

The Origin of the 'Maltese' Surnames

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Early in Angevin times, less than half a generation from the proscription of Islam from Malta, government officials were repeatedly enjoined to keep personal records in the form of names and surnames. It might be taken that these merely implied that the use of nicknames would not be tolerated, as would be the case had the directions been made in our times, when it is still a commonplace that, in several parts of the Maltese islands nicknames, are popularly perhaps more widely used and known than the surnames themselves. However it must be emphasized: the real background of the government requirement was the then still prevailing survival of Arabic naming customs. This differed radically from the one that had been growing up and spreading throughout Europe since the year 1000 AD and was then being spread to the recently Christianized lands of Andalusia, the Balearic Islands, Sicily and Malta. The present study is concerned specifically with what seems to have happened in the Maltese Islands.

As late as 1241 Islam was still numerically strong in the Maltese Islands. The royal commissioner Giliberto Abate reported that Malta then had a total of 681 Saracenic households compared to the mysteriously small number of Christian ones: 47. The figures for Gozo are 155 Saracenic households and 203 Christian.¹ Ibn Khaldun puts the expulsion of Islam from the Maltese Islands to the year 1249. It is not clear what actually happened then, except that the Maltese language, derived from Arabic, certainly survived. Either the number of Christians was far larger than Giliberto had indicated, and they themselves already spoke Maltese, or a large proportion of the Muslims themselves accepted baptism and stayed behind. Henri Bresc has written that there are indications of further Muslim political activity on Malta during the last Suabian years.² Anyhow there is no doubt that by the beginning of Angevin times no professed Muslim Maltese remained either as free persons or even as serfs on the island.

On 22 May 1271 Bertrando de Real, the magister and castellan of Malta was instructed to keep a note of *the names and surnames* of those who transported the falcons to the royal court from Malta.³ He had similarly to note the names and

1. A. Luttrell, 'Giliberto's Report on Malta 1241', *Proceedings of History week 1993*, ed. K. Sciberras, Malta 1997, 1-30.
2. H. Bresc, 'Società e politica in Sicilia nei secoli XIV e XV', *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale*, vol. 70, 273.
3. Vincenzo Laurenza, 'Malta nei documenti Angioini del R. Archivio di Napoli', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, V, 1-4 (1934), doc. xv, 115.'

surnames of the serfs who had servile duties to perform towards the royal estates, together with those of the other members of their families of both sexes together with their ages.⁴ The French soldiers engaged two years later for garrisoning duties in the Castle-by-the-Sea had similarly to be listed by name and surname.⁵ The latter does not occasion any remark, but the serfs in particular must have been largely descended from local Muslims and almost certainly still followed Muslim and Arab traditions in their personal and family nomenclature. In 1277 the authorities in Naples ordered the release of the widow, son and two daughters of the late castellan Robbertus Caffuri, and of their goods which had been distrained in view of an investigation into Caffuri's alleged extorsions, but directed that a number of sufficiently wealthy persons should stand surety on the family's behalf, listed by name and surname, *nomina et cognomina*. Fortunately, an official copy of the list of 38 names and surnames has survived, drawn up and authenticated by Notary Antonius de Cappillerio, Martinus Calleya, the baglio Benedictus de Chaggio, Andreas de Calemera and Symon de Bonanocte (witnesses), providing the first direct evidence of the surnames then current on Malta:⁶

Dionisius de Barba, Guillelmus de Asmundo, Leo de Ayaco, Jacobus ..., Albertus de Farlo, Girardus Machaliphus, Marcus de Asmundo, Robbertus de Bidoso, Nicolaus de Friderico, Nicolaus de Capua, Michael de Assante, Dominicus de Vetulo, Jacobus de Messana, Simon Schiucha [*sic*, Schiricha?], Raynaldus Ramia, Dominicus Far, Benedictus Machalephus, Nicolaus Cubu [*sic*, Cumbu?], Silvester Buruchus, Jacobus Bellus, Iugus Quairatus, Andreas Cafarnia, Bartholomeus de Rosicario, Leo Caley, Raymundus de Cachuro, Maynus Picardus, Paschalis de Barba, Petrus Caniclenus, Jacobus Alayno [*sic*, Alaymo?], Gualterius de Avaracio, Guido Resta, Dardanus de Famiya, Andreas de Messana, Johannes de Melacio, Nicolaus Grecus, Benedictus Xenii, Robbertus Yella [*sic*, Vella?], Johannes de Mistretta.

