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**[p.281] The Survival of Arabic in Malta : the Sicilian Centuries**

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*Lil Glanville, b'rahan ta' qima.*

It is only quite recently that the survival of Arabic in Malta has attracted the attention of scholars and shown itself to be something requiring an explanation. Interest in Maltese has generally tended to focus on other topics and when considering the relations between Maltese and two of the most important languages with which Maltese has come into contact, Sicilian and Italian, scholars have generally concentrated their attention on examining the Romance element and on measuring or explaining the depth of its penetration. A recent illustration of this approach is Brincat's 1991 study on 'Language and Demography in Malta.' What needs to be examined more fully is in fact the reverse of the medal, the vitality shown by the local language in its contacts with the languages of Malta's rulers. When we consider the very considerable social and demographic changes undergone by the islands in medieval times and subsequently, it is surprising to find that the islands still speak a language so very different from the highly prestigious ones that have dominated the political, social and cultural middle and upper class life of the Maltese islands over the last eight or nine centuries. It is indeed a remarkable case of linguistic conservatism.

Two scholars in particular have written on this topic during the last few years and they are both Sicilianists. The first, Alberto Varvaro, a philologist, drew attention to the phenomenon in his linguistic history of Sicily, when comparing the fate of Arabic in Sicily and Pantelleria with its fate in Malta (Varvaro 1981, 170). Varvaro later expanded his analysis in a study contrasting the linguistic history of Sicily with that of Malta and Gozo and offering explanations for their divergence [p.282] (Varvaro 1988). The second was the historian Henri Bresc who, in a monumental work on the Sicily of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, devoted several pages to what he called 'la résistance maltaise à la latinisation' ('the Maltese resistance to latinization' Bresc 1986, II, 624-8). Both scholars are medievalists: it is only during the medieval centuries that Arabic was spoken in Sicily and that a parallel could therefore be drawn with Malta's linguistic history. The pressures that had worked against the survival of Maltese Arabic during the middle Ages went on being exerted during the modern period, however, so that the resistance shown by the local vernacular to these pressures needs to be explained for the successive centuries too. In this short paper I have space only to examine the conditions that have led to the survival of Arabic in its Maltese form during the late medieval centuries and make some reference to the disappearance of Arabic in Sicily to the north and Pantelleria to the west.

The history of Malta both in antiquity and in medieval times has frequently echoed the history of its larger and close neighbour, Sicily (Varvaro 1981, 169; Varvaro 1988, 1; Bresc 1986, II, 622). Half-way through the thirteenth century, however, the history of the Maltese islands begins to diverge from that of Sicily and it does so most markedly at the linguistic level. The pressure for linguistic change away from Arabic appears to have been less in Malta than in the major island. This is seen by Varvaro to be a consequence of the marginal position of the Maltese islands in medieval times compared with that of Sicily (Varvaro 1988, 4; a more qualified position is taken by Bresc 1991, 48). Those who have studied the period have to agree with Anthony Luttrell when he writes in this context that 'confusions of race, religion, residence and language seem inescapable' (Luttrell 1991, 38), although the

complexity of the social structure in Malta cannot have matched that pictured by Varvaro for Sicily during the same period (Varvaro 1979, especially 153-6). In Sicily, Arabic petered out after the expulsion of the Muslims (Varvaro 1979, 157).<sup>1</sup> In Malta, the language not only went on being used by the native inhabitants, but it was sooner or later taken up by the several waves of settlers from the larger island and elsewhere, if not at the first, at the second or third generation, whether they were nobles, knights, notaries or artisans.

We know very little about the inhabitants of Malta and Gozo between the date of the Norman conquest (AD 1091) and the expulsion of the Muslims in 1249. During this period, Maltese and Gozitans tend to be referred to as 'Saracens' by visiting travellers.<sup>2</sup> After 1249, the information becomes less scanty and easier to interpret. From a census taken in 1241, it is possible to work out a population of about 10,000 [p.283] for the two islands, over half of which were Christian and the rest either Muslims or Jews.<sup>3</sup> The figure for Christians must have included immigrants from Sicily and elsewhere (some of whom may have been Arabic-speaking), and also recent converts to Christianity. These converts shed their religion but not their language and, together with the descendants of earlier converts, must have been numerous enough to have kept the balance of languages numerically in favour of Arabic.

