Italian loanwords in Maltese and the vocabulary of “Levant Italian”
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1. Maltese as a Mediterranean language
1.1 Schuchardt 1909: Malt. zbandut ‘outlaw’ ~ sbendout ‘brigand’ in the Dictionnaire de la langue franque printed in Algiers in 1830 (page 457).
1.2 Borg 1996 claims the need for an «investigation into the areal links of M[altese] within the Mediterranean outside the narrow ambit of Arabic and Italian dialectology» (page 131). After individuating borrowings from both Western Romance languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese) and Oriental languages (Greek, Turkish, Hebrew, Levantine Arabic) as well as from the so-called Mediterranean lingua franca, he lists a group of Italian loanwords which «are not of direct Southern Italian provenance (i.e., not Sicilian, the principal source of Italian loans into M[altese]) since they supply a useful corrective to the view that the internal development of the M[altese] lexicon was entirely dominated in a monolithic fashion by that of Southern Italy» (page 134).

2. From “colonial” to “Levant” Italian
2.1 «The following remarks relate to a group of words pertaining mainly to the spoken register of M[altese], borrowed from Romance languages (including colonial Italian), Greek, Turkish, and Hebrew» (Borg 1996: 133) → see “colonial Venetian” (Bidwell 1967).
2.2 After Francesco Bruni’s (Bruni 1999; Bruni 2000; Bruni 2007a; Bruni 2007b) and Joe Cremona’s researches (Cremona 1996; Cremona 1997; Cremona 1998; Cremona 2002; Cremona 2003), the neutral expression “Levant Italian” has been proposed (Bruni 1999).
2.3 Texts available in published editions: Baglioni 2010 (Tunis); Bruni 2007 (mostly Constantinople); Theunissen 1998 (Venetian-Ottoman capitulations).

3. Lexical correspondences: the vocabulary of privateering
3.1 priza ‘prey’
See presa ‘capture of an enemy vessel’ in letters of the deys of Tunis from the 17th century: con la gratissima vostra delli 17 novembre ultimo vediamo quanto dite e che sete restati maravigliati della procedura tenuta nella presa della pollacrà del p’om Dauma (Osta Morat to the French consuls of Marseille: Tunis, 12.17.1619); fa incirca dua mesi che recevai una grata di V. S. dicendomi la presa di una tartana di qua per dua gallerie vostre (Yûsuf d’ey to the French consuls of Marseille: Tunis, 14.3.1619); etc. Moreover, the locution buona presa ‘legitimate capture of a ship’ occurs in the coeval pact between the regency of Tunis and the consuls of Marseille (Tunis, 1616-1621): È circa alle fregate che fussero trovate nelle mari di Francia senza lettera del s’re Hisuff Dai e sigillo del consolo, essendo prese, saranno di buona presa. See also Tunisian Ar. brīza ‘corsair’s booty’ (Cifoletti 1998: 140; Cifoletti 2002: 140) and préza ’prise, action de prendre’ in the Dictionnaire de la langue franque (Cifoletti 1989: 129).

3.2 skapula ‘to escape’
Sic. scapulari primarily means ‘to free’ and ‘to avoid (a danger)’; the meaning ‘to escape’ is apparently not very common in the island (VS, s.v.). Nevertheless, in the Italian translations of Ottoman documents scapolare is often used instead of scappare ‘to flee’ if referred to slaves (‘to avoid slavery’ → ‘to escape’): Che se li navilij venetiani per vento contrario patiranno naufraggio venendo nel mio custodito Dominio tutti gli’huomini, che scapolarano siano liberi; Che se alcuno navilio andando dal mio custodito paese a’ quelle parti per vento contrario patirà naufraggio, gli’huomini venetiani, che scapolarano non debbano esser molestati da altri (Ottoman-Venetian capitulations: Istanbul, 1575 [see Theunissen 1998: 537]). Still in the 19th century iscapolare was apparently employed with this meaning in the North-African lingua franca: [il padrone] fattosi con me barbaro all’istante, “taci” gridommi, “tu dire questo per iscapolare” e si avanzò in attitudine alquanto minacciosa (Felice Caronni, Raggugliai di viaggio compendioso..., after Cifoletti 2004: 336).
3.3 *lvent* ‘lively, swift’
In *MM* this word is erroneously considered a metathetic form of *valent* < It. *valente* (through *v*vent), which is implausible from a phonetic point of view (see *MED*, s.v.), while Barbera’s proposal of a Sic. etymon *livanti* (from *livari* ‘to rise’) is semantically unjustified (*DMAI*, s.v.). Much more likely is the derivation of *lvent* from Ottoman Turkish *levent* ‘an irregular military force recruited from the town roughs and often employed on the galleys’ (*TEL*, s.v.), probably mediated by It. *levente* ‘corsair’ («leventi, zoè corsari» in Marin Sanudo’s *Diarii: GDLI*, s.v.).

