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THE MORISCO AND HISPANO-ARABIC CULTURE
AND MALTA

Some highlights on late medieval and early modern links

In general it is believed that it was the impact of the Great Siege (1565) coupled with the ‘gloire’ of the regime of the Knights of St John and the so-called economic desciclanismo policies of French Grand Masters La Cassiere and Loubenx de Verdale in the 1570s and the 1580s¹ that put the Maltese islands on the European map. If one views the hundreds of historical, geographical, political or theological works and the innumerable travelogues of the late 16th, 17th and 18th centuries which deal with Malta and the Order’s state, one grasps the meaning of this perspective. Central and North European travellers who visited Malta before the Great Siege and wrote in greater detail about its culture and social situation, were André Thevet (1549), Nicolas de Nicolay (1551) or Fuerer von Haimendorf (1564)², who may be regarded as exceptions.

As up to 1530 the Maltese islands were under the dominion of the crown of Aragon, and following 1530 when Malta was granted to the Knights of St John as a fief through the Spanish king and emperor of the Holy German Empire Charles V³, the Maltese islands and their specific cultural heritage had achieved a wider development from the Hispanic world. Many of the characters of Spanish 16th and early 17th century autobiographic literature have the Mediterranean as the setting or background of their exploits and adventures. Many of them have ample references to Malta and the knights. With the exception of the biography of the soldier of fortune Alonso de Contreras who later became a knight of the Order himself,⁴ these writings are totally neglected by Maltese scholars. Ironically Contreras was only a mediocre author and much more gifted writers dealt with Malta. The contemporary Ordoñez de Cevallos, who even travelled to America, used Malta only briefly as the background of his bloody revenge story of an Andalusian lady⁵, while the Duque de Estrada, one of the most famous heroes of the time, gives more details about his various visits to the island and his prestigious

2. The quoted dates indicate the year when these travellers and authors visited Malta. For further details regarding these persons or their stay at Malta see the monograph by Th. Frelle, The life and adventures of Michael Heberer von Brettten (Malta, 1997).
3. In Spain Charles V. ruled as King Carlos I.
4. See Contreras’ autobiography, The Life of Captain Alonso de Contreras, Knight of the Military Order of St John ... (translated from the Spanish by Catherine Alison Philips), (London, n.y.)
5. Pedro Ordoñez de Cevallos, Viage del mundo (Madrid, 1614).
receptions by the old *bon vivant* Grand Master Antoine de Paule. Another interesting author who started his *Vida* in the course of his service as a soldier in Malta in 1612 was the Castillian Miguel de Castro6.

This automatically leads to a comparison with a genre of literature then enjoying widespread popularity: the Spanish *picaro* novels which embrace elements of travel literature, chivalric novel, biography, as well as farce. The semi-fictional characters of these novels are motivated to see the foreign world by a search for adventure, fame, money, and, most of all, *honra* (reputation). The heroes of the works by Cervantes, Quevedo, Lope de Vega, Gongora, or else in the autobiographies of adventurers like Alonso de Contreras or Miguel de Castro, set out for the foreign world on a journey in a struggle for *honra*, personal success, and wealth. Rich in experience, they returned home disillusioned and tempered. Many of them close their writings by indicating the utility of their reports for the education and the instruction of others. In this the Duque de Estrada’s work does not differ much from the contemporary autobiographical notes of the members of the lower strata as the Madrilene Alonso de Contreras, a friend of Lope de Vega’s, or the Castillian soldier Miguel de Castro. Their works make interesting reading especially for their contribution to Maltese literature studies. However they will not form the gist of this paper.

Primarily, this essay investigates the awareness which may have been shaped by the inherently ethnological and political circumstances of late medieval and 16th century Spain. Secondly, this exercise exposes how fruitful a deeper investigation of the Spanish archives—apart from obvious political aspects—would be to gain a wider illuminating insight into the cultural and especially linguistic patrimony of 15th and 16th century Malta.

These last two or three decades have witnessed an intense investigation into the subject of the Maltese language, and especially through the works of Godfrey Wettinger and Michael Fsadni7, Arnold Cassola8, Joseph M. Brincat9, Joseph Aquilina10, and Albert Friggieri11, the origins, roots and development of written Maltese and the further shaping of this Semitic language by way of an admixture of Italian, French, Spanish and Greek influences gained more transparency. Up to 1968, the six-page word list presented by the German scholar and ‘Ordinarium historiographicus’ Hieronymus Megiser in his ‘Propugnaculum Europae’ (first edition Leipzig, 1606)12 was thought to be the first written specimen of the Maltese language13. Then, it was Godfrey Wettinger and Michael Fsdani who came across the ‘cantilena’ of the Maltese Pietro Caxaro written around 145014.

