

# ST. PAUL SHIPWRECKED IN DALMATIA

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*A quiet local tradition, recorded by pilgrims and tourists as early as the tenth century A.D., identifies Mljet, off the Dalmatian coast, as the site of Paul's shipwreck. Evidence for its reliability is briefly examined.*

"After we had escaped, we then learned that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, when a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.' He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm." Acts 28:1-5; Revised Standard Version.

*The name of the island mentioned in Acts 28:1 is, in Greek, Melite. The identification of Melite with the modern island of Malta (Melite Africana) is of long standing and much reinforced by cult and pilgrimage. This identification has not gone unchallenged, however. In the Adriatic Sea, off Dubrovnik (Ragusa) in Dalmatia, lies the island of Mljet (Melite Illyrica), which is, according to Fodor's 1970 Yugoslavia, "the only place in Europe where you will find the mongoose roaming about at liberty. The explanation for this is that long ago these*

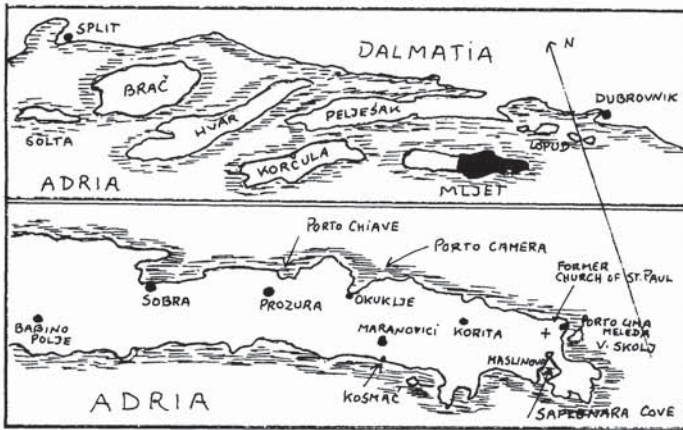
*little animals were imported from the east to exterminate the snakes with which the island was infested." Despite the snakes and despite the name of the island, neither official nor popular traditions have developed there to the extent that they have developed at Malta. But this is not necessarily an argument against identifying the island with that of Acts 27-28. In assessing the reliability of an oral tradition, the archeologist must be on guard against exploitation and chicanery even as he remains alert for the survivals of historical truth. In what follows, Otto F. A. Meinardus reports, first, on written ecclesiastical and other public traditions regarding Mljet and, second, on modern oral traditions that he has collected first-hand. — Ed.*

## Official Traditions

The earliest known writer who connected the name of the Apostle Paul with the Dalmatian island of Melite (Mljet) was Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, Byzantine Emperor from A.D. 945-959. In his work *De Administrando Imperio* he speaks (p. 163) about the "pagani" who in the Serbian dialect were the "unbaptized" and who had settled in Dalmatia. These "pagani" in the Roman dialect were referred to as the Arentani, who hold possession of the following islands: The great island Curcra or Coycra Korcula . . . "also another island, Meleta or Malozeatae. It was here

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**Fig. 1.** Maps showing the location and features of the island of Mljet. The upper map locates the island of Mljet off the coast of Dalmatia. The lower map (covering the area shown in black on the upper map) shows the location of the Sapunara Cove (see fig. 2) and other features of the island.

that a viper fixed itself on the finger of St. Paul, who burnt it in the fire." This quotation by the Byzantine Emperor presupposes that at last in the 10th century a tradition was current in Constantinople that the Apostle's shipwreck occurred in the Adriatic rather than in *Melite Africana* or Malta. From the 10th century to the beginning of the 18th century we have no literary evidence of the Dalmatian tradition. In 1730 Father Ignazio Georgi, abbot of the 13th-century Benedictine Abbey in Veliko Jezero on the island of Mljet, published a famous treatise on St. Paul's shipwreck on the Dalmatian coast, which initiated a lengthy controversy. With his intimate knowledge of the conditions on the island, Father Ignazio was the first theologian to argue convincingly for *Melite Illyrica* as the site of St. Paul's shipwreck. By the latter part of the 18th century, the local tradition of St. Paul's visit to Mljet was firmly established. In 1788 Thomas Watkins traveled throughout the Dalmatian coast and reported that "I lately visited in the Isle of Croma a monastery founded as I am told by Richard Coeur de Lion, in consequence of a vow for his deliverance from shipwreck, and, yesterday, a party was made for me to the Island of Melita, upon which St. Paul was shipwrecked. An honest monk conducted me to the spot where he landed, still known by the two seas that meet there." Thirty-three years later (1821) John Madox passed through the Dalmatian coast on his visit to the Holy Land and spoke of "Malta being anciently called Melita, but there is also an island in the Adriatic Sea named Melita or Melida, the natives claim the honour of St. Paul's first visit. They insist that the wreck took place on their shore. Scripture informs us certainly that this saint was tossed about for many days and nights in the Sea of Adria." Later in the 19th century the Reverend John Mason Neale (1818-1866), Warden of Sackville College, visited the Dalmatian coastline and became one of the foremost British proponents of the *Melite Illyrica* tradition.

