LATE MEDIEVAL MALTESE NICKNAMES

BY GODFREY WETTINGER

Among the most intriguing features of late medieval documents in Malta are the references they contain to the nicknames which were then current in the islands. Unfortunately, while it has been easy to collect some three hundred surnames belonging to the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as well as some thousand placenames, it has proved extraordinarily difficult to find even one hundred nicknames. The reason for this relative dearth is not far to seek. Nicknames were a popular and insufficient form of personal and family nomenclature, and as such were normally ignored by the notaries, scrivens and priests who were then almost the only literate persons in the islands. They were only recorded through unavoidable necessity when it was found difficult to distinguish otherwise between persons who had identical names and surnames and lived in the same village - especially if, for some reason or other, it was not convenient to record their father's name.

The distinction between surnames and nicknames, so strong and universal nowadays, obviously already existed then. But it still sometimes happened that uncertainty would persist over the names of a particular person, whether it should be regarded as a surname or nickname. It must be remembered that nicknames, like surnames, were also inheritable, and must often have become accepted as the normal family name instead of an older one. In fact, there cannot be any doubt that several of the entries of surnames in the militia and anna lists of the fifteenth century were really nicknames after all, being pressed into use instead of surnames. This should not lessen the importance of the fact that a distinction was normally made between the two.

Unfortunately, if it was sometimes difficult for the contemporary scribe to recognise them for what they really were, it naturally becomes doubly difficult for the present-day observer himself to decide on the matter. For this reason, most such surname-nicknames, which would have greatly inflated the present list of medieval nicknames, have been omitted from it. One will therefore look in vain for such surname-nicknames as Campl, Cheffy, Cini, Debon, Gigante, Kerkqi, Sigir (Zghit). Nor does the list include that large number of surnames which started off as nicknames: i.e., Agius, Ani, Cattabuki, Cincotta, Dhejjer, Fenech, Pisani, Papier, Valletta, Sarron, Ynker, Xirba, Zbar, Zejtuna. In spite of their origin, most of them had, by the fifteenth century, been accepted as the normal, officially recognised, family names, and they should not therefore have any place here. On the other hand, it seems that nicknames continued to exist right down to the present-day side by side, but independently, of the surnames; and an interesting fact, particularly for the student of the crosscurrents of the two main cultures influencing the Maltese people at the time - the Semitic Arabic, even Moslem, strain, and the Romance Sicilian Christian one.

It will be seen that in the Maltese placenames of Malta, the names of Semitic origin predominate to such an extent that the Romance ones, except for those referring to Christian proprietors or to saints' churches, are of really negligible importance. The surnames, however, are mixed to a much greater extent, with a very large number of names of Romance origin - though surnames like Vella probably arose locally, whatever their meaning and linguistic origins. Surname giving was a Christian European habit that arose in the Middle Ages: both the Classical Romans and the Arabs or Moors had essentially different systems. One may therefore assume that all Maltese surnames are posterior to the Norman invasions, whether they were of Semitic or Romance origin, though tenuous links might very well exist with the older systems. It is in fact possible that the first real surnames on the island were those of the new Christian rulers, their soldiers and administrators, and the merchants and priests that followed in their wake. The system was then necessarily extended to the rest of the population as one aspect of the gradual process of cultural assimilation. The drive came from on top, from the administrators, clerics,
It should not therefore occasion any surprise that surnames of Romance origin like Vella, Vassallo, Falzon, Bonavia, Pace should seem so large in the medieval militia lists of Malta. However, it is still possible to argue that the surnames do not correctly reflect the extent to which cultural change had progressed among the common people. For this, the study of nicknames is a much surer guide. The locally nicknames were not the creation of the literate and therefore performic Sicilianised clerks, etc.; they were invariably conferred by the people on each other and must reflect much more exactly what was going on in their minds. By means of their study one can penetrate to some extent the Romance-bias of the clerks. However, it must be admitted that some little bias still remains because it was the clerks, notaries, etc. who had to record the nicknames though they had nothing to do with their original formation. It is possible, for instance, that the nickname recorded as 'Formica' was really 'In-Nemla' or 'In-Nemla', the clerk having simply translated it into Italian. This is even more probable in the case of the nickname 'Lu Russu', which has the same meaning as 'Latamara'. However, one cannot be sure how far this tendency went.

