

THOMAS FRELLER

***St Paul's Grotto and its Visitors
Pilgrims, Knights, Scholars, and Sceptics***

From the Middle Ages to the 19th century

*Dedicated to Canon John Azzopardi
without whose encouragement and advice
this study would never have been written*



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PRESENTATION

The promise implicit in a name such as that given to this book would have been fulfilled by a mere collection of anecdotes somehow connected with the rather off-beat locality which is its focus. It would have regaled readers in search of human eccentricity or armchair adventure with their preferred form of entertainment.

The present book, however, provides much more than that. It contains a great deal of freshly unearthed matter for grave or amused reflection on some of the oddest puzzles of human existence in general and of Maltese history in particular.

It relates, in the first instance, to a Biblical text of key importance: the account of St. Paul's shipwreck which concludes the Acts of the Apostles. The episode is of greater significance in the total context of Scriptural revelation than is generally realized, even in Malta itself.

The indications of multiple meaning are several. First, there is the length (two chapters) and the technical detail of the narrative; secondly, its position (rounding up, in a sort of emblematic farewell shot, the account of Paul's role in the establishment of the Church); above all, there is its symbolic texture: Luke "blends Old Testament tradition - above all the Testament of Naphtali (cfr. Ps.107:23 ff) - an already existing narrative of the voyage, and some additions (such as the viper episode) that glorify Paul, and makes a unity of these elements", according to H.U. von Bathzan.

Quite clearly, Luke provides a Christianized version of the basic image of human existence first presented in the Homeric prototype of world literature: the picture of life as a journey back home and of death as the shipwreck of the deepest human aspirations.

The original Odyssey itself most probably arose out of a collectively felt need for a more hopeful image of human existence than the Life-as-Siege image of the Iliad, where the only way out of stalemate (of life lived as a mere interim between birth and death) was general disaster. At any rate, there is a far more optimistic twist and turn given to the journey-shipwreck myth in Luke's very factual sounding version of the initial Pauline impact on Maltese history. The shipwreck in Acts is not the end of the journey but, like the crucifixion of Jesus, the means of a critical reversal. The material structure, the outer form, the wooden body of the ship bursts open and breaks into pieces, but just that collapse of an unreliable earthly vehicle allows those who place their trust elsewhere, in the salvific Word of God, to get to shore on the debris: a splintered

plank or the back of someone who can swim. This paradigmatic Biblical story, located in Malta by the Evangelist Luke, supplies indeed a Christian foundation for the general ritual of pilgrimage. It may indeed appear strange that, given this strong conceptual link, St. Paul's Grotto in Malta did not in fact achieve an even greater attractiveness for pilgrims in medieval times than it actually did. It does not seem that this relative unpopularity in comparison with such shrines as Compostella or Canterbury (despite the additional information about hitherto unknown visitors very usefully documented by Freller in this book) could be attributed to the doubts expressed at various times as to whether Malta was really or not the site of Paul's shipwreck as recounted in Acts.

Freller provides a well-balanced synopsis of this not always scholarly controversy. None of the participants, for instance, ever seem to consider which island fits best into the symbolic network of Acts. Yet surely, in terms of the eschatological-ecclesial symbolic scheme recapitulated above, consideration of such elements as the paradoxical combination of centrality (in terms of the ancient world picture) and off-track location (in terms of the Orient-Rome route) of Malta and rival claimants is relevant. It would be quite out of place to elaborate on this point here, but I thought it was worth alluding to, since it is symbolic values that seem to be the most operative factors in the domain charted in this book.

Thus, the main attraction of the Grotto (supposedly Paul's home during his Maltese sojourn) was that its earth was claimed to be an antidote to viper-bites (with obvious reference to the Acts story). There can hardly be any doubt that, apart from any historical connection with Paul, the Grotto as such profited from its being a hollow within Mother Earth and from quasi-universal ancestral memories of Neolithic age cults. Likewise, the viper harks back not merely to the Pauline episode in Acts, but to the book of Genesis and the immensely complex symbolism of the serpentine family of creatures.

Emphasis on these extremely powerful symbolic dimensions of the Rabat site as a focus for pilgrims increases the pertinence of the question: why did the cult which flourished in the period of the Knights after the Siege not do so before? Freller is a historian who is not at all prone to speculate without a basis of fact and document. But he stimulates the mind and imagination of the reader to explore such questions. The cult of the anti-viperine earth of St. Paul appears to culminate as a sort of backlash to the dominant tendencies of the post-Siege period.

It is as if the increasing magnetism of the transatlantic world provoked an imaginative recoil towards the timeless, biblical-classical heritage of the now marginalised old Mediterranean. It is as if the advances of the scientific

revolution provoked by way of reaction a renaissance of belief in symbolic efficacy. Perhaps the coincidence in time between the apogee of the Rabat site's international fame and that of the Baroque spirit is not fortuitous or totally incomprehensible.

However, it is certainly not necessary to make of Freller's multidimensional research work a launching pad either for speculation on the metaphysics of history or even on the dialectic between the Word of God and the scientific superstitious crosstexture of 17th-18th century sign-systems in order to enjoy a book that has in it many of the most appetizing ingredients of quite a variety of literary genres. In our age marked by a tourist explosion, among other peculiar phenomena, the reader is afforded the choice of deriving from it, at his own will or whim, either superficial or deep pleasure.

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