titular bishop of Rodiopoli and auxiliary bishop of Sapulato, which elaborated on Georgi's classic work.⁴¹ The book provoked a pro-Malta declaration by Pope Benedict XIV,⁴² and in 1927 Francesco Lanzoni, who wrote an authoritative ecclesiastical history of Italy, called the claims for Meleda "sterile".⁴³ That the debate is far from concluded is

³¹ G.A. Ciantar, *Critica de' Critici Moderni che dall'anno 1730 infino al 1760 scrissero sulla controversia del naufragio di San Paolo apostolo*, Venice 1763.

³² G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis, *op. cit.*

³³ O. Bres, *op. cit.*, 371-423.

³⁴ D.E. Sultana, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Malta and Italy*, Oxford 1969, 297.

³⁵ R.C. Hoare, *A Classical Tour through Sicily and Malta*, ii, London 1919, 270.

³⁶ J. Rennell, 'On the Voyage and Place of Shipwreck of St Paul', *Archaeologia*, xxi (1826), 92-106.

³⁷ J. Smith, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St Paul with dissertations on the sources of the writings of S. Lucas and the ships and the navigation of the ancients*, London 1848.

³⁸ Dr D.E. Sultana kindly drew attention to this reference.

³⁹ J.M. Neale, *Notes, Ecclesiological and Picturesque, on Dalmatia, Croatia, Istria. etc.*, London 1861.

⁴⁰ L'Ordine [Malta], 27. xii. 1861

⁴¹ V. Palunko, *Melite nel naufragio di San Paolo e l'Isola Meleda in Dalmazia* - Studio di Geografia Biblica, Spalato 1910.

⁴² La Gazzetta di Malta [Malta], 27.iii.1911.

⁴³ F. Lanzoni, *Le Diocesi d'Italia dalle Origini al Principio del Secolo VII*, Faenza 1927, 652.

demonstrated by recent contributions to the *Journal of Theological Studies* and the *Biblical Archaeologist*.⁴⁴

The Cephallenia Theory

A new theory about the island of the shipwreck was put forward in 1987 by Heinz Warnecke who, dismissing the claims of both Malta and Meleda, tried to prove that he could identify the Melite of the *Acts* with the promontory of Argostoli on the west Grecian island of Cephallenia.⁴⁵ The study which won for the author a doctorate from the University of Bremen, was hailed in the nonacademic press as “the theological event of the century” and “a masterpiece of historical research”.⁴⁶ Theological and Biblical scholars were, however, critical and Warnecke’s thesis was dismissed as a regrettable exercise in academic sensationalism by Jü[r]gen Wehnert of the Faculty of Theology in the University [p.191] of Tübingen who was particularly hard about its “terrible lack of methodical-argumentative insight” and flimsy historical and textual evidence.⁴⁷

Warnecke’s thesis hinges around the argument that Phoenice for which Paul’s ship set course after leaving Fair Havens cannot justifiably be identified with a port on the south coast of Crete. Had this been the case the very short distance between the two ports would surely not have caused any disagreements between Paul and the sailors (*Acts* xxvii, 9-12). Phoenice must therefore have been a more distant port necessitating several days of shipping. Warnecke locates it in the SW of the Peloponese where a harbour named Phoin[i]kus is mentioned by Pausanias, the second century A.D. traveller and geographer, in his *Periegesis* of Greece (iv, 34, 12). To substantiate his point, Warnecke translates the crucial phrase *limen tes Krétés* (*Acts* xxvii, 12) as *a harbour to and from Crete* instead of the standard *a harbour in Crete*, maintaining that the Greek phrase is a thoroughly regular partitive genitive.⁴⁸ More arbitrary is Warnecke’s corruption of the New Testament toponym *Phoenix* to *Phoinikus* and his emphatic denial of the existence of a Cretan port called *Phoenix* in the first century A.D. The existence of such a port is attested to, among others, by Strabo (x,4,3) and Ptolemy (iii,17,3) though archaeological soundings in 1950 produced entirely negative results.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ A. Ackworth, *op. cit.*; C.J. Hemer, *op. cit.*; O.F.A. Meinardus, ‘*Melita Illyrica or Africana*’, *Ostkirchliche Studien*, 32 (1974), 21-36; Idem, ‘*St Paul Shipwrecked in Dalmatia*’, *Biblical Archaeologist*, 29/4 (Dec. 1976), 145-147.

⁴⁵ H. Warnecke, *Die Tatsächliche Romfahrt des Apostels Paulus*, Stuttgart 1987.

⁴⁶ *Die Zeit* n. 52, 23.xii.1988; Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine (Kassel), 16.4.1989.

⁴⁷ J. Wehnert, ‘*Gestrandet*’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie and Kirche*, 87 (1990) reprinted in English translation as ‘*Shipwrecked - A Commentary on a New Thesis about the Shipwreck of Paul on his way to Rome*’, in M. Galea and J. Ciarlò (eds.), *St. Paul in Malta – A Compendium of Pauline Studies*, Malta 1992, 67-99.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

⁴⁹ Warnecke takes the negative archaeological results, as rep[or]ted in *Paulys Real Encycopadie der Classischen*, xx [1950], 431-435, as definite proof for the non-existence of a Cretan Phoenice.

The storm therefore, according to Warnecke, took place in the Peleponese, which he maintains would more or less correspond to the sea of Adria as understood by Luke, and it drove the ship to the island of Cephallenia south of Corfù, as could be proved by a discussion of the winds. The island which was called Melaina (lat. *Melaena*) in classical times (*Pliny NH*, iv, 54) was the *Corcyra nigra* of the *Argonautica* (iv, 569-571). Topographical considerations and a 30m deep extended sea with dangerous shoals indicated the promontory of Argostoli as the most likely site of the shipwreck, and the problem of the name *Melite* could be solved by equating the site with the *Melite* of the *Argonautica*. Warnacke overlooks the important fact that the islands listed in the *Argonautica*, (iv, 564-565) are called *Librunian* (Dalmatian) and that the *Argonautica* (iv, 572) clearly refers to the Dalmatian *Melite*.

[p.192] The Cephallenia theory is quite obviously indebted to the Meleda hypothesis but lacks its sound academic basis. Warnecke simply transfers the shipwreck site from the Dalmatian island, which he considers to be situated too far north, to Cephallenia, a few hundred kilometres away to the south. He however retains all the Meledan arguments against Malta, but does not contribute a single new reason beyond the classic ones of the eighteenth century. Perhaps the greatest merit of the author is his knowledge of Homeric and ancient literature. Gerd Hagenah has shown that a considerable portion of the thesis is concerned “with extensive Homeric parallels (and) with an equally extensive ground work of learned references in the footnotes, which have nothing to do with the actual topic”.⁵⁰ Warnecke’s fascination with Homer and Cephallenia have led him in a subsequent study, to claim an added honour for that island by identifying it also with Odysseus’s island home of Ithaca.⁵¹ One gets the sensation that the Pauline perspective of the thesis sometimes becomes a matter of secondary importance. Warnecke moreover betrays an unscholarly tendency to gloss over difficulties. For example, he solves the difficult interpretation of *topos dithalassos* (τοπος διθαλασσος) by claiming that it is synonymous with *nésos Melite* and that both should be interpreted as a promontory or peninsula. His bibliography, finally, reveals an ignorance of Malta and he is certainly unfamiliar with Maltese Pauline claims and traditions.⁵² His sources for Malta are, in fact, restricted to two guide books intended for the popular tourist market.

