The apocryphal Maltese traditions related to Paul and Publius collected by a local Jesuit. Hieronymus Manduca's manuscript "De S. Publio Principe Melitensi"

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Introduction

If any Maltese with a general idea of Christianity were asked «Who is St Publius?» they would promptly reply that he was the one who hosted St Paul after his shipwreck in Malta, that he became the first bishop of Malta, and that he was martyred by being fed to lions. Anyone with a little more knowledge might say that he was martyred in Athens at the beginning of the 2nd century. For the majority of the Maltese, therefore, this is history with a capital H, a testimony of Malta's allegiance to Christianity from apostolic times.

If, however, we keep to the earliest Christian text that mentions Publius, which is the *Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 28, verses 7–9[1], the scant information we get is that Publius was the πρῶτος of the island, that he hosted the shipwrecked for three days in his estate, and that Paul healed his father. This detail implies that Publius was a man of faith, because in Mt 13:58 faith is presented as an essential prerequisite for miracles to take place. The final verse of this passage states that, following the miraculous healing of Publius' father, the rest of the sick among the people on the island went to Paul and they also received healing. This suggests that the people followed the example of their πρῶτος and likewise accepted faith in the God proclaimed by Paul.

Maltese folklore has it, however, that before leaving the island Paul consecrated Publius as the first bishop of Malta and that eventually he was transferred to Athens, where he faced martyrdom around AD 125. An analysis of ancient sources, however, shows that there is no foundation for this claim.

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[1] «There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured».

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Publius in Early Texts and Medieval Art

After the Holy Scriptures come the Fathers, among whom only a few make reference to a Publius, and it is not always altogether clear whether they are referring to the Publius mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles* or another one. Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, cited by Eusebius of Caesarea[2], speaks of his predecessor named Publius who suffered martyrdom, but there is no clear link to the Publius who hosted Paul. Jerome, speaking about Paulina and Pammachius in his letter to Oceanus, states: «*Quod Publius semel fecit in insula Melita erga unum apostolum et – ne contradictioni locum tribuam – in una nave, hoc isti et frequenter faciunt et in plures*»[3]. Here again, while the reference to the Maltese Publius is clear, no mention whatsoever is made of the local claim that he was the island's first bishop, or even that he late became bishop of Athens.

Moving on to the martyrologies, starting from the 8th century, it is here that some faint references to the Maltese Publius being a bishop of Athens start coming to light. Bede puts the memorial of Publius on 18 January, stating: «*Natale S. Publii Athenarum episcopi, qui princeps insule Mileti, cum navigantem b. Paulum Romam sub custodia detentum per triduum hospitio receptum humane tractasset, patrem ipsius Publii contigit febribus et dysenteria vexatum jacere. Ad quem cum intrasset b. Paulus et imposuisset manus et orasset, sanavit eum. Quem Publium adhaerentem sibi beatus apostolus postea ordinatum episcopum ad prædicandum direxit et præclarus virtutibus et doctrina præfulgens ob Christum martyrio gloriose coronatur. Nam prius Dionysius, inde Publius Athenis præfuit*»[4]. Ado, a century later, practically repeats Bede word for word, while Notker the Stammerer, in his martyrology composed in the late 9th or early 10th century, states: «*Athenis, Publii episcopi, qui cum Paulo Apostolo in insulam naufrago ejecto, post patris curationem non modicam humanitatem præstitisset, per ejus prædicationem ad Christum conversus in tantum gratiæ Dei profecit, ut ab ipso Apostolo Atheniensibus ordinatus episcopus martyrio sit coronatus*»[5]. From these texts, of which Bede's martyrology is the earliest and clearly the inspiration for the others, it transpires that the man whose father was healed by Paul on Malta later became the bishop of Athens; no mention, direct or indirect, is, however,

[2] Eusebius, *History of the Church*, IV,23.

[3] «What Publius did once in the island of Malta for a single apostle and – not to leave room for contradiction – for a single ship, they did many times for many men». Jerome, *Letter 77*, in *Select Letters*, translated by F.A. Wright, London 1933, pp. 334-335.