In the letters of the *deys* of Tunis to the French consuls of Marseille the *leventi* are often depicted as privateers eager for a share of the booty: *Vero hë che non si pouf faire de manco che sempre non resti qualche cosse nelle mani dilli leventi, con lli qutalli vi hë sempre d’il fastidio con tutti lli comandam(enti) che lli fassio a non portarmi francesi ni vasseli in questo n(ost)ro regno* (Osta Morat to the consuls of Marseille: Tunis, 12.10.1623). The semantic evolution from ‘eager privateer’ to ‘lively, young’ can be observed in Modern Greek *ιστιλέντης*. Also Livornese *levente* and Catalan *levent* ‘skillful thief’, although nearer to the original meaning, have acquired a positive nuance (Franceschini 2008: 122-123).

4. More lexical correspondences
4.1 bordato ‘kind of striped cloth’
It. *bordato* is ordinarily used as an adjectival meaning ‘edged, bordered’ (< *bordare* ‘to border’). Except for an isolated occurrence of *bordato* ‘a kind of cloth’ in Michelangelo Buonarroti il Giovane («Bastiti quel bordato», *GDLI*, s.v.), we were not able to find examples of this substantivized participle either in literary Italian or in Italian dialects. In Early Modern Spanish, though, *bordado* was commonly used as a noun meaning ‘embroidery’ (see the definition in the 1726-37 edition of the *Diccionario de Autoridades*: «Bordado: la misma bordadura que se labra en la ropa con la agúja y sedas, ò plata». Therefore, both Malt. *bordat* and It. *bordato* might be borrowings from Spanish and the irradiation of the loanword might be independent in the two languages.

However, Malt. *bordat* is probably etymologically related to Malt. *bordi* ‘striped cloth’ < Ar. *burd* ‘streaky garment’, as already noticed by Aquilina (*MED*, s.v.). This means that It. *bordato*, which is the basis of Malt. *bordat*, circulated in Malta as the name of a striped cloth called in Maltese *bordi*. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the occurrence of *bordato* in the inventory of the goods of the Maltese merchant Pietro Micallef (*†1671*), which was first written in Malta and then copied in Tunis in a deed of the French consulate: *uno abito di bordato vecchio* (Inventario de la robba che ce trovano del povero defunto Pietro Michaellef maltesse nella presenza di testimoni infrascritti, 9.11.1671) → *bordato* ‘striped cloth from Malta’ is probably a “Maltesism”, whose connections to both It. *bordato* and Sp. *bordado* might be fully casual.

4.2 kartell ‘a small barrel; a small cask equal to the twenty-fourth part of an ordinary barrel’
Aquilina erroneously considers *kartell* to be an adaptation of It. *cartello*, although *cartello* means ‘public notice’ and not ‘barrel’ (*MED*, s.v.). Much more likely is Barbera’s assumption that *kartell* corresponds to Sic. *carrasseddu* and It. *cart(r)atello*, both deriving from a diminutive form of Mediaeval Lat. *carrātum* ‘barrel for wine or must to be transported by cart’ (*DMAI*, s.v.).


5. A local formation?
5.1 furban ‘corsair’
Serracino-Inglott (*MM*, s.v.) traces back *furban* to Sic. *furbanu*, but this word does not exist in any Sicilian dialect. Since both Sic. *furbu* and It. *furbo* ‘cunning’ (< Fr. *fourbe*) originally meant ‘thief’, Aquilina considers *furban* to be a nominal form < Sic. *furbu* (*MED*, s.v.). Therefore, we have to suppose that a noun having the same root of Sic. *furbu*/It. *furbo* circulated in Early Modern Malta, where it had acquired the technical meaning of ‘corsair’.
This hypothesis is partially confirmed by an occurrence of the locution *galera furbina* ‘corsair galley’ in a Tunisian document from the 17th century: a certain Mametto Foudale is said to have been captured *supra la guallera furbina* (Osta Morat, *dey* of Tunis, to the consuls of Marseille: Tunis, 1.13.1640). But, while the derivation of the adjective *furbino* from *furbo* is plausible, the derivation of a substantive *“furbano* is very unlikely.

The problem can be solved by assuming that the ending of the word is not Romance, but indigenous (see *sekran/sokran* ‘drunk’ from *siker* ‘to get drunk’, *skarpan* ‘shoemaker’ < *Sic. scarpura*, *kardaran/kaldaran* ‘coppersmith’ < *Sic. caldara*, *marçan* ‘a person who heads a procession’ < *Malt. marc ‘march’ < *It. marcia*). A nominal suffix *-an* is also found in the Arabic adaptation of *lt. corsaro*, i.e. *qursân*, which shows up as a reborrowed form in the *Dictionnaire de la langue franco (corsan ‘corsaire’* [see Cifoletti 2002: 133-134]). As a result, *furban* can be explained as a mixed form (*lt. *turbo* + *-an* – influenced by *Ar. *qursân –) typical from Malta and the Barbary coast.

6. Bibliography


