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ARE THERE ANY TRACES OF PUNIC IN MALTESE?

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EVER since G. De Soldanis made the first attempt at a systematic study of Maltese over two centuries ago the conviction that the language which is presently spoken in Malta is somehow or other connected with Punic has never completely died out. That the Phoenicians occupied Malta for many centuries, and that some form of Punic was spoken in Malta during the first century of our era can hardly be questioned. Punic inscriptions have been found on the Island, and the word *barbaroi* used in Acts 28, 2 to describe the inhabitants of Malta in A.D. 60 testifies to the fact that neither Greek nor Latin was spoken by the peasants who were so hospitable to the shipwrecked company. The problem arises when we ask what language was spoken throughout the Byzantine occupation of the Islands up to the Arabic invasion in the Ninth Century. G. De Soldanis, A. Preca, and C. Caruana were convinced that Punic continued to be the language of the Maltese and that it developed into modern Maltese under the influence of Arabic. Unfortunately there is no historical evidence to verify this assertion. The only reliable criterion to decide the question of Maltese origins is the philological analysis of the language as it exists today. This was done by serious Semitic scholars like W. Gesenius, H. Stumme, C. Brockelmann, and B. Roudanovsky who decided unanimously that Maltese is a dialect of Arabic. The verdict raised a storm of protest in Malta where lesser scholars pointed to the Hebrew roots, all faithfully listed in Caruana's dictionary, that corresponded to their Maltese equivalents. Those scholars who knew Arabic, however, immediately realized that the new theory was the correct one, but some were tempted to strike a compromise by asserting that modern Maltese is a mixture of Arabic with a smaller percentage of Punic, or, at least, that Punic traces can still be found in the language. The theory found acceptance among many scholars and is still held today. This paper is an attempt to examine whether there is any philological evidence in support of such an assumption.

The obvious method to investigate this problem is to look up all the words of Semitic origin in Maltese in an Arabic dictionary, make a list of those that do not correspond, then see if they can be explained through Punic. The corresponding process can then be repeated with the grammar. Unfortunately, however, the very nature of these two languages - Phoe-

nician and Arabic — renders matters slightly more complicated.

Very little is known about Phoenician. What remains of the language is entirely to be found in inscriptions. These are written in the Phoenician alphabetic script which only indicates consonantal sounds. It was only in very late Phoenician that the 'aleph, the 'ain, and the weak consonants were used as vowel sounds, and even these are very unstable. Something of Phoenician vocalization can be gleaned from Greek transcriptions and from some passages in Act V of Plautus' *Poenulus*. The vocabulary at our disposal is very restricted; in fact there is no Phoenician 'dictionary' but only a glossary of words at the back of Harris' *Grammar of the Phoenician Language* (New Haven, 1936) and J. Friedrich's *Phonizisch-Punische Grammatik*, (Rome, 1951). What we do know of Phoenician vocabulary, however, is sufficient to reveal that the vast majority of words correspond to Hebrew, of which we know more, though not enough. The grammar too, follows the Hebrew pattern with only dialectic differences. As the language is definitely North-West Semitic we can safely refer to Hebrew to find out how things were said in Phoenician.

The Phoenician language has had a very long history. The oldest known document is the Ahiiram inscription dating back to the end of the second Millennium B.C. The language is early Phoenician. Middle Phoenician is the language of the inscriptions between the Eighth and the Sixth Centuries B.C., after which the language used in the motherland continued to be called Phoenician while the same language in the colonies, especially Cyprus and North Africa, came to be known as Punic. Neo-Punic is the language spoken after the destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C. This continued to be the language of the North African peasants certainly until the time of St. Augustine (d. 430). Whether it was spoken later during the centuries preceding the Arab invasion cannot be known for certain owing to lack of documentation.

On the other hand, Arabic is such a rich language that its vocabulary, in spite of the many huge tomes in which it has been collected, has never been adequately classified — R. Dozy's *Supplement* to the already existing dictionaries contains over 1700 pages! Hence the vast majority of Hebrew and Phoenician roots have equivalent roots in Arabic, which makes it impossible to decide *a priori* whether a common Maltese root is derived from the one language or from the other.

We shall return to the vocabulary later on in this article. As it is more correct to explain the less certain by the more certain we shall first make some observations on comparative grammar which reveals the structural identity of the language.

Although there is one grammatical structure which is common to all

West Semitic languages, there are numerous points of difference between North-West Semitic, to which Phoenician belongs, and South West Semitic, which includes Arabic. Wherever these two systems differ, Maltese always follows Arabic. I shall enumerate as comprehensively as possible the main points of difference:

(I follow Friedrich's grammar cited above. The Arabic parallels marked with an asterisk are taken from J. Jourdan's *Cours pratique et complet d'Arabe vulgaire, Dialecte Tunisien*, Tunis 1952 as being closer to Maltese than classical Arabic.)

