



Ayse Devrim Atauz. *Eight Thousand Years of Maltese Maritime History: Trade, Piracy, and Naval Warfare in the Central Mediterranean.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. xiv + 379 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3179-8.

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Malta: A Small Nation with a Huge History

Malta is among the smallest nations in the world with a wealth of history almost in inverse proportion to its size. The Maltese archipelago is located at the narrowest point of any east-west passage through the Mediterranean and at the closest distance between the European and African continents, thus putting it on a hot spot of European and sometimes even world history. Malta's huge natural harbor and excellent resources for the construction of fortifications made it a focal point in the commercial and strategic considerations of any seafaring nation in the Mediterranean. Consequently, the Maltese bore witness to many of the great conflicts in history, from the Punic Wars via the Christian-Muslim confrontations to Napoleon's conquests, and finally to the North African and Mediterranean campaigns during World War II.

Books that seek to review the whole sweep of Maltese history are, however, rare, and it is intriguing that Ayşe Devrim Atauz's publication has appeared so soon after Dennis Castillo's *The Maltese Cross*.^[1] It, therefore, makes sense to take a comparative approach to them—especially since individual and institutional purchasers may feel that they can afford just one book on the topic. The two books deal with different but related aspects of Maltese history. They overlap in their respective topics and in their approach to the topic; they also share some advantages as well as a few flaws. Both claim to cover a vast period of time, if not all of Maltese history. Both

name a particular aspect of history—and both refuse to indicate what precisely they mean by *maritime* or *strategic* history. Mentioning this lack of a definition is not just nitpicking. What other history can a tiny island, where every aspect of life is in some way or other related to the sea, have than a maritime one? Can a geographical entity establish and execute strategies? To ask for a precise definition is also to ask for a clear focus for each study.

Castillo takes a solidly political approach to his subject, with an emphasis on diplomacy, conflicts, and military actions that took place in and around the Maltese archipelago. Located at the crossroads of some highly important sea lanes, Malta tells us a story, of how even the smallest of peoples can alter the course of world events (p. 1). His book, similar to many military histories, starts with an overview of the geographical situation of Malta in the Mediterranean; its geology; and its resources, like the harbors and the easy to work limestone, which is perfectly suited for such vast construction efforts as fortresses and underground dug-outs.

It then turns into a straightforward chronological narrative from the first Stone Age settlers, who built the famous temples via the Phoenicians, to the arrival of the Greeks, which for the first time put Malta both commercially and strategically between two power blocks. The Punic Wars put an end to the Carthaginian colony and integrated Malta into the Roman Empire, where it shared

the historical fate of Sicily. With the end of Roman domination, Malta fell to the Byzantines, Arabs, and Normans respectively; and suffered from a long period of instability in the Middle Ages until the Spanish House of Aragon finally secured its hold on southern Italy, Sicily, and with it Malta. The author manages with admirable clarity to lead the reader through this rather complicated and confusing period with few but clear pen strokes.

Castillo summarizes most major chapters with some paragraphs of conclusions; some general observations; and analysis on relevant strategic issues, some of which are among the best passages of the book in terms of enlightening the reader and offering food for further thought. We learn, for instance, that the cooperation and loyalty of the Maltese population was vital for any overlord. The island was never successfully defended against an invasion without its people's active support.

Nobody writing on Malta can resist the temptation to succumb to the fascination of the Medieval Military Orders during the Crusades. Castillo is no exception, providing an overview of the pre-Maltese history of the Knights of St. John, and then continuing to bask in the epic story of the Turkish assault in 1565, stepping from a strategic down to an operational, sometimes even tactical history. This involves a certain loss of focus and confusion of levels of analysis. Nonetheless, there are interesting observations—for instance, the invading Ottoman forces of 1565 were numerically larger than the Armada against England in 1588. The later years of Hospitaller Malta were filled with lots of small-scale naval actions against the corsairs of the Barbary Coast, and, of course, with the construction of the fortresses, which gave Malta its unique features. The order lost Malta to Napoleon in 1798, and only a few months later the French themselves triggered a revolt. The Maltese people, who entered the stage here as a driving force in history—at least in Castillo's presentation—asked for British support and British suzerainty. During this revolt as well as during the Great Siege, the Maltese population displayed an extraordinary capability to endure hardships, like hunger and distress, as well as military pressures, like bombardment and violent assaults.

