

ON THE NEED FOR A LECTURESHIP IN ARABIC IN OUR UNIVERSITY

THE first issue of this review fulfils the wish of its editor when, still an undergraduate, together with Mgr. P.P. Saydon, the Professor of Biblical Greek, Holy Scripture, and Hebrew, he planned the publication of a similar review which was never published. Also unsuccessful was a previous effort made by the late Dr. J. Micallef in 1937 or 1938 to publish a linguistic review of this nature in spite of the £100 subsidy which he obtained from the Government, thanks to Sir Harry Luke, then Lieutenant Governor, money which was later allocated to the Department of Education for the encouragement of Maltese literature. It is not easy to publish a review like this now, but it was much more difficult to publish it then.

The use of Arabic types delayed the printing of this Journal longer than we wished, and so in the next issues, though Arabic and Hebrew types will continue to be used where needed, a larger use of transliteration will be made. We hope that this will lighten the heavy burden that we have thrown on our printer, Mr. J. Mangion, to whose single-handed effort we owe the publication of this review, *Leben il-Malti* and the *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*.

Students of Maltese, and those who read the articles in this issue, will be surprised to know that there is yet no Chair of Arabic in our University, and this is in spite of the fact that we Maltese speak and write an ancient language similar to Arabic, and that a Chair of Arabic in the Department of Maltese is as justifiable as a lectureship in Old Middle English in the Department of English.

Not many know that there was a time when Arabic was studied in Malta, thanks to the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* which in the Seventeenth Century instituted lectureships in Arabic held in the convents of the Friars Minor of Rabat or Valletta from where the teaching of Arabic later on spread to the Lyceum and the University. The earliest lectureship of

Arabic, financed out of a benefice known as *Ta' L-Isqof* or *ta' Santa Ċilia* (short for Cecilia) in Gozo, which forms the subject-matter of a monograph by our contributor Dr. A. Cremona, was set up on the 22nd September, 1637, by Decree of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, the aim being then the use of Arabic for the conversion of Mohammedans and the provision of interpreters for the Holy Inquisition in Malta. The first lecturer appointed in 1637 was Don Francesco Azzopard who, after six years, was succeeded by Don Salvatore Fenech who held the lectureship for about forty years. His successor was Don Fabrizio Bonici who held the lectureship for about forty-five years, that is, from 1684 to 1729, when he was succeeded by Don Gregorio Carbone who held the lectureship for about forty-four years and was succeeded by Rev. G. Calleja, the first to lecture on Arabic also in the university for two years, that is from 1796 to 1798, by decree of the then Grand Master De Rohan, after the Pope's approval. During the brief hectic French rule, the University was suppressed and plans were made for a Central technical school which was to include the teaching of Oriental languages, among these Arabic. But the plan was never implemented because a quick Maltese revolt threw the French out of the Island.

Antonio Fadlalla, appointed in 1803 at the request of Captain Ball, was the first to give lessons in Arabic in our University; but he only lectured for three months, and in 1805 he was succeeded by Fr. Atanasio, O.F.M. of Rome, who in 1807 was succeeded by Fr. G. Grassi whose lectureship in the University lasted till 1838 when the Chair fell vacant again, and no one was appointed to it. However, Arabic continued to be taught in the Lyceum by Faris-El-Shidiac, a native of Mount Lebanon, Syric, who in his *A Practical Grammar of the Arabic Language* (London, 1856) describes himself as 'formerly Professor of Arabic at the University of Malta', perhaps because the Lyceum was then attached to the University under the unified direction of the Rector thereof. He resigned the lectureship in 1850, and Mr. Robert Casolani was appointed in his stead. In 1881 this same Mr. Casolani was appointed Professor of Arabic in the University where he held the lectureship till 1889, the last year of Arabic in the University, but the teaching of language was continued in the Lyceum, the two lecturers in charge being Antonio Sarreo who was appointed in 1889, and was succeeded by Sebhiani, a Maronite, who taught the Arabic till 1914 to 1915.

I thought this brief outline of the vicissitudes of Arabic in Malta would throw light on the need for restoring the lectureship in Arabic in our University in the Department of Maltese to which it is linguistically as closely allied as Old English to Modern English. It must be said to the

credit of the University authorities that some time ago they agreed to restore this lectureship, but as no additional expenditure can be incurred without the previous advice to the Government by the University Statutory Commission, we shall have to wait till such time as the University Commission will deem it fit to do so. In the meantime, we have to carry out the duties of the Department of Maltese and the publication of this review single-handed.

This is most unfortunate for, as pointed out by John Hookham Frère, the Chairman of the Council of the University (1824-1833), in his memorandum on the studies which may be cultivated in the University of Malta, the Maltese are more fortunately situated for the quick study and understanding of Arabic than those whose native language is not Semitic. Our linguistic background acts as a bridge between two continents. Professor J.R. Firth in his book *The Tongues of Men* (p. 61) mentions among distinguished Orientalists 'the Maltese scholar Leonard Abela, Bishop of Sidon, who died in Rome in 1615 and whom Pope Gregory XIII, choosing very wisely, sent to the East, where he travelled widely in Syria, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. His native language, Maltese, being a dialect of Arabic, gave him a great advantage over other Europeans, and he became a great expert in Semitic and near Eastern languages, and did much to widen the linguistic horizons of Europe. He was one of the earliest students of Coptic, and brought manuscripts to Rome.'

Our plea for the creation of a lectureship in Arabic receives support from the authority of the veteran grammarian, Dr. A. Cremona who, in his monograph *L'Antica Fondazione della Scuola di Lingua Araba in Malta*, wrote: *fino alla metà del secolo passato, l'arabo, come pure il greco antico e l'ebraico, figurava come materia di studio nei programmi liceali, quando non si sognava ancora di creare una cattedra del Maltese con uno studio di filologia comparata di lingue orientali. Oggi parrebbe una anomalia che un tale studio supplementare di lingue classiche del vecchio mondo sia trascurato.*

Hebrew, Biblical Greek and Classical Greek are taught in the University. The single anomalous exception remains the teaching of Arabic, though of the sixty-two subjects that have been taught in the University of Malta only the Chair of Civil Law, including Roman Law, is older by only twenty-five years than the first lectureship in Arabic.

This Journal, published under the auspices of the Department of Maltese and Oriental Languages will, we hope, create and forge a link between this University and other Universities where Semitic languages are taught and studied. Maltese scholarship needs the cooperation and collaboration also of foreign scholars. We shall gladly publish articles which

throw light on Maltese studies or on linguistic and folkloristic subjects of a kindred nature. We take this opportunity to call our readers' attention to Professor Arberry's *A Maltese Anthology* (O.U.P.) and a forthcoming book by the same distinguished author (C.U.P.) on our national poet Dun Karm to such readers as wish to know more about the language and the literature of the Maltese people and to which we intend to devote some space in future issues of this review.

THE EDITOR

MALTESE METEOROLOGICAL AND AGRICULTURAL PROVERBS

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