It will be noticed that these persons belonged to the wealthy class and they obviously did not include any serfs or peasants. That explains why the list does not include any surnames of Arabic derivation. The surname *Far* which has been hitherto regarded as deriving from an Arabic or Maltese nickname meaning exactly 'a field rat' is most probably derived instead from the place-name near Messina called lo Faro:⁷

4. *Ibid.*, doc. xix, same date, p. 117. Unfortunately these particular records have not survived.
5. *Ibid.*, doc. xxxiii, dated 20 March 1273, 128.
6. Ruggiero Moscati, 'Fonti per la storia di Malta nel Regio Archivio du Stato di Napoli', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, n.s. VII, 4 (1936), 506, doc. dated 3 May 1277 inserted in doc. xxvi, dated 13 December 12??.
7. E. De Felice, *Dizionario dei cognomi italiani* (Milano, 1978), 122, s.v. Faro.

it led to the formation of the place-name Rahal Far, now Hal Far.⁸ It is interesting to find the surname Ramia, itself undoubtedly giving rise to the Siggiewi place-name Rahal Ramija, now Harramija. The surname Assant, now Sant, is recorded once in the place-name Casali Tamim Assant, Hal Tmin. Melacio refers to the Sicilian town of Milazzo and seems to have been modified eventually to form the Maltese or Gozitan surname of Mejlaq, morphologically an Arabic diminutive form.⁹ As such it has survived to the present time and has travelled round the world. Grech of course is still a very common Maltese surname, unlike Picardus, another ethnic surname. Micallef is also still a very common Maltese surname. In the late fourteenth century it is recorded to have been held by Maltese Jews.¹⁰ Buruchus itself was probably a Jewish surname in spite of the 'Christian name' Silvester.

From the whole list only Asmundo, Barba and Friderico are undoubtedly patronymics, that is formed from an ancestor's first name. By far the larger number refer to localities of origin: Ayaco (Ajaccio?), Capua, Mistretta, Messina, Far(o), Milazzo, Alaymo (?). For Calleya a Greek origin has been claimed by no other than Commendatore Abela. Seeing that its presence in this list antedates Malta's connection with Spain by a few years, he could very well be right.

The list represents precisely the type of Christian settlers on Malta one expects in post-1127 times, those who reintroduced their religion into the island which was otherwise apparently still solidly Muslim until well into the thirteenth century. They had no direct connection with the recently converted peasants largely or completely reduced to the status of serfs. Most of the surnames in the list did not survive in the Maltese Islands down to the fifteenth century.¹¹ Even as late as 1419 the survivors are still largely to be found mostly concentrated at Mdina and Rabat and possibly the larger villages.¹²

8. In my *Place-names of the Maltese Islands* I gave what I then thought were unanswerable reasons for thinking the surname Far was of Arabic origin. I was not then aware of its presence in this particular list.
9. It is therefore not derived from the Maltese word *mejlaq*, a strop; that would make excellent dictionary sense but no real sense; its current form recalls that of the surname *Sejkel*, perhaps derived from the name of the Sicilian town of *Seiceli*, again possibly an Arabic diminutive form, but *Sejkel* could possibly have another independent Arabic derivation. Diminutives were in fact favourite forms for surnames derived from names of foreign towns or showing ethnic origins; thus Pullicino from Polizzi, Majurkino from Majorca, Turentinu from Taranto [?], Tartarni [ie. Tartarini] from Tartar (only surviving in the place-name Rahal Tartarni).
10. Machaluffi was the name of a Gozitan Jew retained in captivity at Tunis on the turn of the fifteenth century: Archivio di Stato di Palermo, Real Cancelleria, vol. 40, ff. 16-17, doc. dated 14 May 1403.
11. Asmundo, Ayaco, Farlo, Bidoso, Capua, Vetulo, Ramia, Buruchus, Bellus, Quairatus, Cafarnia, Rosicario, Cachuro, Picardus, Caniclenus, Avaracio, Resta, Famiya, Xenii, Yella and Mistretta. Barba and Friderico did not survive the fifteenth century, and Far died out also at about the same time.
12. This is of course not true of Calleya, Michallef and Grech or Mejlaq.