[4] «Feast-day of St Publius, bishop of Athens, who was the ruler of the island of Miletus (Malta?), when he had treated the blessed Paul for three days, who was being held in custody on his way to Rome, and had received him into his home with humane hospitality; it happened that his father was lying afflicted with fever and dysentery. When the blessed Paul entered the room and laid his hands on him and prayed, he healed him. Hence Publius, who adhered to him, the blessed apostle afterwards ordained as a bishop, directed him to preach, and being very illustrious in virtue and doctrine, he was gloriously crowned with martyrdom for the sake of Christ. Dionysius was the first bishop of Athens, then Publius».

[5] «In Athens, the bishop Publius, who had shown no small kindness with the Apostle Paul after the latter was cast ashore on an island, after his father's healing, was converted to Christ through his preaching and prospered so much by the grace of God that he was ordained bishop of the Athenians by the Apostle himself and crowned with martyrdom».

made of his role as bishop of Malta. One must underline that Bede might have mixed up two different men who had the same name, because he speaks of Publius of Miletus but then repeats what is found in Acts 28. If this is the case, the bishop of Athens who was martyred would in fact have been Publius of Miletus, not Publius of Malta.

Depictions of Publius until the early modern era represent him as a Roman aristocrat present on the shores of Malta while St Paul is brushing off the viper into the fire, or else at his home witnessing the healing of his father. An early example of these is a 5th-century ivory diptych found at the Museo Nazionale di Firenze, wherein Publius is present in the scene of the viper and possibly in another scene listening to St Paul preaching[6]. The earliest known image of Publius in Malta is probably found in the late 14th or early 15th-century polyptych of St Paul that used to be the titular painting of the medieval cathedral of Mdina[7], where the πρῶτος is depicted clothed as a citizen of high standing. None of the panels represents his consecration by Paul.

The earliest known Maltese text that mentions Publius is a poem by Gregorio Xerri, composed sometime after the siege of 1565 and discovered some years ago by Giovanni Bonello[8]. In it the author states that the great victory over the Ottomans was brought about by the Maltese (not the Knights) through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and St Publius. Nowhere does Xerri suggest that Publius was a bishop or that he was martyred; he simply calls him "*nostro Publio*," underlining the fact that he was Maltese. This poem, however, is proof that when the poem was composed – which must have been before 1625, the year of Xerri's demise – Publius enjoyed a status of sorts, being considered as an intercessor for the Maltese.

More telling is the fact that, according to the 1575 apostolic visitation by Mgr Pietro Dusina, there were no churches or altars dedicated to St Publius in Malta until that year[9]; Publius is in fact not mentioned at all in the notes of that visitation.

Around 1607 the first known church dedicated to St Publius was built in Rabat, above St Paul's Grotto, by Juan de Venegas, who by 1615 had placed a wooden statue of St Publius in the grotto[10]. In 1610 bishop Tommaso Gargallo appointed St Publius as one of the patron saints of Malta and made specific reference to him being a bishop[11]. Following this, the first painting of St Publius depicted as a bishop comes from

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6 This was studied by Salvatore Grech, who insists that in the scene in question the person listening to Paul is Publius and that this is the moment of his consecration, but without any concrete basis for this claim. See S. Grech, *San Publio in un antico dittico del Museo Nazionale di Firenze*, Malta 1910, pp. 9-11.

7 C. Vella, *The Mediterranean artistic context of Late Medieval Malta 1091-1530*, Malta 2013, p. 136.

8 G. Bonello, *Gregorio Xerri's poem for the Great Siege of 1565*, in "The Sunday Times", 23 and 30 March 2014.

9 Special thanks to Dr Alexander Vella Gregory for this detail.

10 T. Freller, *St Paul's Grotto, Malta, and its Antidotic earth in the awareness of early Modern Europe*, in *The Cult of St Paul in the Christian Churches and in the Maltese Tradition*, ed. J. Azzopardi, Malta 2006, p. 206.