The immigration movement, started under the Norman and Hohenstaufen administrations, was continued under the Angevins and, after the Sicilian Vespers of 1282, under the Aragonese (Luttrell 1975, 40-1). In the 1270s, 'for the first time a European, Latin, Christian style of government and society is clearly visible on Malta and Gozo' (Luttrell 1975, 41). In addition to administrators and troops, Bress records the arrival of merchants and usurers from Tuscany, Pisa and Amalfi (as in contemporary Sicily), and of 'specialists': notaries (for example one Tuscan and two Sicilian notaries are mentioned in a will of 1299) and what Bress calls 'siciliani colti' ('educated Sicilians'), often referred to as 'notaries' (Bress 1974, 314). Bress argues for the presence of a 'civic nobility' of knights and notaries, of mixed Maltese and immigrant origin, from the first quarter of the fourteenth century (Bress 1974, 314; 1991, 52). Although the ruling classes in the fifteenth century appear to have been mainly of foreign origin,<sup>4</sup> there are indications that Maltese indigenous families were coming to the fore in Maltese urban society and beginning to play some part in the administrative, religious and intellectual life of the islands (such as it was) (Bress 1986, II, 627; Luttrell 1991, 38). During the fifteenth century, the 'official' written language in use on the islands was Latin, frequently interspersed with phrases in Sicilian (Wettinger 1993, 151). Population figures appear to oscillate between 10,000 and 20,000 until we reach the end of the fifteenth century, but the early fifteenth century saw a marked fall, largely the result of disastrous North-African raids (Blouet 1957, 46-7).

The peasantry remained solidly Maltese. The poverty of the islands did not attract farmers or labourers, only soldiers and administrators (Bress 1986, II, 625). The immigrants appear to have resided mainly in the fortified urban areas of the two islands (the capital Mdina and its suburb Rabat, the Castellammare on the shores of the main harbour and its suburb Birgu and the Citadel of Gozo). Bress gives the attachment of the Maltese to the land and their resistance to urbanization as one of the reasons for the survival of Arabic.<sup>5</sup> We would expect, therefore, that, at this stage, the countryside spoke Arabic while the urban districts spoke also Sicilian (in the case of the Jewish population in Mdina and Gozo, Judaeo-Arabic). Luttrell has suggested that [p.284] certain classes of native Maltese that were resistant to latinization 'perhaps even used [Maltese] as a secret speech which excluded foreigners' (Luttrell 1991, 39).

The position of Pantelleria, superficially similar to that of Malta, was in fact different in a number of important respects.<sup>6</sup> It is a smaller island (about the size of Gozo) and is situated much closer to the coast of Africa. Captured early by the Arabs (circa AD 750), it was not firmly held by Sicily until 1221, after the Norman period. The small population

appears to have remained largely Arab-speaking and Muslim throughout the period that concerns us, for the Muslims were not expelled from the island until the end of the fifteenth century. The inhabitants retained a measure of independence in the management of their own affairs and were in close contact with their North-African brethren. It is significant that the rulers of Sicily shared equally with the rulers of Tunis the tribute paid by the islanders. The dichotomy between a mainly immigrant town population and a native rural population that we found in Malta and Gozo also occurred in Pantelleria, although it appears that foreign immigrants were quick to absorb Arab culture (Bresc 1986, II, 623). There is thus no indication that the position of Arabic on Pantelleria had weakened in any significant way until we come to the expulsion of the Muslims around 1480.<sup>7</sup>

