G. F. ABELA AND THE MALTESE LANGUAGE

By J. Cassar Pullicino

Much has been said and written about G.F. Abela's outstanding contribution to Maltese historical studies, and it was very fitting indeed that his death was commemorated by his compatriots in this tercentenary year. Abela lived in an age when scholars had not yet canalised their studies into special lines of research, in an age when one could still take all knowledge for one's province without incurring the wrath of fastidious but well informed critics. Several topics that are now considered as subjects in their own right with special methods or techniques were then taken by the general historian in his stride — archaeology and antiquities, political, social and economic history, mythology, language and topography claimed equally the attention of the 17th century historian. Now this was not without its advantages. Indeed, it is Abela's merit that he considered History as a whole, that he saw beyond the narrow view of political history as something apart from its social background or its ecclesiastical setting.

My intention here is to deal only with those passages scattered here and there in Abela's Descrittione di Malta which, pieced together, reflect his interest in the Maltese Language and cognate subjects — its origin, Maltese topography, family names etc. I hope that any comments we shall make on his views will not be misunderstood for it is not our purpose to detract in any way from his merit as "Father of Maltese History". His work has to be judged as a whole, and against the contemporary background.

We shall deal with the various aspects of his interest in Maltese under separate headings.

ORIGIN OF THE MALTESE LANGUAGE.

Abela set out with the specific purpose of debunking the Punic theory of the origin of the Maltese Language, which had already engaged the attention of European scholars, Ribera de Gattis (16-17th C.) a learned Maltese ecclesiastic who ended his days at Oxford, Bochart, de Gebelin, Scaliger, Munter and others all tried to establish the origin of Maltese in some way or other, and although the lexical and morphological material at their disposal must have been extremely limited, serious claims were put forward not only for a Punic and Arabic origin of the Maltese Language, but also for a Syriac and an Egyptian descent. (1).

Abela was a strong advocate of the Arabic origin of the language. He emphasized that Maltese was easily understood in N. Africa, Egypt and Syria, and that it was also related to Chaldean and Hebrew. In his opinion the Maltese spoken in his day was the Arabic language which had been corrupted, both lexically and phonetically, after the liberation of the islands from the Arabs in 1090. This admixture of the language was largely due to Malta's commerce and trade links with nearby nations, i.e. Italy and Sicily. When Malta cut off commercial relations with Africa the native Arabic language was discarded together with its use as a written medium. Indeed, for the previous 500 years, Italian and Latin had been used instead of the native language in the Law Courts. Hence the great number of loan-words which had crept in, even in the everyday speech of the Maltese masses.

Abela contended that, with the Arab conquest, Arabic immediately supplanted the original language both in Malta and in Sicily. But he was at a loss to explain why Arabic was retained in Malta after the Norman Conquest in 1090, while in Sicily, where the Saracenic occupation was more thorough, the influence of Arabic was hardly noticeable in the Sicilian speech. Abela suggested that, because Sicily was so near to Italy, its inhabitants could preserve their native dialect, limiting the use of Arabic to their relations with (1) Caruana, Ant. EM., Sull'origine della lingua maltese: studio storico, etnografico e filologico. Malta, 1896, pp. 6-7.
their Moslem rulers. Besides, when Count Roger drove out the Saracens, the Italian garrison which he left intermarried with the Sicilians and thus obliterated most traces of Arabic influence in Sicilian.

Events in Malta, continued our historian, had taken a different turn. Well-to-do families had evacuated to Constantinople when the news of the Saracen advance reached Malta. Those that remained were for the most part illiterates and they had perforce to adopt the language of the Arab conquerors. After 1090 the Norman garrison left by Count Roger lived on side by side with the Maltese and formed a small minority group. According to tradition, they also took their share of lands and estates when these were re-apportioned among the Maltese. As a result they picked up the Maltese, i.e. Arabic language without, however, discarding the Italian or Sicilian which they continued to use for official correspondence (2).

Abela’s theory makes interesting reading, but on analysis it is found to be rather vague. He tried to explain linguistic facts in terms of corresponding historical events only. His failure to explain the linguistic phenomenon in Sicily satisfactorily betrays a lack of appreciation of the natural growth of languages and of their power to assimilate foreign elements without losing their individuality. And because he could not admit this process of linguistic growth and change, he based his whole theory on the supposition that a change of rulers must necessarily and invariably, nay almost abruptly, imply a change in the people’s language, which History shows is not always the case. Abela’s linguistic theory exposed him to some indignant criticism at the hands of A.E. Caruana (3), whose strictures were not wholly unjustified.