The latter example leads us to the period when Malta was under the dominion of the Crown of Aragon (1284–1530)15. The status of the Maltese islands and their part in the sphere of the powerful Aragonese empire can be defined as an eastern frontier and naval base16, as well as an intersection of commercial exchange between the western and eastern Mediterranean17. The role of Malta engulved between the Aragonese—later Castille-Aragonese empire—and the western Mediterranean ‘common market’, were never limited only to aspects related to politics, strategic and economical interests, but also embraced a special

15. The best survey of this period to date is presented by A.T. Lutrull, ‘Approaches to Medieval Malta’, in, A.T. Lutrull (ed.) *Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the knights* (London, 1975), pp. 1–70. In fact the change of dynasty in 1412 when Fernando de Antequera, a prince of Castille, was chosen King of Aragon made no deep difference to the relationship of Malta to the Aragon country. Fernando de Antequera and his successors ruled the Aragonese confederation much as their ancestors of the House of Catalon-Aragon had done. Still useful to consult is also P. De Jove y Hevia, *Indagaciones acerca de la dominacion de Espana en Malta de 1285 a 1530* (Madrid, 1863).
16. This idea of Malta as a naval base was already mentioned in the ‘Libre de fine’ of the famous author and religious visionary from Mallorca Ramon Lull. Lull wrote his visions about the concept and spirit of the Christian Crusade of the 13th century. For the reference to Malta cf. ‘Raymondi Lulli Libellus de fine’ ed. by A. Gottron, ‘Ramon Lulls Kreuzzugszeiten’ in, *Abhandlungen zur Mitleren und Neueren Geschichte* Vol. 39 (Berlin Leipzig, 1912), here p. 86. In the course of his various travels through the western and central Mediterranean which led him also to Sicily and Tunisia, Lull might have visited also the Maltese islands.
17. One should also not forget that the Aragonese crown, had for a time, strong ambitions of conquering parts of the Morea and the Greek islands.
It is interesting to note however that some noble families of Moorish descent were able to integrate themselves into the Spanish nobility and consequently figure among the leading classes of Andalusia. Especially noteworthy is a member of this class of Andalusian nobility who left a deep impact on Maltese history too. It was Juan de Venegas, whose original ancestors—Venegas de Cordoba—hailed from Granada, and who between 1599 and 1622 played a key role in the exceptional revival of the Pauline cult in Malta centring around St Paul’s Grotto at Rabat. While in Malta, during the first decades of the 17th century, he became known as ‘Fra Giovanni della Grotta di San Paolo’

22. From the Maltese point of view, especially considering a number of petitions and ‘memories’ against the king’s decision, one is of particular interest as it not only reflects how well aware the Spanish were of the situation then prevailing at Malta, but also gives an insight into the use of the Maltese language as found in the


26. For this ‘prematica’ and its consequences see the works listed supra.

27. This policy of repression and deterrence finally led to the complete expulsion of the Moriscos in 1609. Its consequences for the Spanish economy, culture and science were disastrous.
Although speaking an ‘Arabic’ tongue, just a few months prior to the ‘memoria’ of the Morisco knight, the Maltese had proved to be faithful Christians in the course of the Great Siege endured against the Turks. But Nufiez Muley also points out the ‘technical’ side and consequences of the edict by Philip II. As the local people in Malta (‘esta ysla’) and those in Andalusia and the other Spanish dominions, many of the Moriscos would not know how to speak and write another language if not their ‘own’ Arabic strain: ‘...y creo que dizen las misas en muchas partes susodichas como en esta ysla en aravigo en no saben hablar ni escrivir castellano los unos ni los otros’. It was the contemporary scholar and traveller from Granada Luis del Marmol Carvajal who in his description of the Morisco insurrection presents a short conclusion of the ‘memoria’ of his Granadine fellow citizen Francisco Nufiez Muley. The passage relevant to the linguistic aspects here dealt with reads as follows: ‘Pues vamos a la lengua Arabiga, que es el mayor inconveniente de todos, como se a de quitar a las gentes su lengua natural con que nacieron y se criaron? Los Egipcios, Suriandes, Malteses y otras gentes Christianas, en Arabigo hablan, leen, y escriuen, y son Christianos como nosotros, y aun no seha ilara que en este reyno se aya hecho escritura, contrato, ni testamento en le tra Arabiga desde que se convirtio.’