11 The decree states «*Docent actus Apostolorum populum Melitensem ad Christianam fidem gloriosi Apostoli Pauli prædicatione conversum, Publio huius Insulae Principe, […], sed ab eodem Christianam fidem edoctus, baptizatus est, et Episcopus ordinatus […] Decet itaque ut quemadmodum sub gloriosi Apostoli tutela semper extitit, in futurum etiam Publii Martyris patrocinium sentiat ut Quem huius Insulae Principem habuit in terris, Patronum habere mereatu in coelis*» quoted in V. Caruana dei Conti Gatto, *San Publio Vescovo e Martire nella Tradizione dei Popoli*, Malta 1909, p. 33.

the early 1680s[12]; it is a masterpiece by Mattia Preti and is found in this church. In the same period, another painting of Publius in episcopal robes was commissioned for the Collegium Melitense[13]. Hence the popular and ecclesial formal acceptance of Publius as the first bishop of Malta must have taken place at some point between the Great Siege and 1610, and it is at this point that the writings of Girolamo Manduca, the first known Maltese Jesuit, enter into the picture.

Girolamo Manduca: Restless Jesuit and Early Chronicler of Maltese Lore[14]

Girolamo Manduca occupies a noteworthy place in the early history of the Jesuits in Malta as one of the first Maltese to enter the Society of Jesus and to participate in its mission of education and pastoral care. Born in Mdina on 19 November 1573, he was the eldest son of Dottor Gio. Paolo Manduca and Catherina Xerri, who was Gregorio Xerri's sister[15]. His father, a respected jurist, left provisions in his testament for his children's intellectual formation and revealed sympathy for the Jesuit cause. His mother, however, proved the more enduring figure in Girolamo's life. Her generosity, interventions in times of crisis, and frequent calls for his assistance placed her at the centre of his story, making her influence almost inseparable from his destiny.

The family's reputation was not without blemish. Several maternal relatives were accused of Lutheran sympathies, and one was condemned outright as a heretic. These stains on family honour must have weighed heavily on Girolamo's parents, particularly his mother, who had to steer her household through troubled waters. Yet Catherina Xerri ensured her children received a solid formation, and her later donations to the Jesuits reveal her lasting loyalty to the Congregation to which her son belonged.

Girolamo entered the Society of Jesus in June 1590, before turning seventeen. He seems to have carried out his novitiate and initial studies in Sicily, since Malta then formed part of the Sicilian Province. By 1597, still in his early twenties, he was back in Malta, entrusted with teaching Humanities in Valletta. Shortly afterwards his father died, leaving Catherina a widow with considerable responsibilities. In 1600 she donated land to the Collegium Melitense, underscoring both her devotion and her role as a key benefactor of the Jesuits.

In 1601 Girolamo was sent to Rome to study theology at the Collegium Romanum, almost certainly the first Maltese Jesuit admitted there. His ordination was followed by a return to Malta around 1606. But his fragile health – especially a chronic tendency to vomit blood – persuaded his superiors that missionary work in distant lands was beyond his strength. His request to be sent eastward was politely refused.

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[12] K. Sciberras, *Mattia Preti. Life and Works*, Malta 2020, p. 206.

[13] Special thanks to Prof. Keith Sciberras for pointing this out.

[14] The source for this section on Manduca's life is: V. Borg, *Girolamo Manduca. His Life and Works*, in "Melita Historica", 7 no. 3, 1978, pp. 237-257.

[15] M. Borg Olivier, *A Maltese Legal Library in the XVIth century*, in "Melita Historica", 5 no. 4, 1971, p. 282. Special thanks to Prof. Petra Caruana Dingli.

The following decade saw him move between Malta, Sicily, and southern Italy. He was posted to Messina in 1610 and then to Reggio Calabria, taking on administrative and pastoral duties. But family matters repeatedly called him home. His widowed mother's difficulties drew the attention even of the Father General, who personally intervened on her behalf. Girolamo's strong bond with his mother often dictated his movements.