Not a single serious work on the island appears to have been consulted. In spite of the interest which the publication of the thesis provoked, the claims for Cephallenia do not seem to merit serious consideration. The real debate remains between Malta and Meleda.

St. Paul on Melite

⁵⁰ G. Hagenah, *New Aspects on the Discussion of the Shipwreck* (Cyclostyled pamphlet), Faculty of Theology, Malta 1991, 1.

⁵¹ H. Warnecke, ‘*Das homerische Ithaka, die Heimat des Odysseus - ein Mythos*’, *Symbolon*, N.F. 9(1988), 121-141.

⁵² C. Sant, ‘*St. Paul’s Shipwreck on the Island of Melite*’, in M. Galea and J. Ciarlò, *op.cit.*, 39-52; P. Guillaumier, ‘*A New Perspective on the Historicity of St Paul’s Shipwreck on Melite*’ in *ibid.*, 53-114

Compared to the exciting detail of the description of the journey and shipwreck, the account of Paul's stay on Melite (*Acts* xxviii, 1-12) is unsatisfactorily brief. The shipwrecked men were welcomed by the βαρβαροι, or non-Greek speaking natives, who showed them great kindness and lit them a fire because it was cold. [p.193] Paul threw a bundle of faggots into the fire whereupon a poisonous reptile (έχιδνα = snake or viper) leapt out of the flames and fastened itself to his hands. The superstitious natives considered this a sign of Divine vengeance against an accursed man who could not be allowed to live; they expected to see him swell up or fall down dead. When Paul indifferently shook the snake back into the fire, they changed their mind and declared that he must be a god. In the neighbourhood were the estates of Publius, the προτος of the island, who entertained the party for three days. Paul healed the father of Publius who was bed-ridden with fever and dysentery. The sick of the island were subsequently brought to him and they found a cure. After wintering on the island for three months the party embarked on another Alexandrian boat, called the Castor and Pollux, and taking their leave of the natives, who loaded them with all the supplies they needed, they sailed for Syracuse.

The Question of the Viper

The title of προτος which is recorded in a Maltese inscription of the Age of Tiberius (*IG*. xiv, 601)⁵³ but is otherwise seemingly unknown, is a valuable argument in favour of Malta. The incident of the viper raises, on the other hand, a serious objection. Of the four species of snake now extant on Malta only the *Telescopus fallax* (cat snake) is poisonous but its venom is generally harmless to men.⁵⁴ On Meleda poisonous snakes were, on the other hand, numerous until the early years of the twentieth century when they were reportedly eliminated by mongooses imported from India for the purpose.⁵⁵

Whether poisonous snakes existed in Malta at the time of the shipwreck there is no way of telling. No fossil remains of any species of snake have been found in Maltese deposits and the herpetological evidence as it now stands is too ambiguous to help in the shipwreck debate.⁵⁶ The Maltese tradition takes their existence for granted and Captain Smith has suggested that they may have been eliminated as a result of drastic environmental change⁵⁷ for which there is, [p.194] in fact, some evidence from Saracenic mediaeval texts.⁵⁸ A recent study tries to find evidence for them in Roman Malta's cult of Heracles and argues unconvincingly that the island must have been snake infested

⁵³ In its Latin translation primus, the title also features in CIL, x 749.

⁵⁴ G. Lanfranco, 'Reptiles and Amphibians of the Maltese Islands', (*The Malta Year Book* (1955), 198-200; P.J. Schembri, 'Snakes and Shipwrecks', *The Sunday Times* (Malta) 30.iv.1989, 34.

⁵⁵ A. Ackworth, *op. cit.*, 193.

⁵⁶ P.J. Schembri, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ J. Smith, *op. cit.*, 147-149.

⁵⁸ M. Buhagiar, *op. cit.*, Chapter 6.

because these reptiles were sacred to the deity.⁵⁹ It therefore proposes that the natives saw in the viper an instrument of divine retribution sent by Heracles to punish the shipwrecked stranger. Such a hypothesis seems to stem from the suggestion by M. Cagiano de Azevedo that the snake as an evil omen had a long history in Malta being first associated with the mother goddess of the prehistoric temples and then with Juno who, according to her myth, sent serpents to suffocate the infant Heracles.⁶⁰

If the *Acts* narrative is to be taken literally, the reaction of the natives to the miracle implies a familiarity with poisonous snakes. It does not seem realistic to maintain as done, among others, by Mgr. Knox that the snake was an accidental visitor which “may have come over in, and escaped from, one of the African grain-ships.”⁶¹ There remains the possibility that the story is an allegory of the triumph of the apostle over the devil or of the new faith over the old one. The biblical abhorrence of the snake is well known and the classical world held it in superstitious fear. The idea that it is an agent of vengeance (*Acts* xviii, 4) finds an echo in Virgil (*Aen.*, ii, 44-56 and in Pliny (*NH*, viii, 35-36) who believed all snakes were poisonous. The allegorical potential of the story was not missed by Maltese Churchmen who used it in pious literature and in panegyrics in honour of St. Paul. One prominent prelate⁶² was, for example, reported to have picturesquely likened the fire lit by the natives to the flames of hell and the viper to Satan who is vanquished by the apostle.⁶³

Pauline Traditions in Malta and Meleda

Neither Meleda nor Malta have a Pauline tradition which can be traced close to apostolic times. The Maltese tradition can be documented only from the thirteenth [p.195] century while on Meleda, the Byzantine tenth century tradition apart (*supra*), there is no secure evidence for Pauline associations before the publication of Ignazio Georgi's treatise in 1730, and the tradition there apparently only became well established around 1788 when a presumed landing site was being shown to visitors.⁶⁴ There was then (and for a long time afterwards) neither church nor statue of St. Paul⁶⁵ and this worried apologists for that island.⁶⁶ In the early twentieth century, Mgr. Palunko claimed unconvincingly that

⁵⁹ B. Montinaro, “*Credenze Popolari - Tradizione Paolina*”, *Sudpuglia - Rassegna trimestrale della Banca Popolare Sud Puglia* (year ix/4 - Dec. 1983), 87

⁶⁰ M. Cagiano de Azevedo, *op. cit.*, 61.

⁶¹ Mgr. Ronald Knox, *The Holy Bible - A translation from the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals*, London 1963, f.n. to Acts xxviii, 4.

⁶² Mgr P Gauci.

⁶³ V. Caruana-Gatto, *La Vipera Maltese in Relazione col Naufragio di San Paolo - Considerazioni Storiche*, Malta, 1911, 60.

⁶⁴ T. Watkins, *Travels through Swisserland, Italy, Sicily, the Greek Islands, to Constantinople, through part of Greece, Ragusa and the Dalmatian Isles*, i, 1787, 1788, 1789, ii, London 1792.

