

LATE MEDIEVAL JUDAEO-ARABIC POETRY
IN VATICAN HEBREW MS. 411: A POSTSCRIPT

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Only a few months after the publication by the present writer of the article on the possible or probable links with Maltese and Sicilian Arabic that may exist in Vatican Hebrew Ms. 411,¹ four important bits of evidence came to light which further strengthen the author's suggestion that this unique collection of fifteenth century Judaeo-Arabic poems in a pointed text should be attributed to someone who lived in Sicily, if not Malta itself, with the preference given to the former possibility.

On page 180 of his *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes* R. Dozy has an entry under حَرَّاسِيَا, meaning *cerise*, with the vital information from Ibn al-Baitar that Sicilians say جراسيا instead of قراصيا.²

حَرَّاسِيَا (κεράσια, pl. de κεράσιον, b. lat. cerasea) *cerise*,

Gl. Edrisi 353, 3; Most.: قَرَّاسِيَا هو جراسيا بالجيم

Bait. I, 247 d: جَرَّاسِيَا في القراصيا البعلبي عند اهل صقلية; II, 282 b, il atteste de nouveau que les Siciliens disent جراسيا pour قراصيا, et il ajoute qu'à Damas les cerises se nomment قراصيا بعلبي; Ibn-Loyon 8 v°:

القَرَّاسِيَا (sic) وانجراسيا بالجيم حَبُّ الملوكة

There is no evidence that this particular pronunciation extended also to Malta though the possibility cannot be ruled out.

The poems contain the very obscure word 'anburlak, obviously

¹G. Wettinger, 'Late Medieval Judaeo-Arabic Poetry in Vatican (Hebr.) Ms. 411: Links with Maltese and Sicilian Arabic', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, No. 13 (1979).

²R. Dozy, *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes* (Leyden, 1881/Beyrouth, 1968). The manuscript of Most'ini is based on one at Naples. Bait: *Traité des simples par Ibn-al-Baitar*. Ibn-Loyon: *Poème didactique sur l'agriculture*, avec des notes marginales, manuscrit de Grenade.

a non-Arabic word. A search in several dictionaries before the publication of the present writer's article proved unfruitful. A few months later, a glance at some old documentary transcripts made years before brought the following passage to light:³

Item cortina una cum suo Inborlachio listato sericii.

The poems themselves similarly associate 'anburlak with *cortina*:⁴

mansāfa min šuf el-dib 'ankəbut
hi l-qurtina
w(ə)l-'anburlak min quzqaz
min newər el-yaqtina

Both 'anburlak and *Inborlachio* would seem to refer to the bed canopy, of course now long disused, still known as *celu* or *soprac-celu*. However, Genevieve and Henri Bresc have already studied the word from Sicilian documents. In their study 'La casa del "borghese" in Sicilia',⁵ this is what they say:

Ma il letto, con la sua cortina, le lenzuola listate di seta e l'*imburlachium* (cielo di letto), il cassone, le tovaglioli, sono lo specchio di una civiltà abbastanza ricca.

For them, however, the origin of *imburlachium* remains obscure.

It is clear, in any case, that this word can only be associated, so far as is known, with Malta and Sicily. In the latter island, the Brescs themselves have found it in no less than nine out of the 23 documents they examined for source material on middle class homes in late medieval Sicily.⁶ In one particular marriage agreement⁷ not only does the word *imburlachium* itself appear, but one also finds another strange word, otherwise apparently unknown, which is found in the Judaeo-Arabic documents of Vatican Hebrew Ms. 411. This is the word *dubler*:⁸

³Cathedral Museum, Mdina (Malta), Curia Episcopalis Melitensis, Acta Originalia, vol. 1, fol. 29v, dated 16 August 1428. Compare the passage with 'Item, unu supra chelo de una cortina cum so frontali isfilati', 7 July 1503, Notarial Archives, Valletta, deeds of Notary Consalvo Canchur, R 140/1 (1499-1505), fol. 212v.

⁴Ernest Mainz, 'Quelques poésies Judéo-Arabes du manuscrit 411 de la bibliothèque du Vatican', *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 237 (1949), pp. 69-70.

⁵Genevieve e Henri Bresc, 'La casa del "Borghese": materiali per una etnografia storica della Sicilia', *Quaderni Storici*, No. 31 (Ancona, Gennaio-Aprile 1976), p. 122.

⁶*Ibid.*, table on p. 126.

⁷*Ibid.*, footnote 7 on p. 125.

⁸Mainz, p. 70.

Dote: I vestiti della sposa, farsium unum pro lecto, mataracia duo, plomacium unum, paria tria lintheaminum quarum unum debet essere ad listas sericas ed alia due de tela alba nova, cultras duas albas novas, cortinam unam, imburlachium unum, dublecta tria, suctanas tres, dubleria seu mensalia quinque, tobalias duas, ad aves ...

Needless to say, and understandably, Ernest Mainz was unable to translate into French either 'anburlak or dubler.

One other phrase left without a French translation occurs in the following two lines:⁹

zawġ hawatem min ġummar	une paire de bagues de coeur
w(e)l-aqfiya qetareš.	de palmier,

Aqfiya must be an irregular plural form of the Arabic word *waqf*, an ivory bracelet; qetareš would be the plural of qatreš. The latter has not been found in Arabic dictionaries but must be derived from the Sicilian word *catrecia*, vertebrate bones.¹⁰ The two lines should therefore mean:

A pair of rings [made] of dwarf fan palm leaves¹¹
And ivory necklaces [made] of vertebrate bones.

Once more, therefore, one is forced to resort to Romance Sicilian for a full understanding of a part of the poems, and this would pretty definitely exclude the possibility of a Maltese origin.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ A. Traina, *Nuovo vocabolario Siciliano Italiano*, s.v.

¹¹ In Maltese, and possibly in Sicilian Arabic, gummar is the plant known botanically as 'dwarf fan palm': J. Borg, *Descriptive Flora of the Maltese Islands* ... (Malta, 1927), p. 799.