Unfortunately, lack of sources does not allow us to have a fuller knowledge of Francisco Nufiez Muley’s biography or his exact social and educational ‘milieu’. Likewise, we do not have a detailed insight of the sources which Nufiez Muley...

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28. For the most recent and comprehensive collection of essays about the Order’s rule in Malta see V. Malia-Milanes (ed.), Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798. Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem (Malta, 1993).


33. It is obvious that the numerous books and pamphlets about the Great Siege published immediately after the momentous events to immortalise Christian prestige, more or less paid tribute to the bravery of the Knights. Well-known and often quoted by modern scholars is the Spanish version of Balbi de Corregio’s eyewitness account La Verdadera Relacion de todo lo que este año de 1565 ha sucedido en la Isla de Malta (Alcalá, 1567) (further editions were printed in 1588 and 1598 in Barcelona) and Pietro Genti’s El suceso de la guerra de la potestisima armada del gran Tyrano Turco, Ottoman Soliman, venida sobre la Isla de Malta: en la qual se cuenta particularmente lo que en ella passo, en la victoria que los christianos havieron en ella (Barcelona, 1566). For a contemporary description in Latin of the Great Siege then available in Spain cf. Conte Gironimo Alessandri, De accurto ac omnium difficillimo Turcarum Bello in Islam Meline gesto, anno 1565 (Venice, 1566).

34. Less known Spanish descriptions of what happened in 1565 in Malta are Pedro de Salazar’s Hispania Victrix. Historia en la qual se cuenta muchas guerras sucedidas entre Christianos e infieles assi en mar como en tierra desde el año de mil y quinientos y quarenta y seys hasta el de sestenta y cinco (Madrid, 1570), cf. especially pp. 156 seq. or Diego de Santisteban Osorio, Primera y segunda parte de las guerras de Malta y toma de Rodas (Madrid, 1599). For the raid on Gozo and the attack carried out on Malta in 1551 cf. Pedro de Salazar, Historia de la Guerra y presa de Africa. Con la destruccion de la villa de Monazter, y ysla del Gozo, y perdida de Tripol di Berberia, con otras muy nuevas cosas (Naples 1552). It is most likely that the learned Francisco Nufiez Muley knew about the publications of Balbi, Alessandri or Genti. For another contemporary scholar and traveller from Granada who wrote about Malta see Luis del Marmol Carvajal, Descripcion General de Africa (Madrid, 1595) (further), for Malta see Vol. 1, f. 276 et seq. Marmol Carvajal’s historiographical work was published for the first time in 1573.


consulted when he referred to the linguistic and cultural situation related to Malta in those times. He was certainly familiar with one or two of the numerous pamphlets describing the Great Siege published in his own time. But none of these accounts deal with the use of the Maltese language. To understand this leading figure in Morisco politics we have to take a look at the broader political and social context of the times. Growing fear of Turkish penetration in the western Mediterranean in the 1560s and the ever present danger posed by the Turks who aspired after expansion, or the possibility of a Morisco rebellion which would have turned Andalusia and the south west coast of Spain into a bridgehead leading to a Mohammedan invasion of the entire Iberian peninsula, led the Spanish crown to an ostracizing policy against the Moriscos’, which left no space for any compromise. In fact many Moriscos’ of the old kingdom of Granada still had relatives living in Tetuán, founded by Granadine Moriscos’, who had emigrated after the Christian conquest of Granada in 1492.36

That Malta soon became involved in the events of Andalusia and Spain in general, became obvious when a certain Morisco was tortured by the Inquisition in summer 1565 (the Great Siege of Malta was still in progress) and had revealed that the Moriscos’, were ready to seize the main ports along the Granadine coastline should the Turks succeed in capturing Malta.37 However, not all Morisco spies sent to Malta seem to have passed incognito. In fact Grand Master de Valette seemed to have been so well informed about the likeliness of a great Morisco upheaval in Spain, that he warned Philip II of Spain through a letter about this oncoming danger.38 To anticipate the possibility of a Morisco rebellion or the threat of a Turkish invasion the Spanish rulers laid out plans for the formation of a municipal militia throughout Andalusia; moreover, in Granada, all staunch old Christian households were ordered to furnish themselves with arms. Spain’s

Archivo de Simancas hosts documents dating from that time which show that through a direct Turkish order, Morisco spies were sent to Malta to collect as much information as possible about the Spanish naval strength in the Mediterranean.40 It is quite certain that Francisco Núñez Muley was well aware of the existence of these Morisco spies who had connections with Malta, and may consequently have had first hand information related to linguistic and cultural aspects related to Malta.