⁶⁵ O.F.A. Meinardus, ‘*St. Paul Shipwrecked in Dalmatia*’, *op. cit.*, 146.

⁶⁶ A church of St Paul was only built in 1935. It stands on the main road of Babino Polje, the capital of the island, and was provided with a statue of St Paul in 1968. (O.F.A. Meinardus, *St. Paul Shipwrecked*, 146.)

the ruins of a building, not far from Porto Como, could be identified with a church which “according to hearsay” had been dedicated to St. Paul.⁶⁷ Since then, “an oral tradition of unknown antiquity” has been recorded of another church in the neighbourhood of Korita.⁶⁸

Porto Coma, a small harbour at the E. end of the island, is one of Meleda’s three “traditional” shipwreck sites, the others being Porto Camera and Spalumara Cove (fig.2). Near the small island of Kosmae, below the village of Maranovici, there is, moreover, a small rock.⁶⁹ The place which seems to fit best Luke’s account of *τοπος διθαλασσος* (*Acts* xxvii, 41) is the E. of Spalmura Cove where navigation is made difficult by the convergence of two strong currents.⁷⁰

The lack of an established tradition on Meleda was obviously exploited as an argument in favour of Malta. G.F. Abela writing nearly three quarters of a century before Giorgi, felt he was treading on safe ground when he expressed triumphantly:

*... in quella Meleda... non vi è mai stato ne pur vestigio, o memoria di San Paolo, non che di Tempio ad honor di lui fabricato, ne di chiesa consagratagli, [p.197] ma si bene per l’opposto in questa nostra Malta, non si trova luogo, in cui non si celebri, honori e innalzi il glorioso nome di Paolo.*⁷¹

The tradition in Malta was, on the other hand, so strong that in 1536 Jean Quentin gave testimony that “the people... believe as firmly and with certainty that St. Paul has been in Malta just as much as they believe that St. Peter has been in Rome.”⁷²

The Maltese Shipwreck Site

In Malta, the site most commonly associated with the Shipwreck is St. Paul’s Bay in the N. of the island. The tradition which is first recorded by the Sicilian Tommaso Fazello is of unknown antiquity, but the bay may have become so called only in the course of the fifteenth century when a church of St. Paul was built there.⁷³ Its association with the

⁶⁷ V. Palunko, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ O.F.A. Meinardus, *St Paul Shipwrecked*, 146..about one metre in the sea which is known as St. Paul’s Rock.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 146

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁷¹ G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta*, Malta 1647, 235.

⁷² H.C.R. Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta* (Lyons 1536) by *Jean Quentin d’Autun: Translation and Notes*, Malta 1980, 42-44.

⁷³ The earliest known reference to the name is a 1485 document (Dominican Priory Archives, Rabat [Malta], ms. *Giuliano antica*, i, ff. 58 rv-59) quoted in G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages*, Malta 1985, 79, which also refers (256, doc. 82) to a slightly later deed of 1496 (Notarial Archives, Valletta, R. 494/1, f. 35v), which mentions the *contrada sancti Pauli di la marina*.

shipwreck was well established in 1536,⁷⁴ and in 1575 the church stood *prope littus quo divus Paulus post eius naufragium primo pervenit*.⁷⁵

There is very little secure information about the church until 1610 when it was refounded by Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt.⁷⁶ Manduca maintained that it had stood there from ancient times and had been restored several hundred years previously by noble families whose armorial shields, including those of the Mazzara and the Casanova, it carried.⁷⁷ Abela, who was presumably better [p.198] informed, did not record the arms but claimed instead that it had been built by the Bordino and Inguanez families.⁷⁸ The fact that the families referred to in the two accounts were influential in the fifteenth century gives us a reasonable guess about the date of the church.⁷⁹

In spite of serious modern objections,⁸⁰ St. Paul's Bay still finds its apologists who try to prove that it meets the conditions of the biblical account and explain the *τοπος διθαλασσος* as being in effect two currents formed by the Tal-Ghasselin reef when the gregale, or NE. gale winds, blow across the harbour.⁸¹ The name Tal-Ghasselin is unconvincingly explained as the Semitic corruption of *διθαλασσος*. Burridge agreed that a meeting place of two currents was one of the possible meanings of *διθαλασσος* but his investigations, based on sea soundings and a study of old maps rather than on philological arguments, led him away from St. Paul's Bay to Mellieha Bay at the N. end of the island where there was a relatively large lake (L-Ghadira) on the land side of the bay. (figs 3-4) The resultant "two masses or bodies of water" were, according to his estimates, the real *διθαλασσος*.

In the nineteenth century, the shipwreck site was shifted to the *Isoletta di Salamone*, or Islet of Selmunet, subsequently christened St. Paul's Island. This is a 1180m long, wedge-like rock which forms the outer end of the W. side of St. Paul's Bay and is "so orientated to the gregale's rollers that it cleaves each roller in two parts".⁸² A large limestone statue of St. Paul, the work of the sculptors Sigismondo Dimech and Salvatore Dimech, which was set up on the islet in 1845 by Salvatore Borg, has since become an

⁷⁴ H.C.R. Vella, *op. cit.*, 44.

⁷⁵ Valletta Museum of Archaeology, *Visitatio Dusina* - Report of the Apostolic Visitation of the Island of Malta in 1575 [eighteenth century copy], f. 229.

⁷⁶ G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*, 22, 354.

⁷⁷ G. Manduca, *Relazione o sian tradizione avute e trasmesse dalli antichi circa le cose dell'Isola di Malte di quanto s'è potuto cavare da scritture antiche degne di fede* [National Library, Malta, ms. 25], 180

⁷⁸ G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*, 26.

⁷⁹ A.T. Luttrell, 'Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and Invention in Maltese Historiography', *Melita Historica*, vol. vii/2 (1977), 120.

⁸⁰ W. Burridge, *Seeking the Site of St Paul's Shipwreck*, Malta 1952; R.P. Saydon, 'The Site of St Paul's Shipwreck', *Melita Theologica*, xiv (1962), 1-2, 58-61; G.H. Musgrave, *Friendly Refuge - A Study of St Paul's Shipwreck and His Stay in Malta*, Sussex 1979).

⁸¹ L. Cutajar, 'Fejn Nizel Malta San Pawl', *Lehen is-Sewwa* [Malta], 7.ii.53; Aless Bonnici (ed.), *San Pawl f' Malta – Religion u Hajja: Storja 1*, Malta 1967.

