

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME "KIRKOP"

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Hal-Kirkop (in the Italianate spelling *Hal Chircop*) is one of the south-eastern villages of Malta, situated about half-way between Żurriq and Hal-Luqa. The same name, normally spelt *Chircop*, is a Maltese surname of medium frequency. Although the connection between the toponym and the family-name is evident, the origin of the word has long puzzled local scholars.¹

In his article "A Brief Survey of Maltese Place-names", Joseph Aquilina simply notes that "the etymology of this Maltese village is obscure",² an agnostic position which he repeated some time ago in his Sunday Times column *Linguistic Pot-Pourri* (-49, March 2, 1986) where he comments further: "As a word-pattern it is in a class of its own, an exception to the established models. It sounds very much like the English surname *Kirkop*, sheer coincidence but the similarity is striking."³ The surname *Chircop*, though not explained, is listed among Maltese names of Romance origin in Professor Aquilina's "A Comparative Study in Lexical Material relating to Nicknames and Surnames".⁴

Erin Serracino-Inglott tentatively relates the word to the Arabic root R-K-B (=Malt. *rikeb* 'he rode'), suggesting that it possibly refers to the relative altitude of the village; however the phonetic difficulties of such an etymology are evident.⁵ Also mentioned in the *Miklem* entry KIRKOP are Agius de Soldanis' association of the toponym with a Sicilian *richippa* 'piega dell'abito', and Caruana's spurious etymology with its equally fanciful explanation: "... significherebbe uno spazio, un piccolo recinto incluso, posto al di sopra della reticula aenea, fatto appositamente per intercettare ciò che cadesse dall'altare". The lexicographer finally reports Bellanti's view that "Possibly the name derives from a substantive. I am inclined to believe that its origin is Sicilian...". Serracino-Inglott supports this hypothesis by noting that those Maltese village-names which, like Kirkop, are preceded by the prefix *Hal-*, frequently perpetuated old Sicilian surnames (cf. *Hal-Balzan*, *Hal-Lija*, *H-Attard*).⁶

That *Kirkop/Chircop* is indeed an old Sicilian surname was later convincingly demonstrated by Godfrey Wettinger, who recognized it as a development of the Siculo-Greek *Prokōpiu* (<Gk. *Prokopios*; Latin *Procopius*, Italian *Procopio*).⁷ Old maps of Malta give one or both of two basic variants of the village-name: *Percop* and *Corcop* (et sim.). Both lexical types appear as surnames in the two medieval civic registers, from Notabile edited by Dr. Wettinger in the late 1960's.⁸ In the militia roll of 1419 there are seven entries of the name *Kercheppu*, five instances of *Percopu*, and one *Perkope*. The bearers of these names hail from several of the central and eastern villages of Malta, from Naxxar to Zabbar. One *Kercheppu* and one *Percopu* happen to be natives of a village given as *Percopu*, evidently the modern Hal-Kirkop. Mentioned in the work roster of the 1480's are one *Kercheppu* (apparently from *Percopu* village) and nine individuals named *Percop*, all from other districts.

Here the problem might seem to rest, since the co-existence of two markedly different variants of the one name is not problematical in itself. What is, however, remarkable is the extent of phonetic erosion of the original Sicilian *Procopiu*,

especially when one compares the dissimilar fate of other Sicilian anthroponyms in fifteenth-century Malta, e.g. *Attardu* > *Attardu*, *Atardu*, *Actard*; *Azzupardu* > *Azupardu*, *Azupardi*, *Azuparda*, *Aczupard*, *Zupard*; *Balzanu* > *Balzan*, *Balzam*; *Bartolu* > *Bartalu*, *Gattu* > *Gactu*, *Gat*. In all these examples we have (local apocope and learned spellings apart) variations on a single phonetic form; in the case of Kirkop one is clearly dealing with two distinct (if ultimately identical) base forms.

The phonetic progression from *Procopiu* to *Kirkop* can, of course, be reconstructed as follows:

Procopiu	>	*Prokopu	(loss of yod)
*Prokopu	>	*Porkopu	(metathesis)
*Porkopu	>	Perkopu	(vocalic dissimilation)
Perkopu	>	*Kerkopu	(consonantal assimilation)
*Kerkopu	>	Kerkep(p)u	(vocalic assimilation)
		> Korkop	(vocalic assimilation; apocope)
		> Kirkop	(apocope)

