

SIMON MERCIECA

---

**THE FAILED SIEGE OF 868  
AND THE CONQUEST OF MALTA  
BY THE AGHLABID PRINCEDOM IN 870**

*Off-print from*

**60<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE MALTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
A COMMEMORATION**

**pages 87-102**

**Edited by Joseph F. Grima**



The Malta Historical Society 2010

# THE FAILED SIEGE OF 868 AND THE CONQUEST OF MALTA BY THE AGHLABID PRINCEDOM IN 870

Simon Mercieca\*

Two books published in Tunisia in 2006 have direct relevance to the history of Malta during Arab rule. The first one, published by the Institut National du Patrimoine, consists of a two-volume work by Bahri Fathi entitled *Les Hommes du pouvoir et les hommes du savoir en Ifriqiyya aghlabide (184-296/800-909)*, wherein the author discusses the main personages that held power and knowledge during the time when Malta fell into the hands of the Arabs. The second publication, a festschrift entitled *Les Communautés Méditerranéennes de Tunisie, Hommage au Doyen Mohamed Hédi Cherif*, contains a number of articles that are of direct and indirect interest to Malta.<sup>1</sup> There is one particular article on which I will be focusing my attention due to its relevance to Maltese medieval history: a paper by Faouzi Mahfoudh entitled '*Itinéraire d'un affranchi aghlabide: Kahalef (sic.), un constructeur hors pair (203-254 de l'hégire/818-867)*'. In my opinion, these two books bring to the fore some of the hidden dynamics behind the conquest of Malta by the Arabs and furnish an Arabic view of the rather complex and unclear history of how the islands of Malta and Gozo fell into Aghlabid hands at the end of a bloody period dominated by harsh wars and perpetual fighting between the Arabs and the Byzantines in the Central Mediterranean.

---

\*Dr Simon Mercieca, a French-trained historian who has specialized in demographic and behavioural history, lectures in aspects of early modern Mediterranean history at the University of Malta where he is also the Director of the Mediterranean Institute. He has taught cultural industries at the Université de Nice Sophia-Antipolis in France and has been the President of the *Koperattiva Kulturali Università*. Actively involved in the writing and implementation of EU projects with a cultural imprint, Dr Mercieca was also the Malta expert in the framework programme 6 (FP6) for culture and society (Priority 7). He has published extensively locally and abroad, including a number of books and papers relating to maritime topics. The European Science Foundation appointed Dr Mercieca chairman of the expert history panel whose duty is to grade European and world history journals.

**Editorial note:** the translations from Arabic in this paper were carried out by Mr. F.X. Cassar, a former teacher of Arabic who has to his credit a number of books and papers translated from Arabic into Maltese.

- 1 This book contains two papers that are of particular interest to Maltese researchers and students working on the Maltese diaspora. Carmel Sammut rebuilds the biography of Antoinette Schembri (1895-1988), in particular her childhood days in the city of Tunis. Eugene Weber and Patrice Sanguy study the Maltese presence in Tunis through the endeavours of Carmel Camilleri who, like many other 'Maltese', lived at the crossroads of cultural diversities. Many other articles discuss general themes that are of particular reference to Malta, such as the article by J. Cremona on the use of the Italian language in Tunis throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and Guido Ciffoletti's and Jocelyne Dakhli'a's articles on the use of the *lingua franca* in Tunis during Early Modern Times.

### Background to Malta's Conquest by the Arabs

The Byzantines lost control of North Africa in the year 647 with the Battle of Sbeitla, but the Arabs would have to wait about 223 years before they gathered the necessary resources to subjugate the nearby island of Malta. Until this happened, political power in Ifriqiyya was to shift from the Umayyads to the Abbasids. Internal wars conditioned the spread of Islam because the new Arab rulers had to share power with the endogenous Berber population who, in order to safeguard their own status, took advantage of the discord that began to develop between the Umayyads and the Abbasids. By the year 800, a new regional power of the Aghlabids came into existence, establishing, at Kairouan, its seat of political and religious Islamic power<sup>2</sup> which was completely independent – politically, religiously and economically – from the Caliphate of Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

Ifriqiyya had a rather complex social tissue at the time, made up of Arabs, Persians, Berbers, Latins, Slavs and other ethnic denominations whose juridical status could vary from slaves to that of *māwali* or free persons. The Aghlabids had their own judicial system which differed from other systems. Slaves could move to positions of power and become generals in the army of the Emir. They could buy off their liberty. Whenever this happened, the slave status moved up to that of a '*mawlā*' (Singular of *mawālī*).<sup>4</sup> Fathi argues that, in the Aghlabid society, the status of the *mawlā* was equal to that of a free man.<sup>5</sup> The free members of the Aghlabid society fell under two categories, that of the '*hāssa*' and that of the '*amma*'. The former was the minority group of the powerful aristocratic elite – from whom religious leaders were normally chosen – and the latter were commoners.<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, in his analysis of the Aghlabids' social structure, Fathi does not refer to the presence of the '*dhimmi*' (a word used to refer to subjected Christians under Muslim rule).