⁸² W. Burridge, *op. cit.*, 14.

important Pauline landmark.⁸³ From Luke's account it is, however, obvious that the ship could not have ran aground on the islet itself because the survivors would have had to be rescued [p.200] from the island! Capt. Smith, who produced a chart indicating the depth of the sea, argued that the boat anchored off Qawra Point, was wrecked off Selmunet, and the survivors swam ashore at Mistra where the landslide formed a little inlet. For him the quest for a suitable beach was more important than locating a τοπος διθαλασσος. His conclusions have been contested by Musgrave who replaces Mistra by Salini Bay (fig.5).⁸⁴

All theories siting the shipwreck in or around St. Paul's Bay share a common indebtedness to a tradition which can be shown to be of late medieval origins. Smith's arguments on wind directions seem, however, to suggest a place on the NE coast. The τοπος διθαλασσος does not offer any real help because it can have several meanings and the way it is used in *Acts* xxvii, 41, does not facilitate an interpretation. A place where two seas meet (*Authorised* and *Revised* versions) and a cross sea (*Knox Version*) are the normally accepted translations but any beach off a headland (*Liddell and Scott*) or an isthmus whose extremity is covered by the waves (*Grimms and Thayler*), as indeed most water channels, can qualify as the place where the boat grounded. The truth is that the *Acts* do not give us sufficient clues to help in the identification of the site.

Traditions on the Founding of a Christian Community

Two inscriptions, one above the main door of Mdina Cathedral (*DIVO PAVLO MELITENSIVM PROTOPARENTE*) and the other on the wall above the baptismal font inside Gozo Cathedral (*ACCEPTA VIX A PAVLO PROTOPARENTE CHRISTI FIDE*) proudly proclaim the firm belief of the Maltese that they owe their Christian faith to St. Paul. This is one of Malta's most deeply rooted traditions and involves one of the chief matters of national sentiment. The *Acts* do not, however, mention the founding of a Christian community and there is as yet no evidence to support a Christian presence in Malta before the late fourth century.⁸⁵

The history of Malta before the late Middle Ages is seriously handicapped by an overwhelming poverty of sources. The little available material is largely unreliable and legends may sometimes have been deliberately fabricated to sustain "those beliefs... according to which Malta was essentially European and Christian rather than African and Muslim".⁸⁶ The man largely responsible for perpetuating [p.202] these myths many of which can be traced back to the late Middle Ages, was Giovanni Francesco Abela who

⁸³ Stanley Farrugia-Randon and Robert Farrugia-Randon, *Comino, Filfla and St. Paul's Island*, Malta 1995, 22-31. In 1960, during the Pauline Centenary celebrations, a solemn high mass was intoned on the islet. On the *Isoletta di Salamone*: see G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*, 25.

⁸⁴ G.H. Musgrave, *op. cit.*, 19-32

⁸⁵ M. Buhagiar, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ A. T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta - Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975, 2.

published his *Descrittione di Malta* in 1647.⁸⁷ This is a work of extraordinary prestige which has until recently been regarded as a quasi infallible reference work.⁸⁸ Abela (1582-1655) belonged to a patrician Maltese family and he was uncompromisingly patriotic. He was furthermore a priest and vice-chancellor of the Crusading Order of St. John which, together with the church, encouraged “traditions” that enhanced the fame of its island-convent as a bulwark of Christendom since apostolic times. Abela was an accomplished scholar with an interest in a multiplicity of fields and it would probably be unfair to accuse him of twisting evidence. None the less in his urge to defend Malta’s claim to being *fortunatissima vie più d’ogni altra terra*,⁸⁹ he was often unscientifically tolerant of fantastic legends that had been reportedly handed down by the ancients (*approve traditioni havute da nostri Maggiori*).

In 1566 Quentin had discussed the legends in a light vein but his incredulity was not shared by most subsequent authors who included the Order’s historian Giacomo Bosio, the Apostolic Visitor Mgr. Pietro Dusina, the German geographer Philipp Cluver,⁹⁰ and the Sicilian ecclesiastical apologists and chroniclers Tommaso Fazello,⁹¹ Octavio Caetano,⁹² Rocco Pirri⁹³ and Tommaso Masucci.⁹⁴ Caetano and Masucci were Jesuits and there is reason to believe that Jesuit schools and scholars were instrumental in fanning up enthusiasm for the cult of St. Paul which characterised the early seventeenth century. That this fascination with the [p.203] early ecclesiastical history of Malta was not confined to Sicilian or Italian Jesuits is shown by the Dutch academic Cornelius van den Steen, better known as Cornelio a Lapide, who, without ever visiting Malta, seems to have been very well informed on the traditions of the island which he discusses in his biblical commentaries.⁹⁵

The society of Jesus had been interested in Malta since the 1570s and it established itself on the island in 1592.⁹⁶ Girolamo Manduca (1573-1643) was one of the first Maltese to join the Society and a key figure in the diffusion of the Pauline myths of his island. Like

⁸⁷ G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ For a critical assessment of Abela’s major work and of the myths and legends which have misled generations of Maltese historians: A.T. Luttrell, ‘*Girolamo Manduca and Giovanni Francesco Abela*’, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*, 221.

⁹⁰ P. Cluverius, *Sicilia antiqua, cum minoribus insulis ei adjacentibus, item Sardinia et Corsica*, Leyden 1619, 425-428.

⁹¹ T. Fazello, *De Rebus Siculis Decades Duae* (1st. ed.). 1558, 10-12.

⁹² O. Caetano, *Isogage ad Historiam Sacram Siculam* (1st [posthumous] ed.), Palermo 1707. 152-156. Caetano died in 1620, but his work was only published in 1707. It must, however, have been available in manuscript because both Rocco Pirri and Cornelio a Lapide refer to it: Luttrell, ‘*Manduca and Abela*’, *op. cit.*, 118.

⁹³ R. Pirri, *Notitiae Siciliensium Ecclesiarum*, ii, (1st. ed.), Palermo 1641, 587-592.

⁹⁴ T. Masucci, *Paulus Apostolus seu vita S. Pauli AP. historice et dogmatici explicata libri 15*, Lugduni 1636, bk. 2, c. 10.

⁹⁵ Cornelius à Lapide, *Commentaria in Acta Apostolorum*, (1st. ed.), Lyons 1627, 349-350.

⁹⁶ V. Borg, ‘*Girolamo Manduca: His Life and Works*’ *Melita Historica*, (1978), 237.

Abela he belonged to a distinguished Maltese family, but his committed attachment to the uncontaminated faith of his forefathers might have been coloured by the unfortunate story of three close relatives who had Lutheran sympathies and had been denounced before the Inquisition tribunal.⁹⁷ Manduca joined the Jesuits in 1590 and spent most of his life in Sicily and Rome, paying occasional visits to Malta on family business. Cornelio a Lapide and Octavio Caetano belonged to his circle of friends and he fed them with information about Malta.⁹⁸ Rocco Pirri, who had visited Malta in 1611, might also have been indebted to him as in fact were all subsequent authors, foremost among them Gian Francesco Abela.⁹⁹

Manduca left two manuscript treatises which are central to the Maltese Pauline mythology. The first, composed around 1606, possibly at the request of Octavio Caetano,¹⁰⁰ is a *Relazione o sian tradizioni avute e trasmesse dalli antichi...* which was probably not meant for publication.¹⁰¹ It provided the ground work for the more ambitious *De Sancto Publio martyre Melite principe...* which was finished before 1635 when it was sent to Rome for approval receiving damaging remarks from the Jesuits' board of censors.¹⁰² As a matter of fact it was never published.¹⁰³

[p.204] The two treatises are a mixture of historiography and popular lore. Manduca did have access to archives but his main source were the “traditions” of the elders and he seeks to justify such fables by reference to the Biblical texts and to ancient and medieval authors such as Arator and the Venerable Bede. He noted that the church at St. Paul's Bay marked the approximate site of the shipwreck because it was built on a tongue of land which was surely a *τοπος διθαλασσος*. He could not, however, say in which village the miracle of the viper took place though he suggested somewhere in the neighbourhood of Benuarrat where there was the most fertile land on the island and the Prince of Melite had his estates.¹⁰⁴ Publius's villa could, on archaeological evidence, be located on the slopes of Wardija Hill overlooking St. Paul's Bay where the church of S. Giovanni *ta Chereb* was built on the ruins of a Roman Villa. On his way there, Paul quenched the thirst of his companions by striking water out of a rock. The spring was still there and pilgrims on their way to St. Paul's church were expected to drink of its sweet water.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 237, 248. His uncle, Antonio Manduca, was formally condemned in 1580 but managed to escape from the island, possibly to Huguenot France.