Another problem met with has been the initial one of decipherment and transcription, especially as the nicknames occur very rarely — more often than not, just once — and it is therefore normally impossible to check their appearance in one place with that in another. In many of the fifteenth century hands it is practically impossible to distinguish between 'c' and 'g', as well as between 'n' and 'u', so that one usually has to resort to what may be called contextual probabilities — in the case of nicknames of very doubtful value. This explains why it has not been possible to decide on the better reading between 'Cardin' and 'Cardin', 'Cambo' and 'Cambo', 'Tapu' and 'Gappu', 'Dune' and 'Dune'. Two others whose exact reading is still doubtful are 'Seyser' or 'Seyser', and 'Ferrecu'.

Even after obtaining the right reading one has not solved all the preliminary problems, because one still has to conjecture (very often it is hardly better than that) the right sounds of the nickname before recognizing and understanding it. The 'ch' of 'Chaud' must obviously stand for 'c'; but it does not follow that the same letters in 'Chickynye' must have the same value, though it seems probable. It might be considered that 'Chaudoun' was probably pronounced 'Cardin', not 'Hardon' or 'Qardun', but such judgements, unless they are based on some kind of evidence, can have little value. After all, it could be thought just as un-likely that 'Cherdica' was pronounced 'Cerdica' instead of 'Cjerica' — one could even appeal to the variant from 'Cerdica'. However, the existence of two other variants — Cherdica and Cerdica — would tend to show that the correct pronunciation of its first letters was an 'c' or soft 'g'. As has already been said, it is very difficult to obtain multiple records of the same nickname and, when such repetitions contain no spelling variations, they are of little use in solving this particular problem, though they are of some value palaeographically because they might still belong to a different and clearer hand.

Occasionally, reference to a modern dictionary or list of place-names (or map) might be of considerable assistance. Thus there cannot be much doubt that the correct pronunciation of 'Carichile', 'likinch', and 'Cuchel' is Quercia, il-Qinc, and Quiceda respectively. On the other hand, 'Chickyne' was most probably pronounced Klejna (little wood), though there is a chance that it should be read 'Hljina' (small dream). 'Fluch' probably stands for 'Flukta' (i.e. Finka). The 'b' may also stand for either of the two 'gb' sounds which early Maltese, like Arabic, must have had. Thus it is possible, probable even, that 'Fajsa' was pronounced 'Ghajsa'. But as long as several other occurrences of the said nicknames have not been found, written in different hands and preferably with different spellings, it shall not be possible to give definitive renderings of them.

A glance through the list reveals that, as expected, the majority of the nicknames in use in late medieval Maltese were of Semitic origin, but that Romance ones included not only references to towns with which presumably their owners had connections — nicknames such as Avola, Cagliari, Malta — but others like Ballarin, Bari, Bari, Caglin, Fiesco, Formica (unless it really represents the nickname Nemla), Madama and Mudiana, Manina, Ribazzu, Rocca, Ila Russu (probably standing for l'Ausa), Stampa, ta' L-Ispa, Sejma, Trumibba, Villana. These do not include those over whose exact rendering doubt persists. Thus at last first hand evidence is available confirming the suspicion that Sicilian speech was affecting the language spoken in Malta.

Even in these medieval nicknames one can observe the distinction made between those introduced by the definite article it- and the others preceded by the possessive tal-, the former given to the first holder of a nickname, the latter to his descendants or spouse. Among the former there are: 'labba', 'labamar', 'likinch'; among the latter: bita talbu, bita lispil. The use of bita it for the modern tal- is, in itself, highly interesting because it disposed once for all of the dispute which has often broken out
about the etymological origin of the Modern Maltese "ta'".

One further point regarding the use of the definite article is that it is

frequently omitted altogether. The fact that the overwhelming majority of

nicknames discovered so far do not have the definite article might at first

be taken as the result of mere negligence on the part of the scribes, until

one notices that it is also left out of nicknames like "bisa gis, bisa

chalun, bisa vala, bisa saroca", where it would be much more difficult to

be omitted unconsciously.