Fathi recounts that the allocation of the status of *dhimmi* was related more to the Abbasid period. The Abbasids allowed the Berbers, who were considered descendants of the Romans and endogenous Christians<sup>7</sup>, to keep their religion against the payment of a tax called *harag* and thus they acquired the status of *dhimmi*. With the rise of the Aghlabid dynasty, this system came to an end. The Christians were considered polytheists as the coins minted at the time of the Aghlabids clearly show. These coins contained continuous reference to a verse in

2 B. Fathi, *Les hommes du pouvoir et les hommes du savoir en Ifriqiyya aglabide (184-296 / 800-909)* vol. 1, Institut National du Patrimoine, Tunis 2006, 90. The work is in two volumes and henceforth will be referred to as Fathi 1 and Fathi 2.

3 Fathi 1, 92-93.

4 Fathi 1, 13.

5 Fathi 1, 14-15.

6 Fathi 1, 15.

7 Fathi 1, 264.

the Koran (Koran, IX, 33) which refers to God's repugnance of polytheism.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that this was a direct reference to the Christian religion as practised in the Mediterranean, in particular by the Byzantines. The veneration of saints and the figurative representation of God on icons were seen by the Aghlabids as a public manifestation of polytheism.

Throughout their short history of a hundred years, the Aghlabids expressed bouts of religious intolerance, thus creating great tension in the Arab world that would eventually lead to political fragmentation characterized by perpetual civil war.<sup>9</sup> In part, this was due to the policy that they chose to follow, which was on the same lines as that of their predecessors the Abbasids, who had focused their strategy on three fronts, that is, against the Berbers, against the Christian West and against internal seditions.<sup>10</sup> Internally, the Aghlabids sought to create what may be compared to the system of Western fiefdoms. This led to fratricidal conflicts within the ruling family. In an effort to prevent revolts, the use of harsh political control was the order of the day. This was followed by a foreign policy characterized by the need to conquer Sicily and Southern Italy.

Malta is not mentioned as part of the many maritime expeditions sent against Sicily in the first half of the ninth century but, undoubtedly, these expeditions had direct and indirect repercussions on the Island. Abū Fihir Muhammad bin Abd Allāh bin Ibrāhim bin Al-Aḡlab led the African fleet on two expeditions against Sicily. The first expedition was in 819/820 and the second in 821/822. The same General led the Aghlabid army in the war of 825 to subjugate Tunis after intermittent revolts against the Aghlabid ruler.<sup>11</sup> In 836, Muhammed bin al-Sindī commanded part of the fleet of the Governor of Sicily, Abu-l-Aḡlab Ibrahim bin Abd Allah, in defence against attacks from the Byzantine fleet.<sup>12</sup>

More wars ensued in the following decades. Al-Fadl bin Ya'qub, was one of the army generals involved in the wars against the Christians of Sicily in 837.<sup>13</sup> Abd Al-Salām bin 'Abd al-Wahhab was responsible for the failed expedition of the army against Enna in 837. Al-Fadl bin Ga'far al-Hamadāni commanded the African fleet of Sicily against Messina in 842-843 during the rule of Abū-l-Aḡlab Ibrāhim bin 'Abd Allah bin Ibrāhim.<sup>14</sup> He had also led the successful campaign against Lentini in 846-847. Abū-l-Aḡlab al-'Abbas bin al-Fadl bin Ya'qūb bin al-Madā commanded the African army in Sicily in the Battle of Butera where more than 10,000 Byzantine soldiers lost their lives. In 843-844, Rabāh bin Ya'q

---

8 Fathi 1, 259.

9 J. Philips, *Holy Warriors: A Modern History of the Crusades*, The Book Service Ltd 2009.

10 Fathi 1, 235.

11 Fathi 2, 153.

12 Fathi 2, 158.

13 Fathi 2, 158.

14 Fathi 2, 159.

ūb bin al Madā bin Sawāda was sent by the Governor of Sicily, al-‘Abbās bin al-Fadl bin Ya’qūb to attack the fort of Catavuturo in 851-852.<sup>15</sup> In 862, he was sent to attack the fort of Gabal Abi Mālik; this town’s geographical location has not yet been identified.<sup>16</sup> Also in 862, the Prefect of Sicily sent his son, Muhammad bin Hafāga bin Sufyān bin Sawād, at the head of an army to attack Syracuse. He lost the battle and 1000 men. He fought again in 866-867 against the town of Troina and managed to capture it. In 868, he was at the head of the African fleet of Sicily in the wars against Christians, following which the Governor of Sicily, Muhammad bin Hafāga bin Sufyan, sent Ab Allāh bin Sufyān bin Sawada to attack Syracuse. He destroyed all the neighbouring villages and made havoc of the agrarian surroundings. In 869, he was again involved in battles waged against Christian communities.<sup>17</sup>

Within this scenario, it is very easy to imagine that Malta continued to be at risk and, therefore, the recorded attacks carried out at the end of the 860s come as no surprise. What is surprising is that there are no records of any other attacks on Malta before 868. The first recorded attack is that by Khalaf, whose life and deeds were reconstructed by Faouzi Mahfoudh.