⁹⁸ A.T. Luttrell, “*Girolamo Manduca and Giovanni Francesco Abela*”, *op. cit.*, 122-123.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁰⁰ V. Borg, “*Girolamo Manduca*”, *op. cit.*, 242-243.

¹⁰¹ The original copy which was preserved in Palermo, is at present unaccounted for, but several transcriptions survive in Malta. The one used here is NLM ms. 25.

¹⁰² V. Borg, “*Girolamo Manduca*”, *op. cit.*, 245.

¹⁰³ A copy of the ms (possibly the original) survives in the Bibliotheca Comunale of Palermo. The transcript used here is NLM ms. 25 (ff. 4-157)

¹⁰⁴ Archaeological finds made in the area in the 19th century were thought to be the palace of Publius (P.P. Castagna, *Lis Storia ta' Malta bil Gzejjer tahha* (2nd ed.), i, Malta 188, 68.

¹⁰⁵ The place is known as *Ghajn Rasul* (“The Apostle's Fountain”): J. Cassar-Pullicino, “*Pauline Traditions in Malta*” *Scientia*, x. [Malta 1944], 21.

Publius and his household embraced Christianity and their example was followed by all the Maltese, including the natives of Gozo whom miraculously heard the voice of the Apostle while he was preaching outside the walls of Melite where a cross on a tall column commemorated the event. Nearby was the manmade cave where the apostle resided. The ship's company had also received baptism and near *ta Chereb* church was a stone baptismal font, discovered in 1600, which was probably the one used on the occasion.¹⁰⁶ Before taking his leave of the Maltese, Paul consecrated Publius as their first bishop and promised them that their island would never be captured by infidels.¹⁰⁷

To Luke and Aristarchus the Macedonian (*Acts*, xxvii, 2), who were Paul's travelling companions, Manduca added Trophimus who is mentioned in *Timothy* ii (iv, 20) where it is stated that he had been taken ill at a place which was obviously Miletus but which the Maltese tradition firmly believed to be Malta.¹⁰⁸ [p.205] Paul did not cure Trophimus because it was necessary to leave him behind in Malta to help Publius organise the new church. When Trophimus eventually left the island he went to Arles where he became first bishop of that city.¹⁰⁹

The most fantastic element of this golden legend, elaborated by Manduca and his circle, concerned Paul's presumed return visits to the island. It was argued that while he was wintering in Malta, after the shipwreck, the apostle realised the time saving facilities that the island offered as a port of call. He therefore stopped again at Malta on his journey back to Jerusalem after he had obtained his freedom in Rome. Subsequently he included the island in his itinerary when together with several of his disciples he undertook the evangelisation of Spain; and he was back again in Malta when, towards the end of his life, he retraced his steps to Rome where he suffered martyrdom. "Old men" told Manduca that they had learnt from their forefathers that on his last visit the apostle was so worn down by illness and so emaciated by self inflicted penance that he was not recognised by the Maltese.¹¹⁰ Abela admitted the possibility of just one other visit to Malta which he thought could be proved by a Greek codex in the monastic library of S. Maria di Trapsmatum in the diocese of Reggio.¹¹¹ Sensibly he rejected the more improbable fables retaining, however, other naiveties such as the story of how the inhabitants of Naxxar were the first Maltese to receive baptism because their village was

¹⁰⁶ Probably a reference to an olive-pipper which is possibly the one outside the modern church of St John at Wardija. The text is reproduced in A.T. Lutrell, "*Girolamo Manduca and Giovanni Francesco Abela*", 131-132.

¹⁰⁷ *L'Apostolo aver promesso che non aveva più lassato per avvenire che quest'isola sii presa dall'infedeli*: Manduca, *Relazione...*, 191.

¹⁰⁸ Arguments in favour of Malta were supported by references to Cardinal Baronio (C. Baronius, *Martyrologium Romanum*, Venice 1611) and other biblical exegetists: Abela, *op. cit.*, 238-239.

¹⁰⁹ Abela, *op. cit.*, 234, reproduces an extract from the office recited in Arles Cathedral on the vigil of the feast of St Trophimus (29 Dec.) which contained a reference to his stay in Malta. Trophimus is commemorated in Malta by an inscription which Abela set up in his family chapel in the church of St Mary of Jesus, Valletta

¹¹⁰ Manduca, *Sancto Publio*, chs, v-ix.

¹¹¹ Abela, *op. cit.*, 231-233.

nearest to the shipwreck site; the toponym Naxxar was a corruption of *Nassara* which meant Christians.¹¹²

Manduca recorded several things which bore witness to Paul's stay in Malta. These included three icons of the Virgin painted by St. Luke, and a stone table on which the apostle had slept but which had been stolen by foreigners on one particular night! As regards Publius, it was retained that he was eventually transferred to the see of Athens to succeed Dionysus the Areopagite, where he suffered a martyr's death.¹¹³ Ignazio Georgi (*supra*) was familiar with most of [p.206] these myths and, in fact, exploited their absurdity to support his arguments for Meleda, provoking lengthy replies in *Ciantar 1763* and *Ciantar 1772*.¹¹⁴

Finally no discussion of the Maltese traditions can afford to ignore the galley surgeon Marcantonio Axiak, who, around 1610, composed a *Relazione della nuova e grandissima divozione introdotta nella santa Grotta di San Paolo...* which survives in several transcriptions in Maltese collections.¹¹⁵ This work was inspired by the activities of Juan de Venaguas of Cordoba who in 1607 installed himself as a hermit in St. Paul's Grotto at Rabat, where he remained until 1620, securing the enthusiastic patronage of Grand Master Alophius de Wignacourt through whose munificence the Pauline cult was injected with unprecedented religious fervour.