To return to Malta, it is perhaps time to stop talking of Arabic and begin to speak of Maltese when referring to the local vernacular as we enter the fifteenth century. A change appears to take place in contemporary local consciousness about the language spoken on the islands. A will of 1426 speaks of *lingua arabica* (Bresc 1986, II, 625, n. 189), but ten years later a will of 1436 contains the expression in *lingua maltensi* (Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 31). A search through fifteenth-century Maltese notarial documents (a collection of which is soon to be published by Godfrey Wettinger) will doubtless reveal a considerable chronological overlap between the use of the two terms to represent the same reality (see now Wettinger 1993, 159-60). Nevertheless, the use of *maltensis* in referring to the language is highly significant.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, it is during the fifteenth century that a distinct Maltese nation is coming to be recognized in Sicily, as suggested by Bresc (1986, II, 627), who adds: ‘... à Trapani vers 1440, l’expression *maltensis natione* est de règle: elle précise l’originalité linguistique et sous-entend une coutume particulière ... un complexe culturel et juridique, des solidarités que la “naturalité” sicilienne n’assume pas complètement’ (‘At Trapani, towards 1440, the expression *maltensis natione* is regularly used: it makes explicit the linguistic originality [of the islands] and implies a special body of customary law ..... a cultural and juridical complex, and [p.285] close solidarities which the Sicilian “naturality” does not wholly cover.’)

During this period, the role played by the Church in the survival of Arabic is not known but is likely to have been considerable. For most of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, only part of the higher clergy was of Maltese origin. The higher dignitaries appear to have been mainly Sicilian and all the bishops either Sicilian or Catalan.<sup>9</sup> The religious orders came to Malta relatively late, towards the end of the fourteenth century (Luttrell 1975, 63). Nevertheless, Bresc considers that the Church was beginning to offer the possibility for social and political advancement to the local bourgeoisie: ‘Le chapitre offre enfin une possibilité d’ascension sociale aux fils des familles de la bourgeoisie de Mdina’ (‘the [cathedral] chapter finally provides the opportunity for social climbing to the sons of the Mdina middle class’: Bresc 1986, II, 627). Moreover Bresc does not rule out the possibility of a connection between the resistance to latinization and an attempt on the part of the Maltese upper-class families to recapture, through the Church and its prestigious offices, the social and political positions occupied by the Sicilians (ibid.).

On a less worldly plane, it may not be excessively anachronistic to suggest that the role known to have been played by the Church in later centuries in fostering the use of local vernaculars in daily religious exercises and communication may have possibly already started taking place in the fifteenth century.<sup>10</sup> What is certain is that by the beginning of the sixteenth century the use of the vernacular for religious purposes was being pressed from on high in the secular hierarchy, seemingly because of complaints against the appointment of clergy that could not speak Maltese.<sup>11</sup> Wettinger and Fsadni quote a letter, dated 10 May 1514, from King Ferdinand II of Spain to his ambassador in Rome requesting him to ask the Pope to appoint in future only Maltese clerics to benefices in Malta, giving as one of the reasons the

need for priests to know the language so as to be able to hear confessions (Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 29).

An unexpected witness to the vitality of Maltese in the fifteenth century is the existence of a text, a recently discovered poem of some twenty lines (some of which repeat earlier material), known as the *Cantilena* and composed between 1450 and 1485 by a fifteenth-century judge, Petro de Caxaro. The version we possess was written down around 1533 by one of the author's relations, the notary Brandano de Caxario.<sup>12</sup> The language is highly metaphorical and the contents of a philosophical, moralizing nature, but we shall have to limit our attention to points of linguistic interest. The language is accessible, albeit with some difficulty, to one equipped with a sound knowledge of [p.286] modern Maltese. It is written in a Roman script with ambiguous renderings of the consonants so typical of Arabic dialects.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the graphy shows no signs of standardization makes it unlikely that the *Cantilena* represents more than a one-off attempt at recording a Maltese composition in writing, although the possibility of it having been written down from memory and not copied weakens the soundness of this conclusion.<sup>14</sup>

The literary interests of Petro de Caxaro are highly suggestive. A native of Mdina, he is described as 'poet, orator and philosopher' by Brandano, his relative, and is known to have played a part in the political life of the Malta of his time. Luttrell sees behind his poem 'a minor world of provincial culture' (Luttrell 1975, 66), but to add with Besc (1986, II, 627) 'c'est le notariat qui manifeste son attachement à la culture arabe littéraire' ('it is the body of notaries manifesting its attachment to Arab literary culture') may be going too far.