### The Islamic Figure of Khalaf

Faouzi Mahfoudh attests that the Arab takeover of Malta came at a time of great tension in Tunisia as a result of the power struggle between the freed black slaves and the ruling Arab population who, during this period, was not yet a demographic majority. Mahfoudh added an important detail to the already described status of the *mawālī*; they were freed black slaves. He continues to explain that tension reached its apex in 875, when the freed slaves revolted against the power of the Aghlabid Emir, Ibrahīm II, at Kairouan by which time Malta was already in Arab hands. These revolts came at the end of a long process during which the *mawālī* began to climb the political ladder of power after the Aghlabids had opened the doors to the black population and the endogenous Christians in an effort to help consolidate their control of Ifriqiyya, suppress internal revolts and keep the captured Byzantine slaves under guard and control.<sup>18</sup> The Aghlabid army reflected most this policy of openness towards the slaves. It was normally formed of the *ḡund* (Arab and *hur āsāniens* soldiers), the *ansar* (auxiliary soldiers) and the *mawālī* (freed black and Christian slaves).

Once again, in adopting such a policy, the Aghlabids were following in the footsteps of the Abbasids. Indeed, it was the Abbasids who introduced the system

15 Fathi 2, 160.

16 Fathi 2, 163.

17 Fathi 2, 164.

18 Faouzi Mahfoudh ‘Itinéraire d’un affranchi Aghlabide: Kahalef, un constructeur hors pair (203-254 de l’Hegire / 818-867)’, *Les Communautés Méditerranéennes de Tunisie, Hommage au Doyen Mohamed Hedi Cherif*, Centre de Publication Universitaire, Tunis 2006, 117.

of using black slaves in the army. They were given their freedom and then engaged to protect the Emir. It should be pointed out that freedom from slavery, as well as the attained state of *māwālī*, was conditional to their conversion to Islam.<sup>19</sup> Mahfoudh fails to account for the dreadful future of those amongst the black and endogenous population in Ifriqiyya who refused to be converted to Islam. As explained by Bahri, their future was bleak.

Presumably, Khalaf belonged to the community of these freed black slaves from Sousse. Khalaf could have been approached and invited to support the established regime in its struggle to consolidate its internal power. On his part, Khalaf accepted the invitation, became a Muslim and gave his full allegiance to the Arab rulers. In return, he got promoted and made headway in the Arab army.

Mahfoudh goes into the details of Khalaf's works and shows how, in Tunisia, he is known primarily for his architectural and urban designs, in particular for designing the *qasba* of Sousse.<sup>20</sup> Mahfoudh admits that there exist historical difficulties in establishing his origins but thinks that Khalaf could have been a black Christian who converted to Islam. Khalaf must have been very young when asked to convert to Islam in return for his freedom and for rendering unconditional service to the Emir. During this period, freed slaves lost their original name because their master gave them a new name upon conversion to Islam. With the lack of any other sources to draw from, three major possibilities remain regarding Khalaf's origins.

In the ninth century, the number of Christians in North Africa was still very high and Khalaf could have been a Christian from Ifriqiyya (as Tunis was known at the time), or he could have been captured in one of the Arab campaigns in Europe, such as the wars against the Byzantines in Sicily and brought over to Tunisia. He could have been just a black slave, belonging to one of the many forms of Animism captured by the Arabs and brought over to Tunisia at a very young age. Considering Khalaf's ethnic origins and black skin colour, Mahfoudh tends to support the theory that he was a Berber belonging to the Christian community of Ifriqiyya.

The little that is known for a fact regarding Khalaf's origins is that his name meant 'the good descent' and such names were usually given to converted slaves. It should also be pointed out that the Aghlabids made extensive use of freed slaves to sustain urban development. For example, the master mason responsible for building the famous mosque of al-Zaytouna was Nussayr, who was also a freed slave. Even the architect of this mosque, Fatah, appears to have been a freed slave.<sup>21</sup>

Around the year 820, Khalaf began his career under Abū Muhammad Ziyādat Allāh bin Ibrāhīm and known as Ziyādat Allāh I,<sup>22</sup> the third Emir of the Aghlabid

19 Fathi 1, 265.

20 Mahfoudh, 117.

21 Mahfoudh, 118, footnote 4.

22 Mahfoudh, 119.

kingdom, becoming the prince's chamberlain and remained in his service up to his death in 837.<sup>23</sup> There are no historical references regarding the services that Khalaf might have rendered to the new Emir, Abū 'Iqāl al-Aġlab ibn Ibrāhim (838-841). But his name re-emerges under the subsequent Emir, Abū-l-'Abbās Muhammad bin al-Aġlab (841-856). Khalaf became an important administrative figure of the regime. He was appointed head of the mint, better known as Dār al-Sikka and here began his rise to true power. So powerful and important was his position that his name began to appear, together with that of the Emir, on the coins being minted. It was also thanks to these coins that the life of this man is mostly known.<sup>24</sup> Khalaf continued to command respect from Emir Muhammed's son and successor, Abū Ibrāhim Ahmad bin Muhammad (Abu Ibrahim Ahmad) (856-863). It was under these last two emirs that Khalaf moved on to a new position by assuming full responsibility for the ambitious construction projects of the Aghlabid kingdom in Tunis that included the building of mosques, public buildings, water reservoirs as well as the setting up of irrigation systems. Moreover, Khalaf was also responsible for defence works, in particular the construction of coastal defences for the town of Sousse. These areas and a number of villages were at the mercy of Byzantine forays. It was for this reason that Khalaf also assumed the responsibility of building a *Rabit* or fort (situated 6 km from Sousse) and the *qasba* of Sousse itself that was supported by a completely new system of fortification lines. The new fortifications at Sousse enabled the Emir to strengthen his naval fleet. It is recorded that Khalaf made extensive use of the freed slaves for these public projects.<sup>25</sup>