Such upper-class surnames have also been found on the island of Gozo for the year 1299.¹³ These include:

Gulliellmus de Malta miles
 Clara de Rocca, uxor Gullielmi de Malta
 Lukina sua filia
 Raynaldus de Barba judex Gaudisii
 Manfridus de Arcudio judex Gaudisii
 Johannes de Permunto judex Hgaudisii
 Leo de Puntetremulo notarius
 Andreas comes insularum Malte et Gaudisii
 Nicolaus de Lentini notary
 Henricus de Montemurro witness
 Chone de Lerro witness
 Guillelmus de Tynart witness
 Jacobus Ssuavi witness
 Rogerius de Daniele witness
 Arnaten Pousalè witness (signs in Greek characters)
 Tristanus de Actardo witness

Again it would not appear that any of these persons had any blood relationship with any of the recently converted Maltese or Gozitan Muslims. Pontetremulo is Latin for Pontremoli, an Italian locality close to Carrara and was to survive abundantly on Gozo at least right down to 1551, and Actardo was a Germanic personal name which has become one of the main surnames of the two islands right down to the present day and had certainly already been closely associated with casali Actard, one of the rahal place-names, even as early as 1419. Barba has been dealt with already. Pousalè is possibly connected to the surname Psaila for which a totally different derivation has been advanced by others. None of the other surnames has survived into much later times.

A notarial document of 1324 provides another short list of surnames:¹⁴

Caterina Greca
 Basilius Limeria
 Lucas de Albano Judge of Malta
 Rogerius de Alamanno notary
 Fredericus de Burdino witness

13. H. Bresc, 'Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano', *Melita Historica*, VI, 3 (1974), 313-321.

14. *Ibid.*, 320-21.

Benedictus Camilla witness
 Benedictus Cuskerius witness
 Henricus Cuskerius witness
 Niolunus de Hasmundo witness
 Johannes de Salerno witness
 Simon Siriha witness
 Angelus Calimeta (= Calimera?)
 Bartholomeus Biseti, a priest

Ignoring Hasmundo (=Asmundo) and Siriha (=Sciricha), already noticed in 1277, one finds the appearance of well-known 'Maltese' surnames like Cuskerius and Burdino, the latter of which however has not survived to the present day. Calimera means 'Good-morning' in Greek; cf. surnames Buongiorno and Bonanno; Limeria = (Ca)limeria, similar to Milleri = (Ca)milleri.

In the circumstances it would seem that the normal way the ex-Muslims could have been provided with surnames was to use their father's name as a new family surname. Those of them who were first generation converts to Christianity, and that must have included most of them, would thus have acquired Arab personal names as surnames, some two scores of which have survived as such to the present time.¹⁵ A similar number of surnames seem to have died out during the course of the last eighty years of the fifteenth century, and an unknown number must have already disappeared between ca. 1250 and 1419, being purposely discarded perhaps for prudential reasons during times when delation to the Inquisition could have led to exile and the confiscation of their property.¹⁶ Such surnames represent only a small proportion of the Arab or Muslim names once current in Malta since those whose sons lived in times when they could keep their religion survived, if at all, only in the place-names which pepper the pages of later documentation. Thus though later documentation only provides Bugibba, Buhagiar, Buras, Busalib, Butigieg and possibly Busuttill among the kunya surnames of undoubted Arabic origin,¹⁷ place-names give us a total of some

15. All of these can or could be found in Arab countries: Abdilla, Agius, Axac, Bajjada, Buhagiar, Butigieg, Caruana, Cassar, Farrugia, Galea [perhaps from 'Ali], Randun, Mallia (=?), Mamo, Said, Saliba, Sammut, Sultana, Xerri, Xiberras, Xuereb, Zammit

16. Arexula (=Ra]un), Bakibac, Berqax, Bugibba, Buras, Busalib, Buturra, Cadide, Cadumi, Cadus, Cafor, Cagege, Cahalun, Canzuhuc, Carcar, Carchune, Chakem, Cutiti, Dejff, Dorbies, Fartasi, Gazal, Gibasal, Guaractu, Hafaride, Lificar, Mahduf, Mahnuq, Meze, Mifsud, Mihallef, Muhammad, Muhtar, Mula, Muzangar, Sabbara (Zabbara), Sansuni (reintroduced from Sicily), Tabuni, Xara., Zumahac