As in the case of Francisco Núñez Muley, knowledge about the life, fate and activities of an earlier Hispano-Arabic author may be of further interest in shedding some light in the development of the Maltese language which up to now is far from complete and satisfying. Fray Anselm Turmeda, born (ca. 1355) in the Aragonese island of Mallorca,41 was a Franciscan brother (‘de la Orden de los Frailes Menores’42) who engaged himself in a wide field of theological, natural, medical and literary studies.43 It was here that Turmeda first got interested in oriental disciplines and the Koran. In the late 1380s he finally travelled to Tunis, then capital of the mighty empire of the Hafsid. His voyage first led him to Sicily, from whence he might have travelled on to the Maltese islands.44 Presumably, he found shelter within a Franciscan convent in Tunis45; some time later practising as a physician to sultan Abu al-Abbas Ahmed. Around 1390 Turmeda must have abjured his Christian faith for the Muslim religion, consequently adopting his new name ‘Abdallâh ben Abdallâh al-Taryumân al-Mayûrqi al-Muhtadi’.46

36. Archivo de Simancas; Estado 149—14.
39. Ambitions and abilities which also led him to study at the University of Bologna. Cf. in detail M. de Epa’za, 165, pp. 117 et seq.
40. About this voyage see in more detail M. de Epa’za, 165, pp. 95—112. Turmeda was not the first man of letters from Aragon who travelled to the Maltese islands is related by the fate of the Aragonese-Jewish cabbalist scholar Abraham ben Samuel Abadlia. Between 1285 and 1288 this scholar is reported to have lived in exile on the little island of Comino. It was here that he wrote his ‘Sefer ha-Ot’ (‘The book of the Sign’) Cf. Jewish Encyclopedia 1 (New York, 1901), pp. 141 et seq., cf. also J. Galea, ‘Kennima’ in, Magosus Organ of the Malta Geographical Society Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1947, pp. 25 et seq.
41. A Franciscan convent at Tunis is documented at the beginning, of the 14th century. It belonged to the province of Catalonia. Cf. P. Sanahuja, Historia de la serafica provincia de Gaudana (Barcelona, 1959), p. 65.
42. Which literally means ‘Abdallâh the translator, the Mallorcan, the good guide’. For further details regarding the origin of this name see M. de Epa’za, 165, pp. 136.
Lack of space prevents us from expanding further upon the extensive activities and writings by ‘Fara Anselm Turmeda, ilamado tambien Abdalláh’ 47. What is certain is that henceforth he carried out his studies in Tunisia 48. His profound studies in literature, natural science, astrology and poetry soon became known throughout the entire Western Mediterranean, and in 1402 the Aragonese viceroy of Mallorca, Roger de Moncada, had promised to issue a safe conduct for Turmeda should he ever return to Mallorca and reconvert to the Christian faith 49. In 1412 the same guarantee for a safe passage in favour of Turmeda, should he reconcile himself to Christianity, was endorsed in a bull by Pope Benedict XIII 50. In both instances Turmeda refused. Up to that time, Turmeda had carried out his writings in Catalan. Around 1420 he finally completed his major ‘oeuvre’ — the ‘Tufhat al-adhib fi al-radd ala ah al-salih’ — entirely in Arabic. This, presumably, was his last work before his death a few years later 51.

According to some previous published study by Mikel de Epalza 52, this anti-Christian’s writing might contain the first hitherto known references to written Maltese 53. When referring to Christian rites and liturgy Turmeda’s text uses words and phrases which seem clearly separated from the Arabic then spoken and written in the Maghreb 54. That Turmeda could hardly dictate those words out of his own Tunisian environment is due to the non-existence of autochthonous Christian communities in the Maghreb, absent for a long time 55. One of the most striking examples is the word ‘kansiya’ (church) which is frequently used in the ‘Tufta’ 56. This word cannot be normally found in Arabic or in any derivative dialect of Arabic then spoken in Tunisia 57. It appears to be an old form of the modern Maltese word ‘knisja’. Again, an old Maltese expression seems to be the phrase ‘safīfī al-kansiya’ 58 (benches in the church). Similarly when referring to the consecration ‘hādā yismī’ 59 (this is my body) it appears to be different from the ‘normal’ North African Arabic and should thus be derived from a Christian arapphonic tongue. These words seemed to have not existed in early 15th century Tunisia but only in the nearby Maltese islands. There can be hardly any doubt that Islam was the religion of the absolute majority of the Maltese inhabitants from the 10th century down to the Norman conquest (1091—1127). This is testified by references dating to the early Norman rule. The numerous 12th and 13th century Muslim tombs found in Malta and Gozo also indicate that the revival and growth of the Christian population was a very gradual process. Furthermore, in 1175, the Bishop Burchard of Strassburg, who touched Malta on his way to Egypt, was then currently writing about an island named ‘Maltha, distans a Sicilia per viginti miliares (...) Sarracenis inhabitata, et (...) sub dominio regis Sicilie’ 60, which proved that the inhabitants had definitely kept their ‘Saracenic’ culture and Arabic character 61. When in 1224 and 1249 Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen expelled the Muslims from Malta and Sicily this was not an act of ethnic cleansing but solely a religious and political affair. To escape expulsion, in all probability,