So successful was Khalaf's mission that he was promoted to the highest military rank, becoming General of the Emir's army and, in this new position, also military advisor and strategist. It was in this role that he would advise the Emir to invade Malta, an advice that the Emir took up by entrusting Khalaf with the responsibility of leading the expedition against the Island. It was in this capacity that Khalaf's name was recorded by Al-Bakri. As was the custom amongst Arab writers then, Al-Bakri mentions Khalaf's mission to Malta while recording the other deeds undertaken by this man on behalf of his Arab masters. His name began to be considered so important for the history of Ifriqiyya that Al-Himyari again recorded Khalaf's deeds when he copied Al-Bakri's work.

To write about Khalaf's fate, Mahfoudh has made use of both a recent publication of Al-Bakri's work, printed in 1992, as well as Al-Himyari's version entitled *al Raoud al-mi'tār*, published in Beirut in 1980.<sup>26</sup>

---

23 Mahfoudh. 120

24 Mahfoudh. 121.

25 Mahfoudh. 122-3.

26 Mahfoudh. 123.

There should be no doubt that, throughout the seventh, eighth and ninth century, Malta was fortified by the Byzantines to resist any attack. There should also be no doubt that the Island was used by the Byzantines for launching attacks on Ifriqiyya and, in turn, the island suffered from raids from the other side. The survey conducted by Godfrey Wettinger led him to suggest that the island of Malta was an important naval station for the Byzantines. Besides the Byzantine *dux*, or military leader, the island had an *archon* and *drungarios*.<sup>27</sup> The former word referred to the presence of a lord or a ruler in Byzantine Malta: the person occupying this office was an aristocrat assigned to government duties. The latter was used with reference to the top-ranking officer of the fleet and was equivalent to the present-day post of admiral.

This fact and the internal difficulties in Tunisia could explain why the Arabs took so long to launch their definite conquest of Malta. The island had a fleet and good military set-up which delayed the Malta conquest. The presence of Byzantine slaves in Ifriqiyya throughout these centuries explains the state of continuous warfare between both sides. The population of Malta could only survive if it lived behind fortified towns and had the military power not only to resist but to counter attack.

### **The Siege of 868**

Thanks to Mahfoudh's paper, we now have another piece of information on how the Arabs took Malta. Perhaps this work will continue to help to identify the events that led to Malta's fall into Arab hands. Until recently, not even the precise date of the Arab invasion was actually known.

The figure of Khalaf is known in Maltese history. Charles Dalli<sup>28</sup> discussed his feats in his work about Medieval Malta. But due to Al-Bakri's description and the conflicting information given by the Chronicle of Cambridge, the date of the Arab conquest of Malta was not clear. In fact, local historians mention two possible dates; one is 868 and the other 870. If one follows Mahfoudh's train of thought, one can conclude that these two dates represent two separate attacks on Malta by the Arabs.

The Aghlabids attacked Malta at least twice. Khalaf himself masterminded the first attack in 868. He assumed full responsibility and personally accompanied the army to Malta. Al-Bakri recounts that Khalaf faced a difficult task because he was met by well-organised resistance. This factor increased his standing with this Arab chronicler. According to the version used by Mahfoudh, Al-Bakri says that

27 G. Wettinger, 'The Arabs in Malta', *Malta Studies of its Heritage and History*, Mid-Med Bank Limited, Malta 1986, 90.

28 C. Dalli, *Malta The Medieval Millennium*, (photography by D. Cilia), Midsea Books Ltd, Malta 2006, 53.



'it was Khalaf, the freed slave of Ziyâdat Allah, who attacked Malta during the times of Abû Ibrâhim Muhammad Ibn Ahmad the nephew of Ziyadat Allah.... Khalaf was known for his construction of mosques, bridges and wells, he had great difficulties to succeed in the campaign and met his death in the Siege of Malta.'<sup>29</sup>

Mahfoudh states that the siege, in 868, was a complete failure because the Arab army suffered a crushing defeat. Yet this information about Khalaf's life, as well as about the siege, highlights a number of aspects concerning ninth-century Malta. The island and, in particular, its capital city were well fortified to the extent that they could offer resistance to any invading army. Not only did the islanders resist but, in this case, they also defeated the enemy.

The reason behind the attack can be better explained if one bears in mind that Malta was considered a threat to Tunisia's security. The Island, with its good natural harbours, served as an important base from where to wage war on Tunisia. It was a well-known fact that the Byzantines, who were a strong maritime power in the Mediterranean by far superior to the Arabs at the time, were making use of Malta's harbours to strike against Tunisia. Therefore, choosing Khalaf to lead this expeditionary force against Malta was, in one sense, not accidental.