The language of the poem is, as might be expected, an archaic form of Maltese, showing many of the features typical of the north-west-African Arabic colloquials. It gives several indications of the state reached by the language in its passage to modern Maltese.<sup>15</sup> It is remarkably free of Romance traits, especially in its vocabulary, but this may be due more to the nature of the contents than to an attempt on the part of the author to keep to words with a Semitic structure and origin, predating the *Malti safi* ('pure Maltese') movement by some four centuries.

That fifteenth-century Maltese was full of words of Romance origin, however, is demonstrated by the presence of Romance words (most of which survive today) in a number of Judaeo-Arabic texts in Hebrew characters found some twenty-five years ago in the Malta Cathedral Archives and Museum by that redoubtable pair, Wettinger and Fsadni, and studied in part by G. Wettinger in a monographic study *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (Wettinger 1985). The published texts consist of orders or acknowledgements of payment and records of financial or property transactions. As in the case of Judeo-Arabic texts found in neighbouring parts of the medieval world (for example Sicily and Tunisia), the language is strongly influenced lexically by the local vernaculars. In the case of the Maltese texts, Wettinger writes that they 'could almost just as correctly be called Judeo-Maltese as Judaeo-Arabic' (Wettinger 1985, 3, 155), warning us, however, that it would be 'misleading to consider [them] as a pure recording of Medieval Maltese' (Wettinger 1985, 156).<sup>16</sup> Two of the contrasts between the language of these texts and the language of the *Cantilena* are of interest to us here. First, the Judaeo-Arabic texts contain many everyday words of Romance origin (but belonging to semantic areas different from [p.287] those of the *Cantilena*); examples include *xurin* 'florin,' *qawza* 'court case,' *qumandamint* 'order,' *aquzani* 'he accused me.'<sup>17</sup> Their presence in these texts shows that words of this type must have been widespread in everyday spoken Maltese. Secondly, the grammatical words of literary origin present in Judaeo-Arabic texts but absent from the spoken language are also absent from the *Cantilena*. The latter difference seems to disprove Besc's statement that some of the Christian notaries were still attached to Arabic literary culture (see above, p. 286).<sup>18</sup>

The word 'survival' can be ambiguous when it refers to language. It may refer to the survival of enough of its elements and rules for it to maintain its identity, or it may refer to the number of speakers, or, better, to the social viability of the group formed by its speakers. The new contacts of Maltese Arabic with Romance, the virtual loss of contact with other Arabic-speaking peoples and, especially, the total lack of contact with literary (Classical) Arabic meant that, from about 1250 onwards, Maltese was bound to develop away from the other Arabic colloquials. Nevertheless, at the close of the fifteenth century, the differences are likely to have been almost wholly lexical in character. Caxaro's *Cantilena* shows that Maltese possessed at the time essentially the same linguistic structures (phonological and grammatical) as those featured today by the Arabic colloquials spoken across the Mediterranean. It is still too early to speak of the interpenetration of two linguistic systems. When Varvaro wrote, with reference to Maltese:

The close contact between two different linguistic systems, the Arabic and the Sicilian, and the disparity of prestige between the two, at that time wholly to the advantage of Sicilian (that also enjoyed the advantage of being the official language of administration in the Kingdom of Sicily), brought about a marked permeability of the socially weaker system, that of Arabic, to the advantage of the stronger, that of Sicilian (Varvaro 1988, 4; my translation, slightly adapted)