17. G. Wettinger, 'The Distribution of Surnames in Malta in 1419 and the 1480s', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, No. 5 (1968), examples on p.33. Bunezza, Buturra and Bucellu have been ignored as insufficiently studied. The *abu* names in the Maltese Islands are properly to be regarded as a variety of nicknames rather than *kunya* names properly so called.

twenty place-names of *kunya* form which must originally in all cases have had a personal reference: Bixrub, Biżbud, Bubaqra, Budaqq, Bufula, Buġimgha, Buġineh, Bugharbiel, Bugharien or Buhurien, Buleben, Bunixeb, Bunuhhala, Buqana, Burix, Busewdien, Busif, Buskieken, Busrawel, Butomna, Bużellaq.¹⁸ Buskieken might be represented by the surname Biscone, The others fall into one type or other of Arabic personal nomenclature.

It is here presumed that all Christian parents whether belonging to Old Christian families or to New Christian ones would normally strictly avoid giving Muslim pre-names to their offspring, and that therefore all new surnames with such an origin would have been conferred on sons of Muslims.¹⁹ This would mean that the 'Arabic' or 'Muslim' surnames would largely antedate the year 1300 by a number of decades. In the Maltese Islands a certain permanence and stability of surnames was established as early as 1300 except for the progressive elimination of Arabic or Muslim connections.

An important point to make is that few if any Arabic female names ever seem to have led to the formation of surnames. Neither Ghajxa and Mejmuna, names, incidentally, of two of the wives of the Prophet, nor Halima, Muhammad's foster-mother or nurse, ever became surnames in the Maltese Islands. However, Nuwwara, blossom, flower, and its plural Nuwwar, as well as Zahra and Zahira both became surnames, only Zahra surviving to the present time.²⁰ To these one may also add Zejne, fem. of Zejn, beautiful, pretty, beauty, grace, only recorded as a surname once in 1419 at Hal Gharghur. One may add that the words *bin* and *bint* were obviously carefully proscribed from all surnames, so that the 'Maltese' surnames do not have the equivalent of Stephenson, Johnson, O'Brian, Prichard, Fitzgerald, and so on. Possibly this was the result of a desire to distance themselves from the universal Arabic use of such words in personal nomenclature. Sephardic Jews in general, however, suffered from no such misgivings and Ben surnames can easily be found in Israel, for example among their descendants.

This brings us to another point, that several Maltese surnames of Arabic origin end in the letter -a, as if it were a feminine word when that is absent in its Arabic form. Thus one finds Raħal Farruġ among the place-names corresponding in Arabic to al-

18. G. Wettinger, *Place-names of the Maltese Islands*, xvii-xviii.

19. However, the place-name Temim Assant (Hal Tmin), probably an anthroponym, could indicate that at least occasionally Muslim pre-names remained in use among Christians, since Temim is apparently the pre-name and Assant the surname in this place-name.

20. *Idem*, 'The Distribution of Surnames in Malta in 1419 and the 1480s', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, No. 5 (1968), s.vv. For the Muslim equivalents see Salahuddin Ahmed, *A Dictionary of Muslim Names*, s.vv.

Farrug becoming a Maltese surname as Farrugia, Karwan as Caruana, Muhtar as Mughtara or Muhtara, Zabbar as Sabbara or Zabbara, Salib as Saliba,²¹ Sultan as Sultana, perhaps 'Ali becoming Galea, Rasul becoming Arexula, Bajjad becoming Bajjada, and Msid Msida. Other surnames not of pure Arabic extraction showing a final -a, which might explain the propensity of notaries to favour such an ending, include Aquilina, Barba, Barbara, Briffa, Cachia, Calleja, Cassia, Ciappara, Cusburella, Formosa, Furmica, Grima,²² Manduca, Michola, Pirera, Petrella.²³ The final -a in Abdilla has a different origin seeing that it is derived from the word *Alla*, God.