From this point of view, the attack on Malta assumes a new political importance. It was not only a campaign to capture the Island but it was also aimed at suppressing a Byzantine enclave that was considered a threat to Aghlabid power in Tunisia. Undoubtedly, the Aghlabids seem to have feared an internal uprising amongst their Byzantine slaves, in which case the slaves would be at an advantage and could count on the support of the Byzantine forces in Malta and Syracuse. The Aghlabids counteracted by seeking the support of the Christian slaves who were not of Byzantine origin but belonged to the endogenous population of the defunct *Ecclesia Africana*. At the same time, the possibility that the Byzantines could use Malta as a military base increased the need to neutralize the island.

Furthermore, the attack came at a time when the Aghlabid rulers were planning to attack and subdue the Byzantine city of Syracuse that was then the largest city that existed in Western Europe. In terms of size and population, it was second to the city of Byzantium itself. It was so big that its historic confines exceeded the modern parameters of the present city. The island of Malta was on the doorstep of this important city and could, somehow or other, hinder the success of an invasion of Syracuse.

In the writings of Ibn Khaldun, one finds the history of the final fall of Malta into Arab hands during the reign of the Emir Abû Abd Allâh Muhammad Ibn Ahmad known as Abû Al-Gharânîq (864-875). According to Ibn Khaldun, Malta

---

29 Mahfoudh. 123.

was conquered in the year fifty-five. However, on reading his text, the year fifty-five refers to Al Gharaniq's age since, later on in the passage, Khaldun writes that Abu Al Gharaniq died in the middle of the year sixty-one, eleven years after he had come to power.<sup>30</sup> The year 61 corresponds to the Christian year 874. Therefore, there must have been another battle fought by the Arabs after 868 and one would be making a good reading of the surviving data in assuming that the final conquest of Malta must have taken place around the year 870. In other words, the year 870 represents the final takeover of Malta by the Aghlabids.

### **The Conquest of Malta in 870**

Conquering Malta meant removing an obstacle which stood in the way of the Arab conquest of Syracuse. In fact, the fall of Syracuse came eight years after that of Malta. No doubt Byzantine Malta had a strong political, economic and religious relationship with this important Byzantine city and she was offering help, through her maritime networks, to resist the onslaught of Arab attacks.

One should definitely eliminate the possibility that the death of Khalef represented just a siege drawback and that the siege continued after a new general arrived from Tunisia. Taking into consideration the geographical situation of the times, it was impossible to keep an army in Malta for an entire winter period. While Malta had good harbours for the fleet, such a large army needed resources. Again, this possibility went against the military strategy adopted by the Aghlabids at the time. It was not their custom to set out on a two-year continuous siege. They preferred to concentrate their forces on one big focused siege. Furthermore, there is also the question of at least three references which all give the year 870 as the date in which Malta fell into the hands of the Aghlabids.

Though the 868 siege was a total failure, a new Mediterranean force was capable of re-grouping itself by finding the necessary manpower to make a second attempt, two years later in 870. This time, the siege was a success and Byzantine Malta fell into the hands of the Tunisian Arab kingdom.

The attack in 870 is recorded in the Chronicle of Cambridge<sup>31</sup> and by an anonymous Arab geographer. However, the account of another Arabic geographer, Al-Athir, created doubts about what actually happened in 870. He recounts that, after Khalaf's death in Malta, the people proclaimed his son Muhammad bin Ahmed bin Al Aghlab sovereign of the principedom of Kairouan who, in 870, sent an army to Malta, which was being besieged by the Byzantines. Al-Athir insists that 'when the Byzantines heard of their coming they abandoned the siege'. (A transliteration of Arabic phrase used is 'they left from it'). Such a text hints that

30 Abd Al Rahman Ben Khaldun, *The Book of Instructive Examples and Register of Subject and Predicate dealing with the History of Arabs, Persians and Berbers*, Vol. 4, p. 201.

31 Wettinger, 26.

Malta was already in the hands of the Arabs in 870 but adds that, in that year, there was another war waged against Malta.<sup>32</sup>

There is a consensus that this account sounds too triumphant and the author may have been mixing up two different events in one tale; that of the final fall of Malta to the Arabs in 870 and a later attack by the Byzantines to recover the Island. A literal translation of al-Athir's text can offer us a different explanation to what happened in 870. Al-Athir writes that 'they (the Byzantines) left from it (i.e. Malta)', and such an expression could mean that the Byzantines had capitulated to a superior force. If such an interpretation is correct, it gives a better reading of what exactly happened in 870.