Nevertheless the unusual contemporaneity of two such forms (in the fifteenth century at least) gives rise to the suspicion that somewhere along the line the surname had been crossed with another quite distinct word bearing the consonantal sequence K-K-P, a form which eventually absorbed and displaced the original *Procopiu* and its variants. Such cases of contamination are particularly common in Italian surnames, for example *Pallavicini* (*pelavicini* 'robber (lit. skinner) of neighbours' x *palla* 'ball'), *Vispo* (*visco* = *vesco*(vo) 'bishop' x *vespa* 'wasp'), *Nuvolone* (*Nibelung* 'Napoleon' x *nuvola* 'cloud'), *Occhipinti* (*occhipunti* 'weak (lit. pierced) eyes' x *pinti* 'painted'). In some cases the formal assimilation is complete, as in *Gilli*, *Gillio* (*Ægidius* > *giglio* 'lily'), *Salmone* (*Salomone* 'Solomon' > *salmone* 'salmon'), *Cielo*, *Celo* ((Mi)chele > *cielo* 'sky'), *Pellicano* (*pelacani* 'dog-skinner; ruffian' > *pellicano* 'pelican'), Sicilian *Papa* (Greek *pappás* 'priest' > *papa* 'pope').⁹ It is important to note that the mechanics of lexical crossing require merely a phonetic similarity; semantic association is very much a secondary factor which may or may not be rationalized later through folk etymology (as in the case of *Occhipinti*, thought today to mean 'painted eyes'¹⁰).

My own suspicion is that the Maltese forms of *Procopiu* were contaminated by, and practically assimilated to, two distinct variants of a Sicilian word meaning 'apricot'.¹¹ Map 1276 of the *Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz* (AIS, Band VII) registers the following forms for the name of the stone-fruit:

- (1) type VRACCÒCU (FRACCÒCU), at Palermo and in most of central Sicily (point 803 Palermo: *vaykkwòkku* < **varkwòkku*, 824 Baucina: *vrakkòku*, 826 Mistretta: *varkòku*, 844 Villalba: *frakkòku*, 845 Calascibetta: *frakkòku*, 873 Naro: *vrakwòku*, 865 Aidone: *verikòk*);
- (2) type PIRCÒCU, in the west, south-west and sporadically in the north-east (821 Vita: *perkòku*, 851 San Biagio Platani: *pirkòku*, 817 San Fratello: *pròkàku*, 859 Mascalucia: *prikòku*);

(3) type PRICÒPU, in the north-east, i.e. Val Demone (836 Sperlinga: *pròkoppu*, 838 Bronte: *prekòp*¹¹, 818 Fantina/Novara di Sicilia: *prikòppu*);

(4) type CHIRIC(U)ÒPU, in the east and south-east (875 San Michele di Ganzaria: *krikropu*, 846 Catenanuova: *kirikuòpu*, 896 Giarratana: *kirikwòpu*).

What emerges as significant here is the formal proximity of the north-eastern type PRICÒPU to the medieval Maltese *Percopu*, and, more particularly, the striking similarity of the south-eastern CHIRIC(U)ÒPU to Maltese *Kirkop* (medieval *Kercheppu*). It is surely no coincidence that CHIRIC(U)ÒPU occurs in the very area of the greater island from which the bulk of Maltese Sicilianisms originate: the Val di Noto. The north-eastern zone with its PRICÒPU type is the next most important source of Sicilian loanwords in Maltese. Both words for 'apricot' could easily have found their way to Malta after 1224, whether as nicknames or as alternatives to the indigenous Arabic *berquq* in contemporary slang or in the hybrid jargon of the Sicilian settlers. In any case, the personal name *Percopiu/Pircopiu* was well and truly in a position to be crossed with the contemporary common nouns *pricopu*/**pircopu*/**percopu* and *chiricòpu*. This would also explain the premature loss of the yod element (intact in modern Sicily and Calabria: *Procopio*, *Procopi*)¹² even before apocope became widespread in Romance Maltese, thus

**Percopiu* 'Procopius' x **percòpu* 'apricot' > *Percopu* (> *Percop*)

**Percopiu* 'Procopius' x **kerkòpu*, *kirikòpu* 'apricot' > **Kerkoppu*
(> *Kercheppu*) > *Kirkop*.

Of course there is no good reason to rule out the strong likelihood that the crossing of the personal name and the fruit-name first occurred in eastern Sicily, and that both types were imported as proper names into Malta, one destined to flourish, the other to disappear. This latter hypothesis would appear to be supported by the absence of any possible descendant of the Sicilianism *chiricòpu* 'apricot' in modern Maltese: clearly the position of the native *berquq* was never seriously challenged.

The Maltese *berquq* shares a common etymology with the west Sicilian type VRACCOCU (FRACCOCU), both forms coming directly from the Maghrebine Arabic *barqûq*.¹³ This same Arabic word with a concreted definite article (*al-barqûq*) is the source of most of the modern European names of the fruit: Spanish *albaricoque*, Portuguese *albricoque*, Catalan *albercoc* (> Sardinian *baracòcco*, *biricòcco*), French *abricot* (> English *apricot*, German *Aprikose*), Modern Greek *berškòkkon*. Arabic *barqûq* is a borrowing from the Byzantine Greek *praikòk(k)ion*, in turn derived from the imperial Latin *præcoquum* (*prunum*) 'precocious (i.e. early-ripening) plum', a popular name for what was otherwise termed *armeni(ac)um prunum* 'Armenian plum'.¹⁴