In 1618 he was made Vice-Rector of the Jesuit College at Mineo, but a quarrel with another Jesuit caused a scandal that ended in disciplinary measures. From then on, Manduca was no longer entrusted with leadership roles; his superiors deemed him better suited to pastoral duties and intellectual pursuits.

He resided in Noto, cultivating literary and scientific interests and informing his superiors of plans to write a book. His desire to transfer to Rome persisted, and in the mid-1620s he was at last permitted to go. In Rome he taught at the Maronite College, working with Eastern Christians, hearing confessions, and teaching Arabic. This revealed both his linguistic gifts and the potential of Maltese Jesuits to engage with Arabic-speaking communities. Indeed, his service prompted the Jesuit General to encourage recruitment of Maltese Jesuits on condition they learn Arabic before admission.

Rome also allowed him to interact with Jesuits engaged in scientific and literary projects. Evidence is scarce, but it is likely he contributed to such intellectual enterprises. In 1625 he was recalled to Sicily, returning to Messina to lecture in theology and scripture while exercising a confessional ministry. There he received news of his mother's death in 1628, a heavy blow that coincided with inheritance disputes involving his brother Angelo. Girolamo returned to Malta in 1629 to support his brother's legal claims, but the outcome was largely fruitless.

From the 1630s onward, his life followed a more settled but troubled course. He lived for years in Syracuse, dedicated to pastoral activity and writing. Yet lawsuits involving his family and the Collegium Melitense dragged on, pulling him once again to Malta in 1635. This last visit proved unhappy. His interventions in Jesuit community affairs, especially regarding building works, created tension and resentment. The Father General swiftly ordered his removal, and by May 1636 he was back in Syracuse, never to return to Malta.

His last years were marked by frailty, legal disputes, and longing for Rome. His brother Angelo's troubles worsened, culminating in imprisonment, while Girolamo himself battled illness and the weight of age. He repeatedly petitioned to return to Rome, but his superiors rebuked him, reminding him to accept his advancing years with humility. After a period at Noto, he returned to Syracuse, where he suffered apoplectic attacks and died at the Jesuit college there on 28 July 1643, aged seventy.

Two principal accounts of his life circulated after his death. The official necrology, sent to Rome, praised his piety, obedience, poverty, and devotion to the Virgin Mary and to St Ignatius. Another, by Fr Giacomo Riela of Trapani, emphasised his intellectual qualities, memory, and literary achievements. Both accounts highlight a man who, though marked by fragility and occasional missteps, remained devoted to his vocation.

Girolamo Manduca's life does not fit the mould of heroic missionary or eminent administrator. His story is one of fidelity, learning, and perseverance amid frailty and family burdens. Above all, the influence of his mother – whose generosity and trials

shaped much of his career – remains a constant thread. His contributions, though quieter than those of some contemporaries, illuminate the early history of the Jesuits in Malta and Sicily, where personal struggles and intellectual pursuits intertwined in the service of faith.

He is known to have left two texts that mention St Publius, neither of which has been published: the first is a *Relazione o sian Tradizioni avute e trasmesse dalli Antichi circa le cose dell'Isola di Malta e di quanto s'e potuto cavare da scritture antiche degne di Fede* and the other is *De Sancto Publio Martyre Melitae Principe, et Athenarum Episcopo Divi Pauli Apostoli Hospite et Sectatore Commentarium in Elogium Venerabilis Bedae*. The first text is important inasmuch as the author reveals that on things related to Malta his sources were oral traditions passed on by the "Ancients" and by other ancient writings worthy of belief, but which are not specified. The second text, which amplifies some parts of the first text, presumably has therefore, the same sources. The title of the second text states that it is a commentary on the eulogy in honour of Publius by Bede; Manduca, in fact, like Bede, makes no distinction between Melita and Miletus, more often than not considering events from St Paul's life that took place in the latter as taking place in the former.