The fall of Malta was also discussed by Ibn Khaldun in volume 4 of his famous book popularly known as '*Al Muqaddamah*'. In his writing, Khaldun does not make any reference to calendar dates when he speaks about the Aghlabids' conquest but only says that this conquest happened when Abu Al Gharaniq was in office. Ibn Khaldun continues to state that 'He (Abu al Gharaniq) conquered the island of Malta in the year fifty-five'.<sup>33</sup> As already pointed out above, by the year fifty-five he is referring to his age. It is known that he died at the age of 61 in the year 875. Therefore, according to this reading, the conquest came in the year 869. However, Ibn Khaldun gives another important detail. He says that Abu al Gharaniq's reign was characterised by various wars. Ibn Khaldun speaks about the fact that the Byzantines regained areas of the island of Sicily (here he is probably referring to the defeat in the battle for the city of Syracuse). Ibn Khaldun continues and writes that Muhammad built forts and watch-towers along the seashore of Al Maghreb for a distance of a fifteen-day walk from Berqa in the direction of Al Maghreb still known now.

This writing confirms that the Byzantines were reacting to the Arab attacks and conquests. In the context of this reading, Al-Athir's text assumes historical credibility. If Malta fell in 869, then it is possible that an attempt was made by the Byzantines to regain the island in 870. However, two other sources give the final fall of Malta as being 870. The manner in which the texts were written and the details given regarding this siege give credibility to these two sources.

The answer for the date of Malta's final fall can be found in Fathi's book. Fathi confirms that the occupation of Malta by the Arabs was not easy. Quoting Al-Nuwayri, Fathi speaks about campaigns against Malta organised by Ahmad Ibn Umar,<sup>34</sup> but even he seems to have failed in his mission because the book entitled *Kitāb al-Uyūn wa-l-hadā'iq fī ahbār al-haqā'iq* gives the name of another general as the conqueror of the Island. This work is known to Maltese scholars

32 Al-Kamil fi Al-Tarikh of Ibn Al-Athir, Vol. 5, page 307.

33 The years correspond to AH 255 / AD 868 & AH 261 / AD 867. The other year 61 corresponds AD 874.

34 Fathi 1, 147.

and Godfrey Wettinger referred to it in his important study about the Arabs in Malta.<sup>35</sup>

According to the anonymous author of this work, Malta was eventually conquered by Abū Malik Ahmad Ibn Umar Ibn Abd Allāh Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Aḡlab known as Habašī.<sup>36</sup> According to this anonymous author, Habašī was put at the head of the African fleet and succeeded in conquering the Island on 28 of the Ramadan of the Muslim year 256 (Hegira) which corresponds to 28 August 870.<sup>37</sup> Thanks to this historical evidence, we now can speak with certainty that Malta was besieged at least twice by the Aghlabid forces whilst it also seems to have suffered from other minor raids from this Arabic kingdom. Incidentally, this historical reference is collaborated by another independent source, that of the famous Arabic Chronicle of Cambridge, which gives the date of the final fall of Malta as 29 August 870. As had been rightly noted, there is only a day's difference.<sup>38</sup>

The events of 868 can perhaps help us to explain why the Arabs moved with such ferocity against Malta in 870, destroying everything they came across, thus rendering the Island barren for a number of years. One cannot fail to consider that such ruthless destruction was in fact a form of punishment. First of all, the Arabs wanted to avenge the death of Khalaf. Secondly, they wanted to ensure that the Island could not be used as a base for Byzantine incursions against Ifriqiyya. This explains why Al-Himyari described Malta as being a wasteland for many years.

It is known that marble pieces were taken from Malta to Sousse and utilised to decorate its buildings.<sup>39</sup> Sousse too was a city that had endured maritime attacks from the Byzantines. It was also the city that had been re-supplied by Khalaf who, in an attempt to conquer Malta, had lost his life. Therefore, taking marble from Malta to Sousse carried a covert political message. The marble was taken as a kind of war trophy and a symbol for the Sousse inhabitants that the Byzantine island of Malta, which had been the cause of their past troubles, no longer existed. It had been destroyed and laid to waste. Sousse had nothing to fear now from the land where Khalaf, their benefactor, had fallen.

At the same time, Ibn Khaldun's writings reveal another important historical point. The whole of Maghreb began to be fortified. Malta was at this time part of the Maghreb and, most probably, the island was fortified during this time. Perhaps the origins of Birgu's castle should be dated to the Arab period, if not to Abu al-Gharaniq. It could easily have been constructed on the remains of a Byzantine fort.

---

35 Wettinger, 90.

36 Fathi 1, 50.

37 Fathi 2, 164.

38 Wettinger, 90.

39 M. Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta, Catacombs, Cult Centres and Churches in Malta to 1530*, BAR International Series 1674, Oxford 2007, 71.

Ibn Khaldun's work indicates clearly that it was not easy for the Aghlabid power to keep intact its conquered territories but, undoubtedly, the Byzantines' reaction did not take long to materialise, as the above text seems to demonstrate. Thus, if Malta's re-fortification did not take place during Muhammad's reign, it would be carried out by his successors. Malta would not be left unprotected for very long. If the Arabs wanted to keep the island, and their intention was very clear, they had to fortify it. Therefore, if one believes Al Himyari that Malta was a wasteland for some decades,<sup>40</sup> there must have been a change of policy in the wake of an aggressive maritime strategy that Byzantium began to wage against Arab expansion in the High Middle Ages. Within the context of Ibn Khaldun's work, it is most probable that the Arabs not only fortified Mdina and Rabat (in Gozo), but also one of the harbour entrances which they could use as a port.