St. Paul's Grotto

The cave at Rabat which according to the golden legend was Paul's Maltese home, was cut into the ditch of the city of Melite, and A.A. Caruana arbitrarily identified it with a presumed Roman dungeon by drawing flimsy analogies with the Tulliano prison in Rome.¹¹⁶ At an unknown period the cave was transformed into a shrine and there were a church and a cemetery round it by 1366.¹¹⁷

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹¹³ The cult of St. Publius which seems to have been non-existent before the 17th century was intensified in the 18th century by the Capuchin friar Bartolomeo Mifsud, better known as Padre Pelagio (Pelagio Maria di Zebbug, *Componimento Storico ossia Notizie Sacro-Profane di San Publio, Principe, Vescovo, e Martire Maltese*, Malta 1776). A.A. Caruana (*San Publio Proto-Vescovo della Chiesa di Malta e Martire - Monografia Critica*, Malta 1896) makes interesting observations but repeats most of the myths and the approach is unscientific.

¹¹⁴ G.A. Ciantar, *Critica de' Critici Moderni*, *op. cit.*, and *idem*, *Malta Illustrata.*, *op. cit.*, 610-649.

¹¹⁵ M.A. Axiak, *Relazione della nuova e grandissima divozione introdotta nella santa Grotta di San Paolo...* The copy used here is NLM ms. 575.

¹¹⁶ A.A. Caruana, *Monografia Critica della Grotta di San Paolo nel sobborgo di Melite, l'antica capitale di Malta*, Malta 1866

¹¹⁷ G. Wettinger, 'A Land Grant by Bishop Ylario to Bochius de Bochio at St Paul's Grotto', G. Azzopardi (ed.), *St. Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*, Malta 1990. 65-67.

The cave which in 1536 had two altars¹¹⁸ was, in 1575, visited daily by pilgrims who carried away chippings of the rock which if pounded into dust and diluted in wine or water were said to be an effective medicine against all disease.¹¹⁹ It was, however, as an antidote against snake bites and poison that the rock (variously called *terra melitensis*, *terra sigillata melitensis*, *pietra di Malta*, *gratiam sancti Pauli*) achieved fame outside Malta. Large quantities were shipped [p.207] to the continent since at least the fifteenth century.¹²⁰ Its therapeutic properties were publicised in two treatises published respectively in Rome¹²¹ and Venice,¹²² and discussed in seventeenth and eighteenth century medical literature.¹²³ It consequently found an honoured place in pharmacopea,¹²⁴ and handbills extolling its virtues and containing instructions on its proper use were circulated in Malta and abroad.¹²⁵ *Terra melitensis* pills as well as poison cups to protect users from toxic drinks were meanwhile in popular demand,¹²⁶ and the rock was also worked to make medallions, statuettes and vases with the effigy of St. Paul¹²⁷ which were likewise credited with talismanic powers such as protecting mariners from dangers of shipwreck.¹²⁸

George Zammit-Maempel has shown how “the indigestion from the powdered objects or the drinking from cups made of *terra sigillata melitensis*” might, in fact, have had a protective as well as a curative effect on poisoning. This happened as a result of “a natural chemical reaction whereby the arsenic contained in the drink reacts with the calcium carbonate of the rock from St. Paul’s Cave and gets sort of covered up or

¹¹⁸ H.C.R. Vella, *op.cit.*, 44.

¹¹⁹ Dusina, *op. cit.*, ff 36-37.

¹²⁰ G. Zammit-Maempel: (a) ‘Two Contro-Veleno Cups made from Terra Sigillata Melitensis’, *St Luke’s Hospital Gazette*, x (1975), 85-95; (b) ‘Fossil Shark’s Teeth – A Medieval Safeguard against Poisoning’, *Melita Historica* vol. vi/4 (1975), 391-410; (c) ‘The Magic Properties of Rock from St. Paul’s Grotto, Malta’, *Studies in Speleology*, iii/1 (August 1977), 29-32; (d) ‘Rock from St Paul’s Grotto (Malta) in Medicine and Folklore’, in G. Azzopardi, *op. cit.*, 169-216.

¹²¹ E Ponzetti, *Libellus de Venenis*, ii/5, Rome 1521.

¹²² P.A. Matteoli, *Pedacii Dioscoridis de materia medica libri vi, interprete Pietro Andrea Mattioli cum ejusdem commentariis*, Venice 1544.

¹²³ See for example, V. Aldrovandi, ‘*Serpentum et Draconum libri duo*’, i/1, Bologna 1640; S. Mercuri, ‘*Degli Errori Popolari d’Italia*’, Padua 1645; F.G. Buonamici, ‘*Relazione della Grazia di San Paolo (1667)*’, NLM ms. 15. See also, G.A. Ciantar, ‘*De Beato Paolo Apostolo*’, *op. cit.* 233, and B. Montinaro, ‘*San Paolo a Malta - Tradizione Paolina*’, *Sudpuglia* (Year x/1 - Mar. 1984), 56.

¹²⁴ B. Montinaro, ‘*S. Paolo a Malta*’, 56-57.

¹²⁵ G. Zammit-Maempel, ‘*Handbills Extolling the Virtues of Fossil Shark’s Teeth*’, *Melita Historica*, vol. viii/3 (1978). 211-224.

¹²⁶ C.J.S. Thompson, ‘*A Medieval Poison Cup made from the Terra Sigillata Melitensis*’, *British Medical Journal*, i (1932); G. Zammit-Maempel, ‘*Two Contro-Veleno Cups*’, *op. cit.*, and *Idem*, ‘*Handbills*’, *op. cit.*

¹²⁷ G. Gatt Said, *La Grotta di S. Paolo a Malta, Considerazioni Archeologiche-Critiche*, Malta 1863, 65.

¹²⁸ C. Shaw, *Malta Sixty Years Ago*, London 1875, 46

mopped up and consequently rendered temporarily inactive, often allowing it to travel through the guts harmlessly”.¹²⁹ [p.208] There was obviously nothing miraculous in all this but the faith factor must have been a psychologically important predisposition on the part of the person receiving the treatment. As a medicine against fever and small pox,¹³⁰ or as a heart stimulant,¹³¹ the rock was, on the other hand, probably quite worthless.

Chippings were distributed free to whoever requested them and they were generally accompanied by written certificates,¹³² presumably to put an end to the trafficking of bogus rock. On 26 May 1571, a certain Tommaso di Bastiano da Cremona petitioned the Magna Curia Castellania to issue letters patent testifying to the genuine origin of the rocks he had acquired from the cave.¹³³ A pick axe was kept handy and the custodian encouraged visitors to cut splinters of the rock.¹³⁴ Large amounts of stone must have been quarried and boxes filled with chips were sent annually not only to Sicily and Italy but also to the Levant and the East Indies.¹³⁵ Marcantonio Axiak estimated, exaggeratedly, that the amount of rock carried away on the galleys of the Knights and other ships was so huge that it was as though a mountain had been torn to pieces. Yet the size of the cave miraculously remained unaltered!¹³⁶

The myth of the immutable dimensions of the cave was further elaborated in *Buonamici 1667*,¹³⁷ and is commemorated by a Latin inscription set up above the entrance in 1743. The cave was measured at regular intervals and a careful record kept,¹³⁸ but though belief in the miracle was widespread there were also sceptics such as the Biblical and Oriental lecturer John Gadsby, who visited the [p.209] cave around 1850 and remarked on the gullibility of the simple people who believed the tricks of the priests.¹³⁹

The Grotto Complex

The popularity of the St. Paul's grotto complex fluctuated from time to time. In 1549 the Rev. Matteo Surdu complained that it had been neglected for over a century. In the old

¹²⁹ G. Zaemit-Maempel, 'Handbills', 218.