Of course, those whose father was a Christian convert adopted their father's Christian name as a surname. Thus we find patronymics of this type in Bartolo from Bartolomeus, Brincat from Pancratius, Bastianu from Sebastian, Attard from the identical Germanic personal name, perhaps Gerada from Gerardu, perhaps Clairo from Calogero, Basili, Blingkeri, Bonanno,²⁴ Bonavia, Bernardu, Hili (Sp. for Julio), Laurenzu, Luchia, Manuelli, Marinu, Nastasi, Nicolachi, Valent, Tonna, Theuma from Thomá not a nickname from *tewma*, 'garlic', Ursu, Federicu, Franciscu, Frendu and Ferrandes (Catalan or Castilian for Ferdinando), Gomes, Gusman, Micheli, Narda, Pericuni and Petrella (from Petru), Ponzu, Refalu, Ristainu.²⁵ However, it should be noted that innumerable Christian names never became patronymics in the Maltese islands during the Middle Ages so far as is known: Angeli, Blasi, Bringeli, Dimitri, Johanni, Paulu, Jacobu, Pasquale, Georgi, Dominicu, Agustinu, Philippu, Stephanu, Gregori, Ximuni, Julianu, Manfre, Marcu, Andrea, Rugeri, Martinu, and so many others. Was that because there were so few second generation Christians at the time when surnames were introduced officially and formalised in the islands? Were

21. However, cf. Saliba, burgensis Accon, an inhabitant of Acre, 16 September 1264: A. Zammit Gabarretta and J. Mizzi, *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in the Royal Malta Library*, Malta, 1964, vol. 1, 223. Saliba here is probably a pre-name.

22. Grima moglie di Donadeo, doc. 358, Grima moglie di Giovanni..., doc. 479, Grima vedova del quondam Jocar (?),..., docs. 7, 8: index entries on p. 296 in Ministro dell'Interno, Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, XXV, *Abbazia di Montevergine*, Registro delle Pergamene, a cura di G. Mongeli, OSB, vol. I (Roma 1956). See also: ... sua moglie Falegrima, abitante in Taruasi, doc. 616 dated 1177, in *ibid.*, p. 173, ... sua moglie Gaytelgrima, doc. 833, dated 1190, in *ibid.*, p. 223, Sikelgrima, figlia del giudice Aldenaro e moglie di Urso, docs. 68 and 69 dated 1065, 1066, in *ibid.*, and Adelgrima, doc. 20, dated August 1003, in *ibid.*, index entry on p. 312. All these instances of *Grima* refer to personal names.

23. G. Wettinger, 'The Distribution of surnames...', s.vv. The following surnames ending in -a have been omitted because they obviously originated from the name of a locality with that final letter: Alagona, Augusta, Asti, Bezzina, Bugeia, Calava, Carduna, Catania, Daiona, Damiata, Davula, Franza, Galata, Licata, Mazzara, Mollica, Muntana, Saguna, Sardinia.

24. For Bonanno, see Henrici de Bono Anno, 26 June 1210, in *Lanfranco (1202-1226)*, a cura di H. C. Krieger and R. L. Reynolds, "Notai liguri del secolo xii e del xiii, VI", *Società' Iigure di Storia Patria*, Genova, 1953, vol. I, doc. 605, 270.

25. Most of these can be found in the Militia List of 1419 and it is not possible to tell whether they were actually created in Malta or alternatively when they entered the island from abroad.

the figures given by Giliberto Abate after all more precise than what most historians have allowed for? Possibly it is a mere defect of our documentation. Several of them can be found in the present surnames of Malta as patronymics, usually preceded by the possessive word 'de', but these are all either later formations or intrusive surnames which did not form part of the islands' surnames during the late middle ages. On the other hand was their scarcity merely the result of a psychological reluctance to adopt Christian names as patronymic surnames in preference to other types of surnames, such as those derived from locational or nickname sources?

It is not clear when the surnames originating from nicknames were formed. Generally they go back to a post-Islamic date as surnames though as nicknames they might be much older, whether they were of Arabic or of Romance origin, and belong originally to members of any of the three religious communities in the islands, Muslim (only if of Arabic and pre-ca. 1250 origin), Jewish or Christian: Bakibac, Blancu, Chetcuti, Falca, Falzon, Fauchellu, Fantin, Felfuli, Felu, Fenech, Ferraru, Furmica, Gambinu, Gazal, Gigante, Grassu, Hafaride, Mahanuc, Mifsud, Fartasi, Mintuf. They would also include surnames resulting from occupations: Balestrera, Camilleri, Carbone, Cassar, Caxaru, Feraru, Baldachinu, Balzan, Millahi,²⁶ Others reveal personal status: Vassaldu or Vassallo, Spiteri, Chiantar, Chakem.