Several of the nicknames whose meaning can be hazarded referred to

animals, birds or insects:

Barri bull
'Fenca' rabbit
Carl jackal
Dubbis lion
Moghas goat
Plants provide several other nicknames:
Ejeju tiny house-raddish
'Kemen' cumin seed
Laninu a pear, a pear tree

Objects included:
Xacora a sack
Trumbetta a trumpet
Maduma a tine

Personal details were not forgotten: Fantas presumably referred to its

possessor's baldness. Catherine "bita lospal" and Lucilia "bita lispal"

must have been two girls who were brought up in the Hospi-

tal of Santo Spirito, which often served as an orphanage for unwanted

children. One's complexion was sometimes referred to: "labiāda", white;

"labmah", red; "ju masu", red. One's real or fancied stature must have

occasionally provided a reason for a nickname, as "Villano" (cf. place-

name "tal villan", i.e. tal-Villan), villetron; "baron", barsin - the latter

probably as a joke. An interesting group of references to abstract qualities

or habits can also be made out:

'Hejja' poltroon
'Hiagisa gebisa' hard work
Klejma one little word
Bewia a kiss

Finally, the list also contains two nicknames which recall two of

Malta's quaint old customs which disappeared centuries ago. The nick-

name "Carcele" recalls the zentu, which were two small pastries in the

shape of a bride and her bridegroom which used to be carried in the

wedding procession to the church and placed on the altar as a gift to the

priest officiating in the wedding ceremony. The zentu, equally forgotten

nowadays, was the custom of distributing bread, flour, fruit, wine, etc.,

on feast-days to the poor of the district, usually following the directions

left in a pious bequest by an ancestor. The North African Arabic إجأ,

means "Premià un repas à la bière; neter la gara", according to Cher-

bonneur. But our medieval documents explain it much better."

A FIRST LIST OF LATE MEDIEVAL MALTESE NICKNAMES

N.B. Arrangement is alphabetical according to Modern Maltese spelling

where known; otherwise according to original spelling within inverted

commas.

Sources All notarial references, unless otherwise explained, are to the

records in the Notarial Archives, Valletta. "R" refers to deed registra-

tions; its absence indicates a reference to a volume of 'original deeds'.

Where pagination is omitted the reason is that there is no pagination

running through a volume from beginning to end but probably a number of

*J. Cassar, "Il-Konti Ciantar u l-Folklore Malta", Il-Malt, Dicembre

1955.

*"con condizione tenue quasi diritti baronesse di fruttiere unico capo ve-


'Cafasoth' Marcus baladiqan alias cafasoth et beta jugales habitatores casalini mecalibbe: Not. C. Canchur, 30.11.1514, R 140/5, f. 297.


'Carnoch' or 'Carnota' Dionisius Barbara camoch: Not. C. Canchur, 10.11.1514, R 140/6, f. 24.


Carm Nicolaus Bunniachia alias bunnia de Casali Tarzem: Not. C. Canchur, 5.i.1509, R 140/4, f. 54.


'Chincelle' (o Gijgg) Francisca Spiteri alias chincelli de casali Tarzem: Not. C. Canchur, 6.i.1507, R 140/3, f. 54.

'Curtiia' (Quejla o tbejla) Nicolaus Samut cabyle de Casali Gregori: Angara list, early 1490s.


Dalamu Paula Vella Dalom di Cassali Bunudd: Militia list, 1420s, f. 15.


...
'FERRERI' Francisco Lucchese fereste (fereste (?)): Militia list, 1425, f. 35.

'FEXU' Paulus Cumbra fergula (?): Militia postings, die lunii ala praeza, c. 1419.

'FLOCHU' Arvito Zammache fuxa of Casali Corni: Angara list, early 1400s.

'FONTECA' (perhaps representing 'Fonte'): Magister Antonius Boncella dicitur Fontica: witnesses to Don Michael Fabro's will, 17.x.1431, very late copy in RML MS 635, f. 227.


'GRELI Zaccarias Greli': Not. C. Cannuz, 17.x.1511, R 140/5, f. 81.


'GIBAL' Palma et Catharina bita gilinae: Rabat population list, 1483, f. 4.


'GHABA' Andrea Cunzis more de Zentum: Cavalry list of 1492: RML MS 470, f. 21v. Gana haudid: Casali Kibis: Militia list, 1425.


'HAJER' Luca Samad Bajje: Militia list, 1420s, f. 8.

'HALLAN ou CAILAS una' Jacoba bita chullas: Rabat population list, 1483, f. 6.