¹³⁰ P. Braydon, *A Tour Through Sicily and Malta*, London 1773, 152-153.

¹³¹ S.F. Geoffrey, *Tractatus de Materia Medica sive de Medicamentorum simplicium historia, delectu et usu*, i, Venice 1772, 45.

¹³² G. Zammit-Maempel, 'Magic Properties of Rock', *op. cit.*, 46.

¹³³ Santo Spirito Archives, Rabat, Archives Magna Curia Castellania [AMCC], *Actorium originalium*, xv, 1570-1571, *Pro Thomaso de Bastiano*. Attention to this document was first drawn in G. Zammit-Maempel, 'Magic Properties of Rock'. It was published in full in B. Montinaro, 'San Paolo a Malta', 55-56, which contains a discussion of the bogus stones. Further details in G. Zammit-Maempel, 'Rock from St. Paul's Grotto'.

¹³⁴ C. Shaw, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹³⁵ P. Brydon, *op. cit.*, 152-153.

¹³⁶ M.A. Axiak, *op. cit.*, 10.

¹³⁷ F.G. Buonamici, *Relazione della Grazia*, f. 134v.

¹³⁸ G. Gatt-Said, *op. cit.*, 65.

¹³⁹ J. Gadsby, *My Wanderings Being Travels in the East in 1846-47, 1850-51, 1852-53*, London 1973, 43

days its fame had been such that it was visited by pilgrims from distant lands who desired nothing better than to die in Malta so that they might earn the privilege of being laid to rest in its sacred cemetery.¹⁴⁰ Evidence concerning the grotto and the cemetery was produced in 1608 when four of Malta's senior clerics recalled the traditions of the *antichi Maltesi*, when they testified before the Inquisitor.¹⁴¹ At about the same time, Manduca wrote of several small chapels carrying the armorial shields of noble Maltese families and described how the dead who, were mostly foreigners, were buried beneath stone arches decorated with family crests.¹⁴² A *cripta sotteranea piena d'un quasi infinità e innumerabile quantità d'ossa de morti* was dug up in the early seventeenth century and converted into a church of St. Mary Magdalene.¹⁴³

During the first two decades of the seventeenth century, the site became the centre of a vigorous cult as a result of the activities there of Juan de Venegas (*supra*); and in 1617 the Knights of St. John were invested with rights over the grotto.¹⁴⁴ Soon the place was entirely transformed. Drastic alterations gave a sumptuously dignified approach to the cave and walls and ceiling were concealed behind marble trappings. An oratory of St. Publius was also built above the entrance steps and an underground chapel, next to the grotto was recut and provided with three altars.

[p.210] Early Christian hypogea were disturbed while these works were in progress but no record was unfortunately kept,¹⁴⁵ and with the exception of a miniature catacomb at the back of the grotto very little has survived. This fourth/fifth century hypogeum (*fig. 6 a-b*), was broken into and partially destroyed as a result of quarrying. It is certainly older than the grotto and seems to prove that the Pauline association of the site is a subsequent fabrication.¹⁴⁶

The *Sanpolari* and Malta's Freedom from Venomous Creatures

The fame of the *terra sigilata melitensis* was intimately related to the myth of how St Paul, after having vanquished the viper freed Malta of venomous creatures. This tradition must already have been well established 1536 when Quentin remarked that:

...no harmful serpent is born in Malta, and, those brought from elsewhere become harmless... scorpions, fearful animals, elsewhere, are seen innocuous in the hands of boys, playing with them; I myself saw one eating them...¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ Mdina Cathedral Archives, CEA, *Acta Originaria* 464, f. 103.

¹⁴¹ G. Gati-Said, *op. cit.*, 67-69.

¹⁴² G. Manduca, *Relazione*, 183-186.

¹⁴³ Abela, *op. cit.*, 346.

¹⁴⁴ M.A. Axiak, *op. cit.*; G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*, 348-355.

¹⁴⁵ M. Buhagiar, 'The St Paul's Cave Complex at Rabat, Malta, and its Archaeological Significance', in G. Azzopardi (ed), *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ H.C.R. Vella, *op. cit.*, 44-45.

In 1575 Mgr. Pietro Dusina reaffirmed his belief.¹⁴⁸ St Paul was not, of course, the only saint associated with deliverance, from venomous creatures,¹⁴⁹ but he was probably the most famous. An, apparently, late medieval brass-medal of Romanesque inspiration, in a Maltese private collection, carries a hieratic figure of the saint flanked on either side by a wriggling serpent and might have belonged to a type which was mass-produced for suspension around the neck.¹⁵⁰ The iconography recalls that of limestone medallion in the collection of the Wignacourt Collegiate Museum in Rabat which is presumably sixteenth century, but probably reproduces an earlier well known prototype.¹⁵¹

[p.212] The *terra Melitensis* was not the only antidote administered to counteract poison. Equally efficacious were the fossil sharks' teeth which abound in the Miocene rocks of Malta. The Maltese called them *ilsien San Pawl* ('St. Paul's tongue') and believed them to be the venomous tongues of the unfortunate snakes which were cursed by St. Paul after his encounter with the viper.¹⁵² In medical circles they were variously known as *Glossopetra*, *Linguae Melitensis* and *Linguae S. Pauli*.¹⁵³ Abela and Buonamici thought they were spontaneously generated by the Maltese rock.¹⁵⁴ The fossils were worn as amulets and they remained popular until the nineteenth century. In the late Middle Ages they were in demand in European courts and noble households as talismans to detect poisoned food and drink.¹⁵⁵ Niels Steensen¹⁵⁶ and Leith Adams both marvelled at the large quantities which were exported from Malta.¹⁵⁷

Snake bites could also be cured by the saliva of persons born on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul,¹⁵⁸ while, outside Malta, charlatans known as *Uomini di San Paolo*, or *Sanpaolari*, made the rounds of Italian cities administering cures against poison.¹⁵⁹ Information on their activities can be gleaned from the *Speculum Cerretanorum* of Teseo Pini, composed around 1485, where they are denounced for their deceit. They claimed direct descent from St. Paul and to prove it they cast away serpents and ate and drank poisonous food without suffering harm. They explained this immunity

¹⁴⁸ Dusina, *op. cit.*, f. 182.

¹⁴⁹ F.G. Buonamici, *Relazione della Grazia...*, ff. 135, 138. V. Caruana-Gatto, *La Vipera Maltese*, *op. cit.*, 55-56

¹⁵⁰ J. Galea, 'The Earliest Medal Commemorating St. Paul's Shipwreck', in G. Azzopardi, *op. cit.*

¹⁵¹ M. Buhagiar, 'The St. Paul's Cave Complex', *op. cit.*, 63-64.

¹⁵² J. Wolff, *Scrutinium Amletorum Medicum*, Lipsiae et Jenae, 1690.