The manuscript

There are a number of copies of the manuscript that offers the story of St Publius still extant in Malta. One is found at the Archives of the University Library[16], others are found at the National Library[17], one at the Cathedral Archives[18], and another one – the one which I analysed – at the Theology Library[19] housed at the diocesan seminary. None of these are the original written by Manduca. The one housed at the Theology Library is a copy made in 1681 by a Jesuit student[20] who lived in the Jesuit community in Palermo.

This manuscript's contents can be divided into five sections: a letter explaining how the manuscript was presumed lost and then was found by the student who copied it; a copy of the text on Publius from Bede's Martyrology; a copy of a note by the secretary of Cardinal Brancatius containing the note on Publius from the Roman Martyrology of 1613; the story of Publius according to Manduca starting with a *Proemium* and followed by twenty-one chapters; and a list of 50 points summarizing the history of Publius and his connection to Malta.

16 University of Malta Library, Archives and rare books, *Ms. 343*.

17 National Library Malta (NLM), *Ms. 25*, pp. 4-157; *Ms. 165*, pp. 1-90; *Ms. 644*, pp. 3-190; *Ms. 1244*, 6r-67v and *Ms. 1415*, pp. 9-215.

18 Cathedral Archives, *Misc. 265*.

19 Theology Library (TL), MZU,O.

20 This is evident because in the preface he explains that he found the manuscript, presumed lost, in 1678, but could not copy it because he had philosophy exams coming up, and that he finally managed to copy it three years later when he had completed his studies in theology.

This history was composed by Manduca sometime during the first three decades of the 17th century[21], while he was living in Italy. In 1635 he sent a copy to his superiors in Rome in order to get permission to have the manuscript published. The verdict was that the book contained nothing wrong that would get it censured, but that, at the same time, it would bring no honour to its author or to the Society of Jesus[22]. As the report of the reviewers said, the book was very wordy when it speaks of St Paul's voyages (historical and presumed), but very scarce when dealing with Publius who, according to the title, should have been the main character. In truth, out of the twenty-one chapters of the book, only seven deal with Publius' life. These are chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 20, and 21; chapter 4 deals with the supposed uninterrupted succession of bishops from Publius until the 17th century. The other chapters deal with Paul's voyages around the Mediterranean and his monuments (namely wells and springs that remove venom from snakes or heal people from snake bites) in Sicily and Italy.

Each chapter starts with a list of the most important events discussed therein. Many times, the text is extremely prolix, giving whole paragraphs of names of authors who allegedly refer to St Publius in their works, taking it for granted that they are always referring to the Publius of Malta who eventually became bishop of Athens. Several times the same events are repeated over and over again, making it even more difficult to follow Manduca's chronology. There are a number of references to specific sites linked to the cult of St Paul in Malta, some of which are linked also to the figure of Publius.

Particularly worthy of mention are: a shrine built on St Paul's grotto, allegedly by St Publius; the church of San Ġwann tal-Ħereb allegedly built on the site of Publius' family villa in Wardija[23]; the spring of Għajn Rażul in Xemxija Bay, which was created through a miracle when St Paul hit the stone with his stick to provide water for the shipwrecked while they were walking to Publius' estates; the sanctuary of the Virgin Mary in Melliegħa (*ad Salinas*), which was consecrated by St Paul in the presence of St Publius; the icons of the Virgin painted by St Luke to replace the cults of Juno and possibly Calypso with that of another divine female figure; and the cross outside the walls of Mdina reportedly constructed there to mark the spot where St Paul preached to the Maltese and was heard even from Gozo[24]. Manduca also speaks of the lasting miracle St Paul made in Malta, wherein he removed the venom from snakes and vipers.

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[21] V. Borg, *Girolamo Manduca*…, 1978, p. 245 states it was completed by 1635; A. Luttrell, *Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: Tradition and Invention in Maltese Historiography*, in "Melita Historica", 7, no. 2, 1977, p. 131) is of the opinion that it was ready by 1626.

[22] V. Borg, *Girolamo Manduca*…, 1978, p. 245.