he ran the danger of overstating the case. What evidence we possess down to 1530 appears to restrict the effect of Varvaro's 'permeability' to a process of absorption of Sicilian words (and phrases) into Maltese. Varvaro is closer to the mark when he contrasts the fate of Arabic in Sicily with its fate in Malta in his 1981 study *Lingua e Storia in Sicilia*. The gist of his argument is worth repeating. The author asks himself whether the cause of the disappearance of Arabic in Sicily may not have been due to the collapse of the Arabic linguistic system because of the rapidly growing infiltration of Romance elements. Infiltration is dismissed as a likely cause, however, because of the testimony of modern Maltese, and also of English and Rumanian. In these languages, the [p.288] large number of loanwords (and, in the case of modern Maltese, encroachments into the morphology) did cause a crisis but it was a crisis that was overcome, whereas in Sicily and Pantelleria, Arabic did not just become 'sclerotic'<sup>19</sup> but was wholly abandoned. There is a great difference, Varvaro adds, between infiltration and sclerosis on the one hand and collapse on the other. In a stable social context, articulated into well-differentiated classes and with little mobility, whether social or spatial, infiltration and sclerosis need not compromise the vitality of a language. In Sicily, those who spoke Arabic but belonged to the Jewish religion kept their Arabic to the end, whereas those who were Moslem or Christian abandoned it. The conclusion arrived at by our author is that the difference can only derive from differences in the socio-cultural (and perhaps economic) identity of the groups (Varvaro 1981, 170).

The borrowing of lexical items, even in substantial numbers, need not constitute change of structure unless accompanied by changes of a phonological or grammatical nature.<sup>20</sup> This appears to be so even with a Semitic language, where derivation by means of root and vowel patterns is an integral part of the linguistic structure. What evidence we have tends to show that Maltese medieval borrowings from Sicilian became morphologically well adapted to the structure of Maltese.<sup>21</sup> These adaptations have survived for the most part till the present day and seem to have limited substantially the consequences of the permeability referred to by Varvaro. To this limited extent, then, Maltese was being latinized during the medieval centuries, but it was also imprinting its mark on what it was absorbing. In other words, the linguistic system of Maltese appears to have been only very marginally affected.

It is to be expected too that some measure of dialectalization had started to take place by the end of the fifteenth century among speakers of Maltese, differentiating those who lived in close contact with the 'Sicilians' in the urban areas from those, probably more numerous, who lived in the country and had little or no contact with non-Maltese speakers. The permeability of the urban Maltese must have been clearly more marked than that of their rural brethren. This differentiation, still very much alive today, was to play an increasingly important role in later centuries in the debates concerning the choice of a linguistic model to be used for literary purposes.

Not only did Maltese stand its ground relatively well linguistically, but it also seems to have done so sociolinguistically, since by this time it probably had started its slow spread upwards and established a number of bridgeheads among the 'Sicilian' strata of Maltese society. This was a task which it was to complete in later centuries. In the early 1500s, there was still some way to go before it could be said that the language [p.289] was spoken and understood at the top. In a letter dated 3 September 1522, for instance, the Viceroy of Sicily instructs the Syndics visiting Malta to choose an interpreter from among the best men of Mdina so that they would be able to understand fully the complaints against public officials (Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 28; see also Wettinger 1993, 155). Similarly, on 2 December 1522, one of the Syndics, John Aloysius Carbuni, accepted the notary James Bondin as an interpreter to help those who could not speak Sicilian (Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 28). In other words, both Sicilian and Maltese were being spoken in Malta at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but the use of both languages, bilingualism, appears to have been limited to some of the circles constituting urban society.

The fate of Maltese appears thus to have been still in the balance, sociolinguistically at least, at the time of the arrival of the Knights of St John in 1530. However, the coming of the Knights, accompanied by a comparatively numerous retinue, radically altered the situation, socially and linguistically. Among the consequences of the great upheaval was a weakening of the prestige of Sicilian vis-à-vis Maltese, the result of bringing other rivals into a dominant position, notably Italian, as pointed out by Varvaro (Varvaro 1988, 4). But at this point we enter a new and better documented period in the linguistic history of Malta.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An exact date can be given for the disappearance of Arabic in Sicily: 1492, the year of the expulsion of the Jews, for the Jews of Sicily spoke a form of Arabic (Judaeo-Arabic). Non-Jewish speakers of Arabic seem to have disappeared from about the second half of the thirteenth century, after the expulsion of the Muslims by Frederick II (Varvaro 1981, 166-7).