The official cult which commemorates St. Paul's shipwreck on the island is of recent origin. There are three Catholic parishes on Mljet; yet, none of the older churches are dedicated to St. Paul, St. Publius, or any event associated with the Apostle's shipwreck, as is the case on Malta. The parish of Govedari has the Church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, the parish of Maranovići includes the churches of St. Guido (St. Vid), St. Elias, St. Rochus, St. Antony, and the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, and the parish of Babino Polje lists the churches of St. Pancratius, Sts. Andrew and Michael, the Nativity of the Holy Virgin, St. John the Baptist, the Holy Family and the new church of St. Paul. This new church on the main road of Babino Polje, the capital of the island, was built in 1935 and repaired in 1967. In the beginning of the 20th century, Bishop V. Palunko, Titular Bishop of Rodope, could still write that although the island of Mljet did not possess a statue of the Apostle, his involuntary visit to the island is nevertheless remembered by the islanders; now, since 1968, a tall statue of St. Paul stands above the northern altar of the church. The Apostle with a cross in his left hand is shown on the bow of a ship.

#### Popular Traditions

Whereas the official traditions on Mljet have not indicated any preference for a particular locality for the shipwreck or any other event associated with the Apostle's visit, the islanders have proposed several sites which they associate with the biblical event. V. Palunko recorded that remains of an ancient wall belonging to a church are situated approximately one mile from Porto coma Meleda, at the east end of the island. An old man had told Father Baldassare Glavić, that this former church was dedicated to the Apostle Paul, a tradition which is also reported by Professor Rudolph Vimer of Zagreb University. According to Professor Vid Vuletić

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*"I have learned from my parents and from the other older people of the town, there is an ancient ruin of a church of St. Paul in the vicinity of Korita, but there is nothing written about it."*

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Vukasović the villagers of Prožura west of Sobra maintain that St. Paul's shipwreck occurred in Porto Chiave. Father Nico Učović, parish priest of Babino Polje, told me that St. Paul's ship was wrecked in the Sapunara Cove, while Mr. Petar Givanović, one of the elders of Babino Polje, wrote to me "that as I have learned from my parents and from the other older people of the town, there is an ancient ruin of a church of St. Paul in the vicinity of Korita, but there is nothing written about it. Below the village of Maranovići near the small island of Kosmač there is a stone, known as St. Paul's Rock, about one meter in the sea."



Fig. 2. View southward, from the Saplunara Cove to the Adriatic Sea.

In the course of my visits to Mljet, I have interviewed many islanders and examined all sites mentioned in the local traditions. I come to the following conclusions:

1. The older residents in the eastern part of Mljet unanimously affirm that St. Paul was shipwrecked on Mljet, though there is no unanimity about the exact locality. Most of those asked agreed that the shipwreck occurred near the southeastern tip of the island — in or around Saplunara Cove — which is now “military zone.”
2. Many islanders are known by the name of the Apostle and are called either Pavlo, Pavla (fem.), Pava (Paola) or Pavica (Paolina).
3. Those residents associated with the tourist industry in the western part of the island around the National Park and the Hotel Melita, the former Benedictine Abbey of Veliko Jezero, are ignorant of the tradition and showed no interest.
4. Neither the Church nor the civic-municipal administration seemed interested in establishing Pauline cult-centers for pilgrimages or to exploit the tradition for touristic purposes.
5. The most likely site that would fit the biblical description of the “Dithalasson,” where two seas meet (Acts 27:41), would be east of Saplunara Cove, where two strong currents converge, making navigation difficult.
6. Villagers have spoken to me about all kinds of snakes on Mljet (Acts 28:3-6).
7. The absence of a strong and well-established Pauline tradition on Mljet should not prejudice further inquiries and studies.

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