Sicilian *pircòcu*, *pricòpu*, *chiric(u)òpu*, unlike *vraccòcu*, *fraccòcu*, were not taken from Arabic, but derive directly from the late Latin PRAECOQUUM (classical PRAECOX). However on the Italian mainland this word, where it occurs, usually has the different meanings of 'quince-plum' (It. *pesca cotogno*) and (in Calabria) 'large clingstone peach' (It. *pesca duràcina*), cf. the continental forms *percocu*, *pricocu*, *pircopu*, *pricopu*, *cricopu*, *chiricuopu*). The general South Italian term for

'apricot' is *cresòmmulu*, from an Italo-Greek *chrysómèlon* 'golden apple' (cf. It. *pomodoro* in the different sense of 'tomato').¹⁵ (*Al*-)*barqûq* occurs only in parts of Apulia (*vermecòcca* - colourfully crossed with *verme* 'worm!') and Lucania (*vernecòcca*)¹⁶; otherwise it is at home in central and northern Italy (*albicocca* et sim.). It would seem, then, that the old Latin term meaning 'quince-plum' or 'clingstone peach', reintroduced into Sicily in Norman times, retained its continental forms while assuming the new Arabic meaning of 'apricot': *materia romanza*, *spirito semitico*. The subsequent attraction of the old Greek personal name *Prokopios* into its orbit could hardly have been an unusual occurrence in a linguistic atmosphere as fluid and confused as that of post-Saracen Sicily and Malta. However, it is not simply a question of the contamination of an established surname by a common noun. The two forms that interest us have both been recorded as South Italian surnames; *Chircoppi* will be found today in the Palermo telephone directory, and the name *Percoco*, *Percuoco* also occurs in Sicily, though its South Italian epicentre is Campania. This latter form was already a common surname at Benevento in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and De Felice cites from a contemporary document the mention of a certain "Mabilia de Johanni Percuocu".¹⁷

1 I express thanks to Prof. Stanley Fiorini and Prof. Giuseppe Brincat for drawing my attention to various facts and possibilities related to this research.

2 In *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (The Royal University of Malta, 1961, rpt. 1981), p. 215.

3 In the *Penguin Dictionary of Surnames* (1967), Basil Cottle explains the English surname *Kirkup* as meaning 'church valley' and embodying the Old Norse *kirka* and the Anglo-Saxon *hop* (cf. the surname *Hope*).

4 In *Maltese Linguistics Surveys* (The University of Malta, 1976), p. 198.

5 *Miklem Malti* (Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1978), Vol. 5, p. 112.

6 *Ibid.*

7 G. Wettinger "Non Arabo-Berber influences on Malta's medieval nomenclature", *Proceedings of the First Congress of Mediterranean Studies of Arabo-Berber Influence* (Malta, 1973), p. 201, and n. 22. The same scholar elsewhere mentions the existence of a patronymic derivative of *Percopiu*: *Pirchipullu*, *Curchipullu* = Siculo-Greek *Prokopiopoulos* 'son of Procopius', also the name of a now extinct Maltese village ("The Lost Villages of Malta" in *Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A. Luttrell (London, 1975), pp. 203, 209).

8 G. Wettinger, "The Distribution of Surnames in Malta and Gozo in 1419 and the 1480's", *Journal of Maltese Studies* V (1968), pp. 41, 43.

9 See Egidio De Felice, *Dizionario dei cognomi italiani*, (Milan, 1978), *passim*.

10 This is my own correction of the standard but unlikely explanation of the meaning of the name, uncritically repeated in De Felice's dictionary and elsewhere. The compound is certainly related to the Sardinian adjective *ocripuntu* 'che ha gli occhi punti, ossia guasti' (Pittau).

11 The embryonic form of my hypothesis is mentioned in Professor Aquilina's recent *Maltese-English Dictionary* (Vol. 1), p. 654.

12 Forms registered in G. Rohlfs, *Dizionario dei cognomi e dei soprannomi in Calabria* (Ravenna, 1979), p. 215. According to Rohlfs, the modern form of the name in Greece is *Prokopis*.

13 In Classical and eastern Arabic the term means 'plum'; *mišmūš* being the normal word for 'apricot'.

14 The apricot, like the peach (Lat. *malum persicum* 'Persian apple') was an Asian fruit, coming to Europe from Armenia, whither it had arrived, via Central Asia, from China. *Prunum armeniacum* survives in Padania (Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna) in the forms (*ar*)*mognaga*, *armognà(n)*; the Venetian *armelin* continues the adjectival variant *ARMENINU.

15 For the southern Sicilian locality of Naro (point 873) the AIS records two terms for 'apricot'; *vrakwòku* is the larger kind while the smaller variety is known as *krisònnulu*.

16 The Neapolitan hinterland uses the form *libbèrgia* 'apricot', a borrowing from Spanish (*alberchiga* = the Mozarabic development of PERSICA), cf. also Calabrian *limbèrgia*, Sicilian *sbergia*, Abrutian *lembèrgene*.

17 De Felice, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-193.