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<sup>2</sup> For example, by Master Burchard of Strasburg in 1175 (Pertusi 1977, 275). For an up-to-date statement on medieval Malta, see Luttrell 1975, complemented by Luttrell 1991, 33-9.

<sup>3</sup> The figures are based on a report by the Royal Governor, Giliberto Abbate, as interpreted by Luttrell (1975, 38-9), an interpretation accepted by most specialists (Wettinger 1985, 6; Bresc 1986, II, 624; Abulafia 1990, 116)

<sup>4</sup> 'During the fifteenth century a class of notables or oligarchs, most of whom were more or less recently established in Malta, came to dominate the island's affairs...'

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(Luttrell 1974, 322). Also: ‘Le sicilien apparait ... comme la langue de la classe dominante: sur 48 personnes qui component le Conseil élargi entre décembre 1453 et août 1454, et qui appartiennent à 31 familles, trois seulement portent un patronyme de matrice arabe’ (‘Sicilian appears ... to be the language of the dominant class: of the 48 persons who constitute the enlarged Council [p.290] between December 1453 and August 1454 and who belong to 31 families, only three carry a surname of Arabic origin’: Besc 1986, II, 625). By the mid-fifteenth century, however, many of the non-Arabic surnames referred to by Besc had been established in Malta for several generations (Wettinger, private communication).

5 ‘L’attachement à la terre et à l’habitat dispersé protégeait la population maltaise du contact, dans le creuset de Mdina, avec les éléments d’origine sicilienne ou hispanique’ (‘Their attachment to the land and to a scattered habitat protected the Maltese population from having contact, in the Mdina melting pot, with elements of Sicilian and Spanish origin’: Besc 1986, II, 626). A similar opinion is expressed by Varvaro when he includes ‘la consistenza e la compattezza della società rurale maltese, ben maggiore che non a Pantelleria’ (‘the density and compactness of Maltese rural society, much greater than at Pantelleria’) among his reasons for the survival of Arabic on Malta (Varvaro 1988, 4).

6 My information on Pantelleria is derived from ‘Abd el Wahab 1951, Besc 1971 and Besc 1986, II, 622-4. A useful comparative account of Malta and Pantelleria with respect to Sicily in late medieval times is given in Besc 1991, 47-56.

7 There is some uncertainty as to when Arabic ceased to be spoken on Pantelleria. It seems that Arabic or a form of Arabic was still spoken there during the second half of the seventeenth century: a French merchant from Cassis, escaping from captivity in Tunisia via Pantelleria in 1670, said he needed a Maltese interpreter on Pantelleria ‘parce qu’on parle la même langue à Malte et à la Pantalarie’ (‘because the same language is spoken in Malta and in Pantelleria’: Galland 157, a source cited by ‘Abd el Wahab (1951, 72) and by Besc (1986, II, 623)). Varvaro (1981, 170; 1988, 3) cites Amari (1933-9, 3 iii, 895) who writes: ‘ma fino al XVI secolo, ancorchè gli abitatori professassero già il Cristianesimo, “avean comune co’ Saraceni l’abito e la favella,” al dir del Fazzello (*Deca I*, Lib. I, Cap. I.)’ (‘but up to the sixteenth century, although the inhabitants already professed Christianity, “they had in common with the Saracens their style of dress and their speech” according to Fazzello (*Deca I*, Book I, Chap. I)’). Varvaro, however, understands this to mean that the inhabitants of Pantelleria stopped speaking Arabic in the sixteenth century. The words used by Tommaso Fazello, a sixteenth-century Sicilian historian, are: ‘habitatores Christiani sunt, Hispanorum regum parentes Imperio: idiomate tames, & habitu Sarracenorum utuntur’ (‘the inhabitants are Christian and owe allegiance to the kings of Spain; nevertheless they use the language and style of dress of the Saracens’: Fazello 1560, 10).