'HAREJ' (Huejja or Channejja) Andrea Mahalif barnja of Casali: Militia list, 1420s, f. 7v. Also: Gulielma Mahalif banae marinae of Birkirkara: ibid. f. 8v.

'HELE' Nicolaus Farinque bellis (Micabbe): Militia list, 1420s, f. 20v.

'HENTS' Dominice Vella benta: Militia postings (he was posted at 'lu gadta', i.e. St. Thomas Bay near Zentum), c. 1419.

'HIME' Andrea Mahalif bide (Casali Lutis: Militia list, 1420s, f. 7v.

'HIMAJA Cilia Cumia kumata of Rabat: Angara list, 1480s, f. 10; Bartholomueus Cumia Bumejra of Rabat: ibid., f. 17; Johann Cumia kumata of Rabat: Militia list, 1420s, f. 31v.

'KALAFAR' Xalomo Hakim alias Caglaris: Not. J. Zabara, 23.xi.1487, R 404/1.


MADDAIA for MODERNA MASCA MADDAIA ALIAE Vella de Casali Lucar: Not. C. Canchur, 26.ii.1406, R.494/1, f.137.

MADDAIA MICHIEL MANONI madonna di Rabba: Militia list, 1120, f.30v.


MANNI Giacomo Machinace alia Messina: his will, by Not. Ingemar de Brancato, 11.xii.1492, noted in late seventeenth century manuscript, RML, MS 695, f.117v.

MARENA BARTHOLOMEO CHABELE dirvo: Not. J. Zabara, 10.x.1501, R.494/2.


MOLLENNA Gellulino Malabili misiachai di Birkikara: Militia list, 1420, f.9.


MUSISTI Mauro Vehari alia Paragge: Not. J. Zabara, 8.iii.1487, R.494/1.


CARCELLA Joanna Vella alia Cercelle habitató Rabba: Not. Geronano Cumbo, 8.iii.1531, R.196/1, f.45.


CUCCHIA Gellulino Storfera cuoke o Siggiewi Militia list, 1420, f.25v.


RAJAHIA, Y3' buka radone e la marai: Rabba population list, 1483, f.7v.


RUSSA Gheorgios buke la marai di Rabba: RML, Univ., 11, f.79, c.1450.

SADONI Paulo Vella radone: Militia list, 1420, f.17v.


SEYERS or SAYERS Ximun Salibe Sayers (or Sayers): Angara list, early 1480s, f.21.

BITA BIBILE' Francesca bita tible: Rabba population list, 1483, f.8v.

SINNA Gellulino Malabili Sionne of Birkikara Militia list, 1420, f.9."
FOREWORD

L'inkiet tass-Sir Martin is a one-act play about the impact of the City on the Village. The village represents tradition and conservation, attachment to the old ancestral customs which are rapidly disappearing under the impact of city life which, being more cosmopolitan, is exposed to many foreign influences from which radiate new mental attitudes that are progressively eroding the core of the village community as we knew it in our younger days.

It is a one-act play which I enjoyed writing and seeing performed by my students several times in the University Theatre at Valletta. The play represents a conflict of mental attitudes to life as it affected the domestic habits and peace of mind of a good-natured, temperamental village man attached to his family traditions and customs and whose two lovely daughters upset his tenor of life by some of the exotic fashions of modern life which they picked up from the two Sliema families they worked for as maids.

I am grateful to Mr. F. Williams, a British resident of Siggiewi and congratulate him on his mastery of written Maltese which is by no means easy for an English-speaking person. I have published the Maltese text and translation facing each other to enable Semitic linguists to read the two texts together and draw their own conclusions from the proximity of the original text and its English rendering.

I do not think that this experiment is without its value. The Maltese language is rapidly developing along two distinctive lines which are one linguistic and another literary. Though Malta is a small country both its language and history form an integral part of the structure of Mediterranean civilization. Unfortunately, most books on Malta, very often liber ex libris, do not give a faithful picture of the Maltese and the language they speak. One field that is generally either ignored or underestimated is that of Maltese literature. This Journal will continue to introduce both aspects of Maltese contemporary culture to its subscribers abroad. There will be more translations, with or without the original texts as the occasion permits, in future issues.

This is the continuation of a policy which I have already adopted in previous numbers of this Journal in which I published Maltese texts with the English translations for comparative linguistic and literary purposes.

J. Aquilina