Ethnic surnames which started off as nicknames include Armenia and Darmanin, Alban, Albanu and Albanisi, Calabru, Caschun from Gascon, Causiri (Cosyra, Pantelleria), Cuzin from Siracusa, Urdub or Corduba (from Cordoba), Ferriolu, Gaudixi and Gaudixanu, now Gauci (Gozitan), Grech, Harabi, (A)laman, Lumbardu, Luuki and Lukisi (Lucchese), Majurkino, Malf or Melfi, Maltisi, Navarru, Pisani, Ponzu, Pullichinu, Ragonisi, Santurinu, Sardu, Savoye, Scavuni, Spanu, Turentinu, Xiruntan (Florentine), Vinicianu (but Bindiki survived as a surname down to 1417). Some are not recorded to have made it to the status of surnames: Masri, Ginui, Sindiwa, Cerkes, Tartarni. Probable ethnic names also are Curmi and Dingli, the first possibly referring to the Crimea, the latter to Dongola down south of the Red Sea. Both seem far-fetched. Some would regard Azzopardi as ethnic, associating it with the word Sephardic referring to an Oriental Jew, but the separate existence of Accio and Pardo as surnames in the twelfth century counsels caution in reaching premature conclusions.²⁷ However, the credentials of Ellul or Hellul as a Jewish name or

26. For Balzan, see Giacomo Grasso de Balçamo Mediolanensi, 31 May 1205 in Giovanni de Guiberto 1200-1211, a cura di M.W. Hall-Cole et al., "Notai liguri del secolo xii, V", Genova 1940, doc. 1360.

27. For Accio see: *Codice diplomatico della Repubblica di Genova*, "Fonti per la Storia d'Italia", Roma 1942, III, doc. 44, p. 120: Azo Rovedus, Azo Borel, giugno 1197; and Azo de Pangiano, Azo, Salvaticus, Azo Rovedus, and Azo de Avolasca in *ibid.*, doc. 50, pp. 131-132, 27 Agosto 1198. Ogerius Açopardus figures among witnesses to a notarial deed in Genoa on 4 August 1201: Giovanni de Guiberto (1200-1211), a cura di M. W. Hall-Cole et al., "Notai liguri del secolo XII, vol. V", Genoa, 1940, doc. 350 in vol. I, 173.

surname seem unimpeachable seeing that Hellul is identical with the name of a month of the Jewish calendar. Muxi for Moses must also be of Jewish extraction. Other Jewish surnames might be Parnis, Refalo, Cagege, Sansuni, Episcopu, the latter frequently resulting from the conversion of a rabbi. It has also been suggested that Muscat could also be of Jewish origin.

To the ethnic surnames one might add those that refer to Sicilian or other European towns, such as Agusta, Avula, Catania, Girgenti, Xortinu, Palermu, Madiona, Mazzara, Mullica (i.e. Modica), Naso, Oluna, Platamuni, Pontremulu, Pulisi, Ravellu, Rigio (ie. Reggio), Saguna or Sahona, Santurinu, Suria (in Spain), Tirrana, Galata. Do all these point to foreign origins for such surnames of non-Arabic origin?

It is clear that there was a consistent effort during the later Middle Ages to move away from the more obvious Arabic and Muslim names. Thus surnames like Muhammed, Xara, Canzuhuc (whatever the latter meant), Razul, Cahalun, Duhamuri, Gibasal, Hafaride, Harabi, Muzangar, Busalib, Zumahac dropped out almost completely by 1500. Others were disguised so to speak. Thus we have Calabachi from Halap (Aleppo, cf. Mtahleb and the benefice called Ta' Halap), Cusburella from Kožbor; Werratello apparently from Werrad (cf. Bin Werrad), Caruana from Karwan, Farrugia from Farruġ, and others have already been discussed. There are then those that were eventually translated into a Romance form. The clearest case is that of Dejff which was changed early in the sixteenth century into Magro or Magri. Here one must also consider that Dejff itself was not originally the Maltese or Arabic word meaning 'lean' but the Arabic word meaning 'guest' in the theophoric personal name Dejffullah.²⁸ Other possibilities of such calques can be pointed out, such as that of Salam, Salâma, Selmun, Salma into Pace, the nicknames Dnieri and Dnajjar into Aquilina, Kabir into Qrendi²⁹ which however did not survive either, the same fate that happened in the attempts to replace Fenech by Coniglo and Psaila by Cipolla.³⁰

28. This arises from the consideration that Dejffullah is a normal Arabic and Muslim theophoric name while *dejff*, meaning 'lean', has not been found in the dictionaries of Arabic or Muslim personal names. That such theophoric names frequently drop the second and divine element is also extremely common.