[23] The church was dedicated to John the Baptist because according to Manduca this was the place where Publius and his family received their baptism.

[24] In actual fact it seems that this cross was erected to mark the place where the original Augustinian Friary was constructed, but which had to be torn down due to its dangerous proximity to the city's bastions in case of an pirate incursion.

Paul's other trips to Malta

The *Acts of the Apostles* speak of Paul's visit to Malta only once, as a result of the shipwreck. No other known apocryphal acts of Paul, or early hagiographical accounts, imply that Paul ever returned to Malta. According to Manduca, however, Paul visited the island four times in total.

Tradition has it that Paul was shipwrecked in Malta in the year 60, but according to Manduca, the first arrival of Paul in Malta falls in the year 59. Among those hosted with Paul by Publius were Saints Luke, Aristarchus, Epaphroditus, and Trophimus. Trophimus is mentioned in the *2nd letter to Timothy*, wherein Paul says that he was left behind at Miletus due to illness; keeping to the mistake made by Bede, Manduca claims that Trophimus remained ill in Melita, not Miletus. Publius was consecrated bishop of Malta before Paul left.

The second arrival of the Apostle in Malta falls in the year 64, as Paul was going to Spain. With him were Dionysius and Hierotheus the Areopagites, Sergius Paulus (a Cypriot), and Rufus, the son of Simon of Cyrene who helped Christ carry the cross (Mk 15:21). Publius and Trophimus accompanied Paul to Spain; Trophimus, according to Manduca, stopped at Arles and became bishop there – here he is confusing the biblical Trophimus with the 3rd-century bishop of the city.

Paul stayed in Spain for three years and returned to Malta for the third time in the year 67. It seems that during that trip it was agreed that Publius would succeed Dionysius as bishop of Athens, so they returned to Malta in order to consecrate a man to succeed Publius as bishop of Malta.

Finally, Paul came to Malta for the fourth time in the year 68 when travelling from the East on his way to Rome; this was to be his last visit, because soon after reaching Rome he was martyred.

Manduca's manuscript seems to be the only source of these voyages. Whereas some details were accepted by local traditions and beliefs – namely that Trophimus and Aristarchus were with him in his first visit, that Trophimus spent some time in Malta after Paul left, and that Publius was consecrated bishop of the island's new Christian community – others were rejected, as no reference has been made to the other three journeys in texts following Manduca.

Publius's final years

The author is surprisingly scant in his details about Publius' mission as bishop of Malta between the years 59 and 64, apart from stating that he built a number of shrines. Two of these would be the old church presumably built on St Paul's grotto and the church of San Ġwann tal-Ħereb built on his estates. Nothing is said about his work with Paul in Spain, nor about his work in Athens after succeeding Dionysius. He states that while working in Athens he personally met St John the Evangelist, St Clement of Rome, St Ignatius of Antioch, and St Polycarp of Smyrna. It is interesting that these

names refer to four early 2nd-century Church leaders and martyrs whose texts have been preserved. Manduca mentions two Athenian popes, Hyginus (138–140) and Sixtus II (257–258), who were allegedly converted to Christianity by Publius.

Some details of his demise are given in the final chapter of the book. In the year 125, when Publius was a hundred years old, Emperor Hadrian is said to have visited Athens to be initiated into the mysteries of Eleusis, and the pagan priests took this as an opportunity to organize a persecution against Christians. Publius was the first they seized. No details are given about his method of martyrdom; the only information Manduca provides is that after the persecution, St Quadratus, a disciple of the apostles, gathered the scattered remains of the faithful and succeeded Publius as the third bishop of Athens. The idea of "scattered remains" implies that Publius was mauled by beasts. In the 1681 version kept at the Theology Library, there is a note at the very end, after the *Finis*, stating «*occultum iacuit Publii sine nomine fatum. Nil mirum, tumulum ventre leonis habet*»[25], which is a clear indication of the manner of his death; this note, however, is not present in all versions.