47. Turmeda was referred to in this manner in a letter by the Aragonese king Alfonso el Manganimo. Cf. A. Calvet 1914 pp. 52 et seq.
50. This ball was published by J.M. Pou y Marti, ‘Sobre fray Anselmo Turmeda’, in, Boletin de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona No 7, (1914), pp. 465—472.
51. The exact date is not known. Turmeda’s modern biographers point to a period between 1425 and 1430 as the time of his death. Cf. the works mentioned, supra. Cf. also J.M. Miret y Sans, ‘Una visita al tomba del escritor catalan Fra Anselm en la ciudad de Tunis’ in, Bulletin de Centro Excursionismo de Catalunya (Barcelona, 1910). For a 19th century British traveller touching upon this subject cf. N. Davis: Tunis or selections from a journal during a residence in that Regency (Malta, 1841), pp. 6 et seq.
53. De Epalza touches upon this subject briefly. As he was not familiar with the history and the shaping of the Maltese language he did not recognise the importance of his findings. This unfamiliarity is shown when he claims that there is no proof of written Maltese before the 17th century ‘... pero el maltés, lengua viva, no ha tenido literatura escrita hasta el siglo XVII...’ M. de Epalza, 1994, p. 164. Most of the information about Maltese linguistics was derived by de Epalza from J. Aquillina’s article ‘Maltese as a mixed Language’ (in, Journal of Semitic Studies Vol. 3, 1958), a work which is superseded by modern research. All in all, however de Epalza’s study of the ‘Tufta’ is a very well researched and highly evaluated work.
55. In a few scattered localities Christianity in North Africa survived to around the 11th century.
57. Where generally the term ‘kanisa’ is used.
58. Cf. ‘Tufta’, 1994, p. 355. ‘Cuando se han reunido los cristianos para las oraciones y han ocupando las hileras de la iglesia el sacerdote echa un poco de vino de la botella en la copa de plata y trae el pan ácido en un lienzo limpio. Después se pone delante de las hileras, dirigiéndose hacia Oriente (...)’. Spanish translation of the Arabic by Mikel de Epalza. Epalza also prints the Arabic original version of the ‘Tufta’.
a substantial amount of the local population had accepted formal baptism. From here onwards we may then consider an adoption and assimilation of Christian liturgical words and phrases\(^{62}\).

In general, the language spoken in Malta contemporary to Anselm de Turmeda, with the exception of those 'Christian' phrases, could not be too distant from the Arabic then spoken in Tunisia. Owing to the importance of these passages dealing with Christian liturgy and rites Turmeda must then have consulted ‘un cristiano arabofono’, perhaps a Maltese\(^ {63}\). This source also opens up a new field of investigation for other words contained in the ‘Tuha’, not current in Arabic, as the formula for baptism ‘una n strokes i s'uka’ or the word ‘sabg’\(^ {64}\) (soutane).

There is obviously room for further speculation and interpretations of Turmeda’s ‘Tuha’ and its ‘Maltese’ references. This work definitely deserves further study from linguists who may interpret more precise connotations and conclusions. What is also interesting is that a deeper study of the Arabic caliphats in Spain, the Mozarabic culture and the later interactions of the Spanish Moriskos', with their Mediterranean contacts would most probably unearth further precious information about late medieval and early modern Maltese culture and linguistic origins\(^ {65}\).

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\(^{62}\) For the expulsion cf. A.T. Lutrell, 1975, pp. 37 et seq. See also G. Wettinger, ‘The Arabs in Malta’, in, Mid-Med Bank Limited, Report and Accounts 1984, pp. 22 – 37, here p. 32. For the roots of the language spoken at the time in Malta cf. the closing statement by Joseph M. Brincat which reflects the present trend of modern research: As to the Maltese language its roots must be sought in Sicilian Arabic as it was spoken just before and during the Norman period.’


\(^{63}\) Which is also confirmed by M. de Epsalza, 1994, p. 163 et seq.


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