29. G. Wettinger, *Place-names of the Maltese Islands*, s.v. Qrendi. Cf. Laurentius Crendi of Gozo, in S. Fiorini (ed.), *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, II, Documents in the State Archives, Palermo, No. 1, Cancellaria Regia: 1259-1400*, Malta 1999, doc. 277, p. 325, dated Catania, 30 August 1399.

30. See above, p. 4 for the relationship between Pousalè and Psaila.

There is a group of surnames which seem to be of late Greek or Byzantine formation: Bonnici,³¹ Burlo,³² Cachi,³³ Calimera, Cachia,³⁴ Callus,³⁵ Callea or Calleya, Grixti, Chalpas or Chappas, Cumbo, Percopu, Cuschieri, Gamichi, Percopulli and probably Psaila. Stafrace seems to have been developed from Stauracius. The Greek connections may be vague in some cases, in others quite strong.

It is sometimes difficult to reach firm conclusions at the present stage of our knowledge of how particular surnames arose. Thus Tabone can be found throughout Italy at the present time and seems surely to be of Italian origin. Yet *tabuni*, its earliest form in Malta, means a peasant oven or kiln low on the ground which is still to be found, for example on Djerba Island in the pottery industry. Also Debono and Tabone were very likely interchangeable at one time. The surname Vella reached a frequency of some 3% in the militia lists and remains very common to the present day, especially in the north of Malta. It cannot be of Arabic origin. The common idea that it is derived from the Italian word *vela*, 'sail', seems particularly pointless. In Catalan *vella* means 'old' (fem.), raising the possibility that it replaced an original nickname *xih*, 'old' (masc), the final -a ending being the one frequently associated with surnames. The surname Borg, which disputes with Vella primacy of occurrence among Maltese surnames, could have resulted from the Sicilian town of Burgi, itself perhaps from the Greek *pyrgos*. This however would not explain its lack of occurrence in Sicily itself. It is very well known that it has a much wider occurrence in Europe, especially in

31. G. Rohls, *Dizionario storico dei cognomi nella Sicilia orientale*, p.52, s.v. Bonnici: 'da Bonnici = Bonamici (De Felice 82)?'; however, cf. s.v. Bunikis: Petros Bunikis, 1189. Cf. Johannes Bonichi in Oberto Scriba de Mercato (1186), "Notai liguri del secolo xii, IV", a cura di Mario Chiaudano, Genova 1940, doc., 220, 81 and Hospinelli Bonichi, 9 November 1203 in *Giovanni de Guiberto 1200-1211*, a cura di M. W. Hall-Cole et al., "Notai liguri del secolo xii, V", Genova 1940, doc. 997, 462.
32. G. Rohlf's, *Cognomi...*, p.5, s.v. Burlò: cfr. Burlákis cognome in Grecia. But cf. Rolandus de Burlo, 14 August 1203 in Lanfrancus (1202-1226), a cura di H. C. Krueger and R. L. Reynolds, "Notai liguri del secolo xii e del xiii, VI", Società ligure di storia Patria, Genova 1953, p. 206, doc. 463. Cf. 'homines de sexto et de Priano et de Borzoli et de Burlo debent per unumquemque due faxium de lignis', Decreto col quale si assegnano a determinati posti di guardia I cittadini chiamati a prestare servizio in persona e si indicano le coresponsioni in denaro o in derrate dovute da coloro che non dimorano nel recinto o nelle vicinanze della città, 1142?, Codice diplomatico della Repubblica di Genova, "Fonti per la Storia d'Italia, III", Roma 1942, 143, doc. 120.
33. See Boni Senioris Cachi, 3 October 1225, in *Lanfranco (1202-1226)*, a cura di H. C. Krueger and R. L. Reynolds, "Notai liguri del secolo xii e del xiii, VI", Società ligure di Storia Patria (Genova 1953, vol. II, p. 285. Doc. 1602.
34. See Giovanni de Cachia, cittadino abitante di S. Maria, 15 May 1322, in P. Egidì, *Codice diplomatico dei Saraceni di Lucera*, Napoli 1917, 396, doc. 795.
35. However: 'Il toponimo è infatti già attestato nella forma Caluxium almeno nel 1177... La sua origine più probabile va infatti ricercata nel gentilizio latino Calusius.', review by Aldo A. Setta of J. Vignano-G. Ravera, *Il "Liber decimarum" della diocesi di Ivrea (1368-1370)*, Roma 1970, in *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, vol. 25 (1971), 253.