¹⁵³ G. Zammit-Maempel, 'Fossil Shark's Teeth', *op. cit.*, 393.

¹⁵⁴ G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*, 133; F.G. Buonamici, *Trattato delle Glossopetre di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1668, 22, 29-32.

¹⁵⁵ G. Zammit-Maempel, 'Fossil Shark's Teeth'.

¹⁵⁶ Better known as Nikolaus Steno.

¹⁵⁷ N. Steno, *De Solido Intra Solidum Naturaliter Contento Dissertationis Prodomus*, Florence 1669, 61; A. Leith Adams, *Notes of a Naturalist in the Nile Valley and Malta*, Edinburgh 1870, 528.

¹⁵⁸ G.N. Godwin, *The Geology, Botany and Natural History of the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1880, 48.

¹⁵⁹ B. Montinaro, 'Credenze Popolari', *op. cit.*, 91-97.

as a special grace enjoyed by the descendants of the apostle on the island of Malta after he had been bitten by the viper. Pini recalls how as a young man in Rome he had heard one of these swindlers boast that St. Paul had conceded this miraculous power to the descendants of a particular Maltese house who could cure all venomous bites by [p.213] administering drinks made of a certain rock. To prove that he was a member of this household, the swindler had shown his audience the serpentmark on his shoulders, but Pini recognised it for a simple tatoo.¹⁶⁰

In Sicily (where the Sanpaolari were usually called *cirauli*), and in Puglia, this gift was also claimed by persons who were born on the eve of the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul,¹⁶¹ but the Malta connection remained an essential condition and it has been proposed that the original Sanpaolari might have been Maltese swindlers. Their activities have, however, not so far been recorded in Malta.¹⁶²

[p.183]

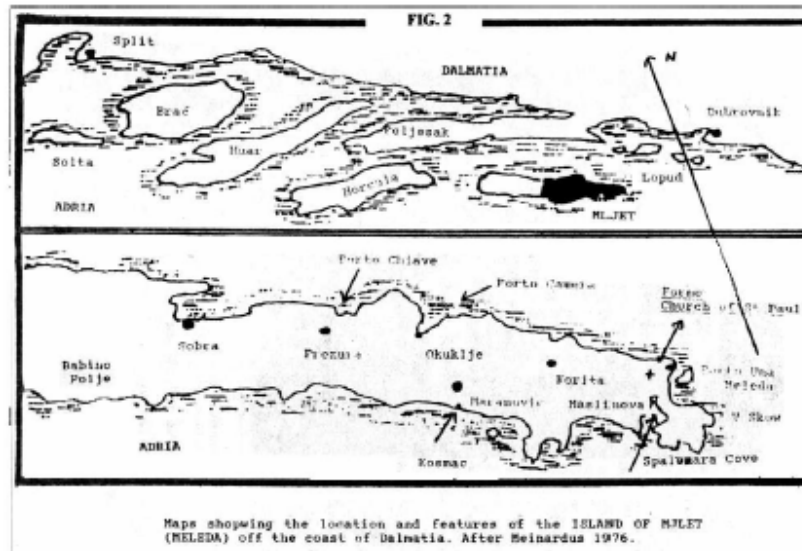


¹⁶⁰ The full text of Pini is reproduced in Italian translation in B. Montinaro, 'Credenze Popolari', 96-97.

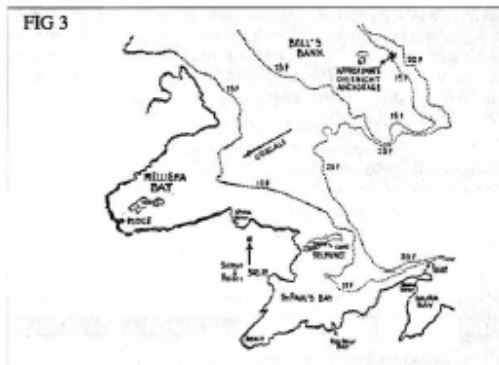
¹⁶¹ B. Montinaro, 'Credenze Popolari', 91.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

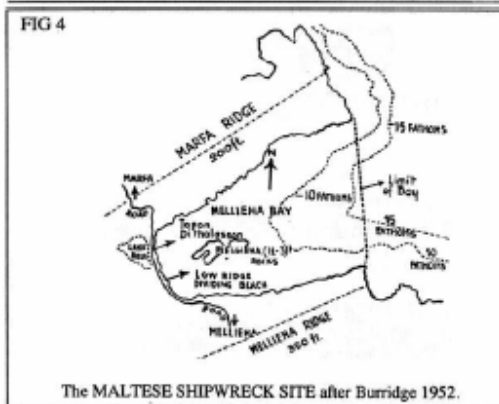
[p.196]



[p.199]



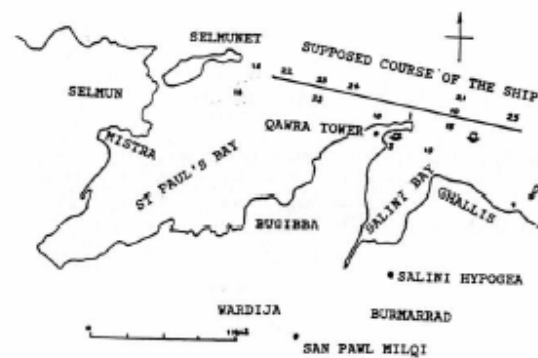
The NW. end of Malta with ST. PAUL'S BAY and MELLIEHA BAY. After Burridge 1952.



The MALTESE SHIPWRECK SITE after Burridge 1952.

[p.201]

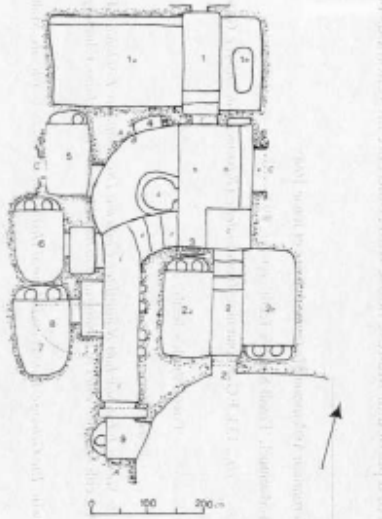
FIG. 5



Map of NW. Malta showing details relevant to the SHIPWRECK. After Musgrave 1979.

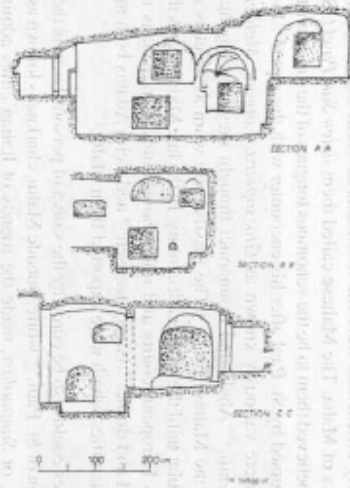
[p.211]

Fig 6a



THE ST PAUL'S CAVE HYPOGEUM.
Plan.

Fig 6b



THE ST PAUL'S CAVE HYPOGEUM.
Sections.