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 Zurrieq and Hal-Luqa. The same name, now commonly spell 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.

In his article "A Brief Survey of Maltese Place-names", Joseph Aquilina simply notes that "the etymology of this Maltese village is obscure", an agnostic position which he repeated some time ago in his Sunday Times column Linguistic Pot-Pouri (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, of course, the similarity is striking. The name 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".

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 phonetic difficulties of such an etymology are evident. Also mentioned in the Mkelem entry KIRKOP are Agius de Soldaniis' association of the toponym with a Sicilian ricciopp 'piega dell'abito', and Caruana's aposiopesis etymology with its equally fanciful explanation: "significherebbe uno spazio, un piccolo recinto incluso, posto al di sopra della reticula aerea, fatto appositamente per intercettare ciò che cade dall'altare". The lexicographer finally reports Bellanti's view that "Possibly the name derives from a substantive. I am inclined to believe that it is Sicilian...". Serracino-Inglott supports this hypothesis by noting that the Maltese village-names which, like Kirkop, are preceded by the prefix Bal-, frequently perpetuated old Sicilian surnames (cf. Hal-Baltzan, Hal-Lija, H-Attard).

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 Prokopiou (<Gk. Preprokoi; Latin Procopius, Italian Procopio). Old maps of Malta give one or both of two basic variants of the village-name: Percop and Coreop (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. In the militia roll of 1419 there are seven entries of the name Kercheppu, five instances of Percop, 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 Percop happen to be natives of a village given as Percop, evidently the modern Hal-Kirkop. Mentioned in the work roster of the 1480's are one Kercheppu (apparently from Percop 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, Attardu, Actard; Azopardu > Azopardu, Azoardu, Azuwardu, Azoardu, Zeopard, Zapedu; Balzanu > Balzain, Balzain, Balzardu; Bertolu > Bartalatu, Gattu > Gacuti, Gait. 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 > *Porkopu (loss of yod)
*Porkopu > *Porkopu (vowel shift)
*Porkopu > Perkopu (vocalic assimilation)
Perkopu > Kerkopu (consonantal assimilation)
*Kerkopu > Kerkopu (vocalic assimilation)
> Kirkop (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-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 (pelavicint 'rober (lit. skinner) of neighbours' x palla 'ball'), Vispo (visco > vescovo 'bishop' x vespa 'wasp'), Nuvolone (Nebulung 'Napoleon' x nulua 'cloud'), Occhipinti (occhipinti 'weak (lit. pierced) eyes x ponti 'painted'). In some cases the formal assimilation is complete, as in Gilli, Gillio (Agidius > giglio 'lily'), Salmone (Salamone 'Solomon' > salmone 'salmon'), Cielo, Celo (Mi)chele > cielo 'sky'), Pellicano (pelacanu 'dog-skinner; ruffian') > pellicoano 'pelican'), Sicilian Papa (Greek pappas 'priest' > papa 'pope'). 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').

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

1) type VRACCÔCU (FRACCÔCU), at Palermo and in most of central Sicily (point 803 Palermo: vaykownik < *varkownik, 824 Baucina: vakkòkù, 826 Mistretta: vakkòkù, 844 Villalba: frakkòkù, 845 Calascibetta: frakkòkù, 873 Naro: vakkòkù, 865 Aidone: verìkòkù);

(3) type PRICÔPU, in the north-east, i.e. Val Demone (836 Sperlinga: prìkòpo, 838 Bronte: prëkòpo, 818 Fantina/Novara di Sicilia: prikòppu);

(4) type CHIRIC(U)ÔPU, in the east and south-east (875 San Michele di Ganzaria: kirikrupu, 846 Catenanuova: kirikuòpu, 896 Giarratana: kirikòwpù).

What emerges as significant here is the formal proximity of the north-eastern type PRICÔPU to the medieval Maltese Percopu, and, more particularly, the striking similarity of the south-eastern CHIRIC(U)ÔPU to Maltese Kirkop (medieval Kercheppu). It is surely no coincidence that CHIRIC(U)ÔPU 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 PRICÔPU 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 berqāq 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 cross with the contemporary common nouns pricopu/*pircopu/*percopu and chirciopu. This would also explain the premature loss of the yod element (intact in modern Sicily and Calabria: Procopio, Procopi) even before apocope became widespread in Romance Maltese, thus

*Percopiu ‘Procopius’ x *percòpu ‘apricot’ > Percopu(> Percop)

*Percopiu ‘Procopius’ x *kirkòpu, 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 chirciòpu ‘apricot’ in modern Maltese: clearly the position of the native berqāq was never seriously challenged.

The Maltese berqāq shares a common etymology with the west Sicilian type VRACOCU (FRACCCOU), both forms coming directly from the Maghrebine Arabic barqāq. This same Arabic word with a concreted definite article (al-barqāq) is the source of most of the modern European names of the fruit: Spanish albaricoque, Portuguese albaricoque, Catalan albercòc (> Sardinian baracòcco, bircòcco), French abricot (> English apricot, German Aprikose). Modern Greek berykókko. Arabic barqāq is a borrowing from the Byzantine Greek praikōk (kion), in turn derived from the imperial Latin praecocuim (prunum) ‘precocious (i.e. early-ripening) plum’, a popular name for what was otherwise termed armeniaca (cum prunum ‘Armenian plum’).

Sicilian pìrcòpu, prícopu, chircì(u)òpu, unlike vraccòcu, fraccòcu, were not taken from Arabic, but derive directly from the late Latin PRÆCOQUUM (classical PRAECOX). However on the Italian mainland this word, where it occurs, usually has the different meanings of ‘quince-plum’ (lt. pesca cotonog) and (in Calabria) ‘large clingstone peach’ (lt. pesca duricina), cf. the continental forms percorcù, pricòpu, pricopu, cricòpu, chirciuòpu). The general South Italian term for ‘apricot’ is cresòmmulu, from an Italo-Greek chrysómulo ‘golden apple’ (cf. It. pomodoro in the different sense of ‘tomato’). (Al-)barqāq occurs only in parts of Apulia (vermèccoca - colourfully crossed with verme ‘worn’) and Lucania (vermèccoca) 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 romanunza, spirito semelico. 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; Chircopp will be found today in the Palermo telephone directory, and the name Percoco, Percuco 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 Percuccu”.

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2 In the Penguin Dictionary of Surnames (1967), Basil Coltie explains the English surname Kirkup as meaning ‘church valley’ and embodying the Old Norse kirka and the Anglo-Saxon hop (cf. the surname Hope).

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

4 Sli-MiÈm Malti (Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1978), Vol. 5, p. 112.

5 Ibid.


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

10 This is my own correction of the standard but unlikley 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 opitumus ‘che ha gli occhi punti, oisia guasti’ (Pintau).

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. Rohlfis, Dizionario dei cognomi e dei soprannomi in Calabria (Ravena, 1979), p. 215. According to Rohlfis, the modern form of the name in Greece is Prokopis.

13 In Classical and eastern Arabic the term means ‘plum’; mísání being the normal word for ‘apricot’.

14 The apricot, like the peach (Lat. málum ‘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 armeniaca, armagnuoli; 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 krisiònu.

16 The Neapolitan hinterland uses the form libbòrgese ‘apricot’, a borrowing from Spanish (albicocca = the Mozarabic development of PERSICA), cf. also Calabrian limburga, Sicilian abiùgù, Abuanè lumbrèu.