Sweden and Spain (Borgia). One other explanation that needs serious consideration is whether it is not, after all, derived from Ambrogio, the name of one of the principal Fathers of the Church known throughout medieval Europe. Certainly Ambrogia in Malta did take the form of Burgia. Though Borg is not normally listed as an Arabic or Muslim personal name it can be found repeatedly in Sicilian Norman name lists written in Arabic or Greek as el-Burgi and in the Maltese militia lists as il Burgi. Does the 'Maltese' surname Gatt derive simply and solely from the Italian *gatto*, a cat, or is it ultimately derived from *Agata*, gr. *Agathé*?³⁶

What are we to think of the surname Mamu? In its modern form, one might be forgiven for mistaking Mamo for an undoubted Italian creation, only it is very rare in that country.³⁷ Annemarie Schimmel has suggested that the taboo on the personal name Muhammad has led to its replacement by Mamu in Mali and Kurdistan. Could that have happened in Malta where Muhammad survived surprisingly as a surname well into the fifteenth century but then mysteriously disappears, while Mamu, although missing from the Militia Lists, appears before the end of that century and waxes strong ever since. The surname Mamux, also mentioned by Schimmel similarly appears in the early Militia Lists.

On the other hand, as has been said by the present writer on several occasions, it has been possible to take the origin of the surname Mintoff back to tenth century Baghdad or thereabouts. It was immediately apparent from its occurrence in late fifteenth century notarial records from Malta and Gozo that its proper and original form was Mintuf. It immediately became imperative to discover what *mintuf* could have meant, since it is inconceivable that a person could be plucked except metaphorically, even if his surname was really Butigieg, Farrugia or Chetcuti. It was clear that the Maltese Mintuf family originated on Gozo, where it can still be found firmly established in one little area between Gharb and Żebbuġ roughly in the neighbourhood of Ghasri. Later it transpired that it is also recorded on the platee of Norman Sicily in Arabic and Greek transliteration, Iben el-Mentouf, a serf on the estate of the monastery of Monreale at Calatrasi.³⁸ Finally, the nickname has been found in Mesopotamia sometime in the lifetime of Khalif El-Mansur (136-158 A.H./ 753-774 A.D.). The traditional Arab writer 'Abd Allah b. 'Ayyach was nicknamed El-Mentouf

36. G. Rohlf's, *Dizionario storico dei cognomi nella Sicilia orientale*, Palermo 1984, 37, s.vv. Àgata, Agàti; cf. Latinised version *De Agatiis*.

37. Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Names*, "Islamic Surveys", Edinburgh 1989, p. 30.

38. Salvatore Cusa, *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia pubblicati nel testo originale tradotti ed illustrati*, 169, document of 1178.

because he had the habit of pulling at the ends of his beard while speaking. It is said that the Abbassid Khalif El-Mansur one day asked his minister Rebi' to promise this scholar a rich recompense if he stopped the habit. 'Prince of the Believers,' the vizir answered, 'He gets greater pleasure from pulling out his beard than if he obtained kingly power. How can I get him to agree to your offer?' The same nickname was held by two others.³⁹

It will be seen that surname study involves not only the preliminary documentation of the earliest occurrence of the surnames themselves in the Maltese Islands, but also much research into the dating and circumstances of their occurrence elsewhere. The field of study might range from medieval Baghdad to Renaissance Italy and Spain and involve linguistic research both of Indo-European languages as Latin, Greek, Spanish, Sicilian and Tuscan Italian as well as of Semitic tongues like Arabic and even (in a very few examples) of Hebrew itself. The dating is fundamental to such studies.

39. A.-C. Barbier de Meynard, 'Surnoms et sobriquets dans la littérature arabe', *Journal Asiatique*, Sept.-Oct. 1907, 233.