If England had not insisted in keeping Malta, but had handed it over to the Kingdom of Naples instead, history might well have taken a different course; in this case, Malta would have fallen to unified Italy and probably would have served as an Italian base to protect Axis transports to North Africa in World War II. Instead, Malta became a major base of the Royal Navy. The ups and

downs of British armament spending deeply affected the Maltese population, which depended on British naval facilities for employment and the British personnel as customers for their products and services. The many times told and retold story of Malta's crucial role in the Mediterranean campaign is well covered and integrated into the overall course of events in the Western Theater. The author gathered a lot of interesting facts and figures, emphasizing the dynamics of the threat, which the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy posed against the Axis supply line to North Africa and the simultaneous effort required to keep Malta in battle against the German-Italian blockade. There are, however, some imbalances of coverage. The fifteen weeks of the 1565 Great Siege are given twenty-two pages, while the whole Second World War receives only double that—of which twenty-three pages are devoted to the few days of Operation Pedestal, the convoy that saved Malta from a possible capitulation in August 1942. Nevertheless, the Second World War takes about a quarter of the book.

Only a few pages are dedicated to the postwar period, when Great Britain retired from imperial ambitions. In 1964, Malta became independent; and, in 1979, Malta's long history as a military base ended, when the Labour government refused to extend the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) lease. As a matter of fact, Malta is still struggling with this economic inheritance—the readjustment of the Malta Dry Docks, direct successor of the Royal Navy Dockyard, is still a veritable headache for any Maltese government, and the change from a state-oriented to an entrepreneurial, market-oriented economic culture is still not fully accomplished.

The author, an American with Maltese roots, has compiled his study almost exclusively from secondary English sources. There is no reference to original sources or archival material, and only less than a handful French and German titles. With regard to the range and depth of this book, this sounds worse than it actually is. There are excellent works in English covering Mediterranean history, many important books are translated, and Maltese historians usually publish in English as well. It is also easy to quibble over which additional books should have been included into a bibliography. In this case, a deeper look into more specialized literature might have helped to avoid taking legend for history or questionable theories as proven facts: firmly rooted in Maltese national mythology, neither the visit of St. Paul in Malta—although quite possible—nor the conversion of the Maltese population at that early date is supported by any ar-

chaeological records.[2] In a nutshell, this is a good and readable introduction into the conflict history of Malta. With its extensive bibliography and notes, it is—some minor flaws notwithstanding—a good starting point for anybody who wants to dig deeper or just needs an overview.

Atauz also claims to give an overview of a long period of history, though a slightly different one from Castillo's. His eight thousand years start with the arrival of the first Stone Age settlers about 5200 BCE and end in 1798, when the Knights Hospitaller surrendered Malta to Napoleon. This not only leaves a millennium short but also raises the question of whether there was no maritime history related to Malta after 1798 even though the Royal Navy was stationed there for almost two centuries, a presence culminating in an almost three-year naval and air campaign for the control of the central Mediterranean. The author, a nautical archaeologist, announces that this is a "maritime history of the Maltese Archipelago, based on archaeological evidence, archival sources, primary accounts and secondary sources," resulting in a "first-time event to put Maltese history into an intra-Mediterranean framework and view its events in a larger picture," all to be accomplished on roughly 180 pages of readable and concise text, interrupted by extensive tables and followed by opulent indices (p. 4).