### Conclusion

Khalaf's life story shows the dynamism of an Arab Empire that valued its human resources not on the basis of birth or colour of the skin but on the intelligence and allegiance that an individual could offer to these new rulers who had settled in hostile territory. These rulers needed the support of the endogenous population who mostly consisted of Christian subjects, many of whom were dark or black skinned. Becoming a Muslim was seen, therefore, as a guarantee of loyalty towards these new masters. A former black slave, of Christian origins, had, under the Aghlabids, the opportunity to move up the social ladder provided he gave his unconditional support to his master. Khalaf had served six different emirs, from Ziyadat Allâh to Abû al Gharâniq. During his career, Khalaf succeeded in climbing the social ladder and, through his unwavering support to his master, together with his new religion, earned himself the title of Muslim martyr, having met his end fighting for the conquest of the Christian island of Malta.

In itself, such a religious glorification of Khalaf's life indicates that this General made use of the Islamic concept of Holy War or *jihad*<sup>41</sup> to better achieve his aim. A recent book by Jonathan Phillips has shown that Islam possessed the concept of holy war from the inception of this new creed, while Christianity only invented its own version in the late eleventh century with the First Crusade.<sup>42</sup> This concept gave Muslims, in particular their rulers, an unprecedented moral force to go to war for the glory of their religion. Khalaf understood well this new aspect of warfare and made use of it in his campaign against Malta. On their part, his followers paid back their master's faith by acclaiming him a Muslim 'saint' and demanded, as Al-Athir words clearly show, a religious revenge.

40 J. M. Brincat, *Malta-1054, Al Himyari's Account*, Said International, Malta 1991, 2.

41 Mahfoudh. 124.

42 Phillips, *passim*.

Reading the eventual fate of a small island within the maritime context of the time, one has to query how successful were the Arabs in controlling the island of Malta. Had the final siege in 870 actually managed to subjugate Malta to their full control? Here there are two conflicting versions. On one hand, there is the story of Al-Athir who speaks about an attempt by the Byzantines to re-conquer the Island and then there are the references that marble from Malta was transported to Sousse and the fact that Malta was abandoned for a number of decades. This last reference indicates that the Arabs must have had some difficulties in controlling such a small rock in the middle of the Mediterranean. Thus, one is tempted to think that, after the final conquest in 870, the Arabs decided to stay on and, after destroying Byzantine and Christian relics, proceeded to fortify the Island. This enabled them to resist any attempt by the Byzantines to take it back. However, after the city of Syracuse fell to Arab rule, the need to keep Malta as a launching pad from where to increase military attacks against Syracuse diminished to the extent that, at this point, the decision was taken to abandon the Island to its fate.

If a place is left uninhabited, it only takes about 30 years to revert to a wilderness similar to the one discussed and described by Al-Himyari. If one considers the geopolitical structure of the Aghlabid Emirate, one finds that a number of viziers were appointed to help the Emir in the administration of his realm. Each vizier was responsible for a province. It is not known whether Malta constituted an independent province or was part of a larger district. The fact that it was left to go its own way may indicate that it failed to be considered a province on its own and was probably part of a bigger district with its fulcrum in Tunisia.

Fathi's work seems to hold the key to this riddle. Most probably, the most ferocious aggression against Malta began when Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm bin Ahmad, better known as Ibrahim II, became the Emir of Ifriqiyya. His was the longest reign of all the Aghlabid rulers, running from 875 to 902. It was during his reign that the most ferocious persecutions of Christian communities were committed. In 878, Abū 'Īsā b, Muhammad bin Qurhub headed the Aghlabid army in its final victory over Syracuse. The city succumbed after a long siege.<sup>43</sup> The rule of Ibrahim II was very disturbing where religious tolerance was concerned. During the campaign of Italy, around 902, Sa'dūn al-Ġalawī was sent by Ibrāhīm II to attack the fort of Aci. The fort was razed to the ground despite the fact that inhabitants accepted to pay the *ġizya*,<sup>44</sup> a tax normally associated with the acclaimed status of *dhimmi*. During the same Italian campaign, Abū Haġar bin Ibrāhīm Bin Ahmad was sent by Ibrahim II to the fort of Rametta which was dismantled after the inhabitants failed to pay the *ġizya*.<sup>45</sup> Ibrahim's successor continued with the same policy. Ziy

---

43 Fathi 2, 165.

44 Fathi 2, 169.

45 Fathi 2, 170.

ādat Allāh III, the last Aghlabid ruler, appointed Hārūn bin al-Tobni to head an army of 12,000 soldiers in a punitive expedition against the fortress of Dar Malul which was destroyed and all its inhabitants killed.<sup>46</sup>

Above all, the Aghlabids had every interest to wipe out the strategic importance that the island of Malta held for the Byzantine rulers by rendering it into a worthless fighting platform. Indeed, the loss of the important Byzantine city of Syracuse helped the Aghlabids to achieve this aim even more. The Christian Byzantine power could not make any effective use of the barren and derelict Maltese islands, not even temporarily, for their raids on the Tunisian coast. It must not be forgotten that, despite the conquest of Sicily, the Arabs still remained weak at sea. Seaborne power remained in the hands of the Byzantines.