(2) ABELA, GIO. FRANCESCO, Della Descrittione di Malta... Libro Secondo, Notitia IX. Malta, 1647, pp. 257-259.
(3) CARUANA, ANTON. EM., op. cit., pp. 8-12; 299-305.
accompanied the Knights to Malta in 1530; Hobż ta’ San Blas, small loaves distributed to the congregation by the Sacristan of St. John’s on the feast of St. Blaise; and Litra, a musical instrument, guitar introduced, according to De Soldanis, at the beginning of the 18th century (7).

ORTHOGRAPHY.

Maltese had not yet been reduced to a written system in Abela’s day. So the Maltese historian had to devise some way to write down the Maltese place-names which occupy a good part of his description. He chose the Roman letters of the Italian alphabet, to which he also adhered in the main for sound correspondences. However, he did not express the same sound by the same letter uniformly and some of his combinations are rather strange and fanciful. The more noteworthy features of his system of orthography are:

Ch denoted the ⟨h⟩ (aspirate) sound, e.g. Dachlet et Kasab, Tan Nachla.

Y, corresponding to English ⟨y⟩, denoted the modern Maltese ⟨j⟩ or long ⟨i⟩, as in Deyr et Binet and Aayn ila’ Kibira, but the same symbol appears in the diphthong ⟨ye⟩ (Modern Maltese ⟨ie⟩) as in Uyed Casrun, Dar el Duyeb.

The W sound is written indifferently as ⟨U⟩, as in Uyed el Rum, Hal Uarda, Suggeui, Bir el Usaa; or as ⟨u⟩ as in Eskak el Uati; Cerkeia and Ta Sciaueki, Bir e tayl; Ta Aasieul; Fa’ara; Maauec.

G (soft) is gi as in Italian, e.g. Targia; Ginjyna and Redum ta Segira.

G (hard), is given as ⟨gh⟩, as in Italian, e.g. Uyed Gherzuma. But ⟨gh⟩ also stands for initial ⟨gh⟩ in Hal Ghul, Ghar Etja, while initial ⟨gh⟩ is ignored and shown as a reduplicated vowel ⟨y⟩ in Aayn Ghrab and Aayn Riohna. Medial ⟨gh⟩ in Xagħra is given as ⟨aa⟩, i.e. Sciaara.

(7) R.M.L. Ms. 143a.
result that the modern student in several cases has to check the recorded version with its surviving form and pronunciation. Abela's abiding merit lies in the fact that the place-names he recorded far exceeded in number those given in any map of Malta published before or in his time. To this extent the topographical material he collected stands as a monument to his assiduity and although he was not immune from the tendency to italianise local names which was prevalent in his day, perhaps he was less so than most of his contemporaries and certainly avoided the extremely fanciful transliteration of the 19th and 20th century official and survey maps (e.g. Shileyi Tower for Torri Xulltela).

FAMILY-NAMES.

Patronymics, the study of family surnames, is nowadays considered as subsidiary to the Science of Linguistics. Surnames did not come into general use before 1400 and in tracing the family histories of some 115 families in Malta and Gozo from 1350 to 1647 (9) Abela provided the earliest material on which later scholars could draw for an ethnolinguistic study of the Maltese people (10). Abela's service in this field would have been greater had he extended his researches to families other than those belonging to the nobility and the governing stock. But Abela was breaking new ground, and one cannot help wondering how so much of enduring value could have been accomplished by one man.

TWO CASES OF MEDICO-LEGAL INTEREST

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The following cases present interesting problems from a Medico-Legal point of view and are deemed worthy of record.

I. THE GOZO CASE

On the 25th September 1954, Emmanuel Said, a young man who had returned from Australia two days before, was found dead in bed with his throat cut. His father had died two months previously and he was staying with his step-mother with whom he was not on very good terms.

Rumours went round that Said had been murdered for the sake of the money, it was presumed he had brought back from Australia, and it was even hinted that his step-mother had connived at the murder, since Said had been found dead in the same room in which his step-mother had been sleeping.

At the "levee du corps" it was found that the pillow on which Said lay was soaked with blood which had trickled down to the floor and formed a small pool under the head of the bed. A small pool of blood was also found by a table in the room adjoining the bed-room. On this table there was a broken bread and on the sill of a window overlooking the "Mandra" (a sort of enclosure with prickly pears), near which was the table mentioned, there was a pointed knife such as is used for cutting vegetables. The sides of the window were smeared with blood.

In the "Mandra" there were drops of blood on a heap of stones situated a short distance from the place, immediately under the window of the second room mentioned, as well as on some of the prickly pear trees. Drops of blood were found on the top of the boundary wall which separat-