8 Note too *in lingua nostra maltensi* in a contract of 1496 (Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 31) and *lingua melitea* in a text of around 1533 by Brandano de Caxario (Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 12 and 47), for whom, see below. Note the contrast between the latinized Sicilian *maltensis* and the classical-sounding quasi-humanistic *meliteus* of the sixteenth-century lawyer.

9 Besc 1986, II, 627; the basis for the calculation is an analysis of patronymics for the period 1330 to 1467.

10 ‘Peut-on avancer que les prêtres ont, après l’entreprise réussie de déracinement de l’Islam, joué un rôle protecteur des particularismes culturels?’ (‘May we suggest that the priests, after succeeding in uprooting Islam, played a protective role with regard to

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cultural particularisms?') writes Bresc (1986, II, 627). For the following centuries, we may expect that, *mutatis mutandis*, the use of the vernacular was being conserved by the Church in Malta in the same way as in Sicily the Sicilian vernacular was being conserved against the encroachments of [p.291] Tuscan. This is how Franco Lo Piparo comments on the linguistic situation in Sicily towards the end of the sixteenth century: 'Scomparso nella seconda metà del Cinquencento dai documenti ufficiali dello Stato, il Siciliano continua ad essere praticato e incoraggiato nella Chiesa fino a tutto il Settecento e, in tono minore, anche in epoca successiva. Alla lunga durata dell'idioma siciliano (dialetto? lingua?) nell'organizzazione del consenso religioso storici della lingua e della cultura non hanno finora dedicato l'attenzione che il fenomeno meriterebbe' ('Although its use had disappeared during the second half of the sixteenth century from all official state documents, Sicilian continues to be used and encouraged by the Church until the end of the eighteenth century and, though in muted fashion, even later. Historians of language and culture have not yet given the long life the Sicilian idiom (dialect? language?) has had in the organization of the religious consensus the attention that the phenomenon deserves': Lo Piparo 1987, 751). In this context, we should keep in mind that from 1154 the bishops of Malta, together with the bishops of Girgenti and Mazzara in Sicily, were suffragans of the Archbishops of Palermo (Bonnici 1967-8, I, 66).

11 One such complaint had been made on 28 January 1481 by the Town Council of Mdina against the appointment by the bishop of Malta of a parish priest who did not know Maltese (Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 29).

12 The MS was discovered in the Valletta Notarial Archives in 1966 and edited by the finders, G. Wettinger and M. Fsadni (Wettinger and Fsadni 1968, 2nd edn. 1983). The near repetition of three and a half lines may be due to a faulty first draft of the middle section of the poem: see Brincat 1986, 11-14.

13 Arabic /q/ (Modern Maltese /ʔ/), for instance, is rendered by the graph *c* four times, by the graph *k* three times and by the digraph *ck* twice. At the same time, the graph *c* also represents the Arabic and Maltese phoneme /k/ four times while the same phoneme /k/ is represented by the graph *k* three times (see Cohen and Vanhove 1984-6, 178; Wettinger and Fsadni 1983, 45).

14 We are discounting here the writing down of Maltese place-names and nick-names in notarial records and similar documents. Efforts at discovering further examples of fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Maltese have proved fruitless: see Wettinger 1985, 154. The next text of any substance written in Maltese that we possess is a sonnet composed some 200 years later by G.F. Bonamico (*circa* 1675).