One historical fact is clear. The Aghlabid takeover of, and eventual settlement in, Malta occurred during a very turbulent period. Within such a background, claims made in the past that the new Arab masters treated their conquered subjects well, respected their religion and gave them the status of *Dhimmi*, a status that was normally given to Christian subjects under Muslim rule, does not tally with the historical facts of the period. What these historians did not realize is the fact that, as has been explained above, the Aghlabids were not much inclined to offer a subjugated population special treatment. The islanders, who did not have the chance to escape, had to face either conversion or total oblivion. It seems that many chose the second option, thus becoming martyrs of the Christian faith.

## Appendix 1

### Translation of Ibn Khaldun Passage about the Conquest of Malta by F X. Cassar.

### عبد الرحمن بن خلدون

808 - 732 هجري الموافق 1332 - 1406 ميلادي  
كتاب العبر والديوان والمبتدأ والخبر في أيام العرب والعجم والبربر  
المجلد الرابع صفحة 201

<sup>46</sup> Fathi 2, 174.

« أخوه أبو الغرائيق بن أبي إبراهيم بن أحمد )»

ولما توفي زيادة الله كما قدمناه ولى مكانه أخوه محمد ويلقب بابي الغرائيق فغلب عليه  
الله والشراب وكانت في أيامه حروب وقتن وفتح جزيرة مالطة سنة خمس وخمسين  
وتغلب الروم على مواضع من جزيرة صقلية وبنى محمد حصونا ومحارس على ساحل البحر  
بالمغرب على مسيرة خمسة عشر يوماً من برقة إلى جهة المغرب وهي الآن معروفة ثم توفي  
أبو الغرائيق منتصفاً إحدى وستين لإحدى عشرة سنة من ولايته

( أخوه أبو الغرائيق بن أبي إبراهيم بن أحمد )

ولما توفي زيادة الله كما قدمناه ولى مكانه أخوه محمد ويلقب بابي  
الغرائيق فغلب عليه الله والشراب وكانت في أيامه حروب وقتن وفتح  
جزيرة مالطة سنة خمس وخمسين (ومتنين) وتغلب الروم على مواضع  
من جزيرة صقلية وبنى محمد حصونا ومحارس على ساحل البحر  
بالمغرب على مسيرة خمسة عشر يوماً من برقة إلى جهة المغرب وهي  
الآن معروفة ثم توفي أبو الغرائيق منتصفاً إحدى وستين لإحدى عشرة  
سنة من ولايته.

ADD AL KAHMAN BEN KHAIDUN

AH (732 - 808) corresponding to AD (1332 - 1406)

'The Book of Instructive Examples and Register of Subject and  
Predicate dealing with the History of Arabs, Persians and Berbers'



### Volume Four page 201<sup>47</sup>

His brother Abu Al Gharaniq Ben Abi Ibrahim Ben Ahmed

When Ziad Allah died as we mentioned earlier his brother Muhammad known as Abu Al Gharaniq took his place. He took to pleasure and drink. During his days there were wars and turmoil. He conquered the island of Malta in the year fifty five.<sup>48</sup> The Byzantines regained areas of the island of Sicily and Muhammad built forts and watchtowers along the sea shore of Al Maghreb for a distance of fifteen days walk from Berqa in the direction of Al Maghreb still known now. Then Abu Al Gharaniq died in the middle of sixty one eleven years since he came to power.

### Appendix 2

#### Translation of Ibn Al-Athir's Passage about the Conquest of Malta by F X. Cassar.

ابن الأثير مجلد رقم 5 صفحة 307

(نكر ولاية ابنه محمد)

لما قتل خفاجة استعمل الناس ابنه وأقره محمد بن أحمد بن الأغلب صاحب القيروان على ولايته , فسير جيشا في سنة ست وخمسين ومائتين إلى مالطا وكان الروم يحاصرونها فلما سمع الروم بمسيرهم رحلوا عنها , وفي سنة سبع وخمسين ومائتين في رجب قتل الأمير محمد قتله خدمه الخصيان وهربوا فطلبهم الناس فادركوهم فقتلهم ..

*Translation of the above*

Al-Kamil fi Al-Tarikh of Ibn Al-Athir

Volume number 5, page 307

(Mention of the principdom of his son Muhammad)

When Khafaja was killed the people made use of his son and designated Muhammad bin Ahmed bin Al Aghlab as the Sovereign of Qairawan over his principdom. Thus he sent an army in the year sixty six and fifty and two hundred to Malta. The Byzantines were besieging it. When the Byzantines heard of their coming they left from it and in the year seven and fifty and two hundred in (the month of) Rajab the prince Muhammad was killed. He was killed by his castrated servants and fled. The people demanded them and they caught them and killed them.

47 The work consists of four volumes with the first, 'Al Muqaddamah' (prolegomena) which introduces the whole work.

48 The years correspond thus: AH 255 to AD 868 & AH 261 to AD 867. The year 61 corresponds to AD 874.