This is, in fact, a book written around the (somewhat disappointing) results of an underwater survey in the coastal waters of Malta. This program of nautical archaeology was conducted between 1999 and 2001, and—to the surprise of the team—produced almost no shipwreck remains and only a limited amount of other pre-twentieth-century artifacts. Writing a book about findings based on archaeological evidence that is almost nonexistent is somewhat disturbing for a reviewer with legal training—where is the evidence? As a result, the story of prehistoric Malta up to the Middle Ages is told mainly from secondary sources, of which the author made good use. The focus again is mainly on political, economic, and commercial aspects. It is true that there are long periods, even in historic periods, where the historians still ask more questions than they have answers for. Narrowing the focus on Malta, however, will probably lead into a dead end. Major archaeological discoveries are no longer to be expected there due to the small size of the islands and the geological conditions, a thin layer of soil on solid rock. Widening the angle, however, seems to be a more promising approach. Given the proximity of Sicily and the close economic, cultural, and political ties between Malta and Sicily, reviewing developments and including archival sources there might help to close or at least nar-

row some gaps.[3]

Nevertheless, Atauz makes some interesting remarks and findings. The author argues against the widespread assumption that Malta was an important base for sea-borne trade and military campaigning in antiquity. Analyzing prevailing winds and ship technology, and combining them with archaeological evidence, she comes to the conclusion that Malta was probably no more than an emergency harbor for Phoenician traders and a jump-off point for occasional attacks against Greek and Etruscan trade routes. The rise of Carthage further marginalized Malta, because the prevailing north-south trade between North Africa and Sicily/Corsica needed it much less as trade post than the east-west routes of the Phoenicians. Likewise, Malta is described as somewhat isolated from Mediterranean commercial and cultural exchange throughout medieval times until the arrival of the order.

The Knights of St. John do not fail to cast their spell over Atauz as well—and the gentlemen in mail and plate were kind enough to leave lots of documents for generations of researchers to come. In addition, there is an ample supply of books available to be compiled into a new sketch of their history. There are no real mistakes and errors to speak of, but some chapters clearly remain behind the state of the art by omitting important works: the chapter about European perceptions of Malta, for example, would have definitely looked less underweight had the author at least taken a distant look at Thomas Freller's two-part seminal study of the topic, *The Epitome of Europe* (2002). (Notwithstanding the English title, Freller's roughly one-thousand-page study of European literature about Malta in early modern times is written in German.)

The author has, however, undertaken original research on the naval history of the Knights. Based on the archives and supplemented by secondary sources, she provides a detailed record of the changing strength and naval actions of the Galley Squadron between 1530 and 1798, as well as the Sailing Ship Squadron from 1700 to 1798. Atauz supplements this by an overview of the galley strengths of other Mediterranean naval powers and several detailed tables related to ship constructions in the Maltese yards, acquisition of galleys from outside Malta, etc. An appendix of almost eighty pages lists every major naval action and participating naval forces of the order between 1523 and 1798, while another provides meticulous reconstruction of an eighteenth-century third rate ship, the *San Giovanni Battista*.

The components of the book are not fully integrated

and the whole work is somewhat fragmented. Atauz offers a concise introduction into the commercial, economic, and military history of Malta's naval affairs, interspersed with some interesting ideas that might well serve as the basis for a future detailed scientific article. The numerous overviews and tables are the real value of the study. They offer lots of basic and supportive information for everybody dealing with the period and the topic. Like Castillo's work, with its short and concise text, its detailed endnotes and bibliography, Atauz's book might well serve as an appetizer for further and deeper study of a fascinating little spot in our world.

Notes

[1]. Dennis Castillo, *The Maltese Cross: A Strategic History of Malta* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006).

[2]. For a summary cf. Anthony Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2005), 199, 261-262.

[3]. As proven by Charles Dalli, *Malta: The Medieval Millennium* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2006). Due to its wealth in detail, this book is a little difficult to use without a thorough knowledge of medieval Mediterranean history, but it solidly proves that discoveries are still possible—even in unexpected places.

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