Publius' arrest and martyrdom follow the accounts of two of the bishops Manduca claims he met in Athens: St Polycarp, who was martyred around 155 after being the first to be hunted due to his reputation as a staunch Christian,[26] and St Ignatius of Antioch, who was fed to lions and who speaks very clearly in his *Letter to the Romans* about his body being crushed by the teeth of wild beasts[27].

Conclusions

Manduca seems to have been aware that most of what he was narrating was a novelty in more ways than one, and he concludes his text stating: «*Unde mirandum sit Apostolicas tot annorum peregrinationes, Publii miracula et doctrine monimenta periise, vel tacuisse Athenienses, quamdiu autem celebrantes latentium meritorum erga cultores S. Publii proventus erit uberior?*»[28].

In other words, he is all but admitting that no one knew what he was writing about, probably because no real ancient tradition existed, especially regarding the three other visits of Paul to Malta and Publius' journeys. In this light, the final sentence can be regarded as an exhortation to the Maltese of the early 17th century, and those who would follow, to increase their devotion to this fellow Maltese saint so that they might share in the rewards that he bestows.

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25 TL, MZU, O, *Manduca*, De S. Publio, f. 114r.

26 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3,2.

27 Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 4,1-2.

28 «Hence it is to be wondered at that the apostolic wanderings of so many years, the miracles of Publius and the monuments of his teaching have perished, or that the Athenians kept silent about them. Yet how much richer will be the harvest for the devotees of St Publius, as long as they celebrate the hidden merits?». TL, MZU,O, *Manduca*…, f. 114r.

This story was composed during a time when the Knights of St John were working hard to turn Malta into a Pauline pilgrimage site. The Grotto had been acquired by the Knights in 1610, and that same year Bishop Gargallo appointed St Publius, bishop and martyr, as a co-patron of Malta. It could be that this appointment was, in a way, a response to the Knights' appropriation of this important Maltese sanctuary. Its link to St Paul can be attested in works that predate the arrival of the Order; two of these are Niccolò da Poggibonsi's *Libro d'Oltramare* written around 1350, and Pietro Casola's *Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*. These, among others, confirm that the site was cherished by the Maltese as their direct link to the Apostle. Thus, when it was taken over by the Knights, some kind of reaction must have taken place. The Knights dedicated the new church built on the Grotto in that period to the Maltese saint – maybe to appease the Maltese? – and later had him depicted for the first time as a bishop, together with St John the Baptist, their patron in the altarpiece for this church painted by Preti. In 1610, Marcantonio Asciak wrote a book on the "new and great" devotion introduced in St Paul's Grotto thanks to the Knights[29] – could this be a covert reference to the cult of Publius as a bishop and martyr that was gaining ground?

This was the milieu in which Manduca was writing his history of St Publius: devotion to St Paul was on the rise thanks to the Knights, and this led to an increase of interest or devotion toward St Publius, who seems to have been mentioned in a popular context sometime after 1565 by Gregorio Xerri in his poem, and who suddenly became patron of Malta in 1610. Manduca's interest in Publius might have come from his link to Xerri through his mother. His history of St Publius can be interpreted as an attempt to give this saint – who suddenly rose to fame – a biography that binds him even more to the people of Malta and underlines his contribution to the Church in general. Seeing that members of his family had been suspected of Lutheran inclinations, his struggle to offer a biography of a Maltese Catholic saint with a direct link to St Paul could have been his way of trying to put straight his family's reputation. Being a member of the Society of Jesus, the same Society thanks to which the Collegium Melitense was founded, his writings must certainly have had an impact on the Maltese intelligentsia, and it is to be expected that if the intelligentsia accepted a theory, they would certainly help in its propagation. In fact, some of Manduca's narratives on St Publius were reproduced by Gian Francesco Abela, who published the first history of Malta in 1647 – and, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

[29] NLM, *Libr. Ms. 515*, M. Asciac, *Relazione della rinovata e grandissima divozione introdotta nella Sacra Grotta di S. Paolo nell'Isola di Malta, con una breve raccolta delle cose notande, ed antichita di dett'isola*.

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