15 The following notes on the language of the *Cantilena* may be found useful. The phonology appears conservative: some, but not all, of the phonemic distinctions made by Old Arabic, preserved in most 'core' Arabic colloquials but lost in modern Maltese, are retained, as far as it is possible to tell from the unsystematic script (see Borg 1978, 47-50; Wettinger 1985, 188 note 24 and 189 note 28; and especially Cohen and Vanhove 1984-6, 179-83). There is little to say on the morphology and syntax within our context beyond stating that it is free of Romance traits. It is also free of those grammatical words and phrases of Classical origin which did not form part of the spoken language but were common in written Arabic and found also in contemporary Judaeo-Arabic texts of Maltese origin (for example hād[i]h[ī], u[a] dāl[i]k[a] [ʔ]an[na], al[la]di, l[iʔ]an: see Wettinger 1985, 165). As for lexis, there is unexpectedly only one non-Semitic word, the Sicilian *vintura* ('fortune'), which, ironically, is no longer current in modern Maltese.



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- 16 The author adds in a note: ‘The main difficulty in speaking of Judaeo-Maltese rather than of Judaeo-Arabic of Maltese origin arises from the presence of [p.292] conventional Classical Arabic elements which might lead to a serious misunderstanding of the true character of the Maltese vernacular in the later fifteenth century’ (Wettinger 1985, 188 note 12). In a later note: ‘It is unlikely that the speech of the Maltese and Gozitan Jews differed much from that of their Christian compatriots because they did not live in separate ghettos’ (Wettinger 1985, 188 note 16), adding, however, that ‘they [the Jews] had much closer contact with foreign cultural influences.’
- 17 Wettinger 1985, 164. Only some of the vowels have had to be supplied by the editor. The Judaeo-Arabic texts generally tend to use the *scriptio plena*, that is to write down the short vowels, particularly when transcribing words of Romance origin (Wettinger 1985, 157).
- 18 This does not rule out, of course, attachment to oral forms of culture represented by folk-tales, proverbs, and so on: see Bresc 1986, II, 626. There is the possibility, to my knowledge not yet explored, that the *Cantilena* may have started life as oral literature.
- 19 I take this to be equivalent to ‘linguistically non-productive.’ In other words, the language no longer grows by following its own word-formation rules. New items in the lexicon cease to be formed through internal means but are borrowed from some prestigious language. That this is invariably the case in all dialects of modern Maltese needs to be established.
- 20 In this connection, we should remember that the great majority of borrowed items are likely to have belonged to peripheral areas of the vocabulary and not to the central core. This is the case in modern Maltese (see Cremona 1990, 168) and is thus all the more likely to have been the case in medieval Maltese, although there are some notable exceptions.
- 21 In the language of the Judaeo-Arabic texts published by Wettinger, for instance, the plural of *xurin* ‘florin’ is *xrunjat*, that of *qrlin* ‘carlino,’ an old Italian coin, is *qrniat*. Both plurals are formed by adding the sound feminine plural suffix *-at*, usual for words of foreign origin in Classical Arabic (Wright 1896–8, II, 198; Wettinger 1985, 166–7). *qrniat* appears to have had a continuous history in Malta in the modern Maltese expression *tliet-karnijiet* ‘tuppence-halfpenny,’ literally ‘three carlini,’ showing the modern form of the *-at* suffix featured in the medieval word; in the sense of the coin, on the other hand, the plural of *karlin* is *karlini*, featuring the plural suffix *-i*, of Siculo-Italian origin. (A broken plural form *kranel*, given in De Soldanis’s eighteenth-century manuscript lexicon and quoted in Aquilina’s *Maltese-English Dictionary*, is unreliable.) The word for ‘florin,’ on the other hand, appears to have been reborrowed from Italian *florino* as modern Maltese *fjorin*, with only one plural form *fjorini*. Similarly, the modern *xelin* ‘shilling’ from the Italian *scellino*, has only the one plural form *xelini*. It can be seen from the foregoing that the study of modern Maltese does show the existence of some correlation between date of borrowing and thoroughness of adaptation to the morphology of Arabic. The correlation is unreliable as a method of dating, however, since there are many examples of comparatively recent loans that have been fully adapted. One of the factors determining the degree of adaptation to Semitic morphological patterns appears to be the phonological pattern into which a word falls (see Mifsud, forthcoming). The examples of *xurin* and *xelin* are thus particularly interesting because of the similarity of their phonological patterns.

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