1) **Pronouns:** The Maltese *jiena*, 'I', is a development of the Arabic أنا 'ana as the initial 'alif very often becomes *j* or *w* in Maltese. It is further removed from the Phoenician 𐤍𐤏𐤍 '-n-k which is in common use, though 𐤍 '-n is sometimes used in inscriptions. In the second person Maltese has lost the distinction between masculine and feminine using *inti* for both. This corresponds to Arabic أنت 'anta. In Phoenician, as in Hebrew, the *n* has assimilated itself to the *t* producing 𐤍𐤏𐤍 '-tt for both genders. *Huwa* and *bija*, he and she, are just a transcription of هو and هي. The Phoenician *b-* and *b-j* were probably vocalized as in Hebrew: *u* and *i* respectively. The first person plural in Maltese is *aħna* corresponding to Phoenician 𐤀𐤏𐤍𐤁𐤏 *'aħna and differing both from the Phoenician 𐤍𐤏𐤍𐤁𐤏 '-n-ħ-n and the classical Arabic نحن *naħnu*. Again like Tunisian, Maltese has lost the gender distinction in the second and third persons plural, hence *intom*, *buma*, 'you', 'they'. *Intom* is the Arabic أنتم 'antum and its parallel in Phoenician is not attested. *Huma* is actually the classical Arabic dual, but, as in Tunisian هما **huma* it is used for the plural. The Phoenician is 𐤍𐤏𐤍𐤁𐤏 *b-m-t*.

The demonstrative pronouns in Maltese are *da*, *dana*: 'this'; *dak*, *daka*: 'that', used in the masculine. The feminine is *di*, or *dina*; *dik* or *dika*. In its simpler form, the Maltese is just the Arabic ذا *dha* and هذي *hadhi*. Where does the *n* in *dana* derive from? In Phoenician we have 𐤁, 𐤏, 𐤍𐤏 and 𐤍𐤏𐤍 *z*, *z'*, '-z, and *zn*. The evolution of *d* from *z* is phonetically possible. So can *dana* be the same as 𐤍𐤏𐤍 *zn*? Unfortunately this form is only attested in inscriptions from Byblos and Ur, never in Punic inscriptions from the colonies. Moreover, as G. Barbera notes in his *Dizionario Maltese-Arabo Italiano* (Beyrouth 1939) s.v. this could easily be a mannerism taken over from Sicily where the Italian *questo* >, *chistu* >, *stu* >, *stuni*. If we take into account the tremendous influence of Sicilian on Maltese this explanation will appear more probable than the one which derives *dana* from 𐤍𐤏𐤍 *zn*. The Phoenician for 'that' is 𐤁𐤏𐤍𐤁𐤏 *b'*, *bj bmt* totally unlike Arabic or Maltese: ذاك *dbaka*, تيك *tika*.

The relative pronoun *illi*, shortened to *li* has a parallel in Tunisian

الى 'ali*, a shorter form of the Arabic 'alladbi الى. In Punic we have שא, ש, שש, שש 's, s, s, s which come from a different root altogether. The same thing can be said of the article il- which is clearly the Arabic ال. Phoenician, like Hebrew has ב ba which was originally bal.

2) *The Verb:* Maltese, in common with Arabic has ten verbal forms: *qatel, qattel, qâtel, tqattel, tqâtel, nqatel, qtatel, qtâl, staqtel*. The fourth form, *qat-al*, has fallen out of use. Phoenician has seven forms: *qal, nisal, piel, pual, ifil, hitpael, biptael*.

The conjugation of the perfect, as far as it is documented in Phoenician inscriptions, seems to correspond to both Arabic and Maltese except in the third person feminine singular where Maltese and Arabic end in *t*, *qatlet*, while Phoenician in common with Hebrew most probably ends in *a*, as can be surmised from the occasional *y 'ain* at the end of the word. In the imperfect, the Maltese first person singular differs from both classical Arabic and Phoenician. While these have 'ali/ as preformative according to the formula 'q-t-l, Maltese, in common with the North African dialects has *n*, *noqtol*, cf. Tunisian نكتب **nekteb*. The same can be said of the third person masculine plural. In common with Tunisian Maltese has *joqtlu*: يكتبوا **jektebu*. It is doubtful whether the Phoenician parallel ends in *u* as the 'ali/ which usually testifies to its presence is missing in this case and we only have *שש* j-q-t-l.

3) *Nouns:* As in Hebrew, the plural of Phoenician nouns is formed by adding *im* in the masculine and *ot* in the feminine. Maltese and Arabic, on the contrary have the most intricate ways and means of forming plurals, which are too complicated to be listed here.

4) I shall now proceed to give a paradigm of numerals from one to ten, and of some particles:

ARABIC	PUNIC	MALTESE	ENGLISH
واحد	אחד	wiehed	one
اثنين	שנים	tnejn	two
ثلاثة	שלוש	tlieta	three
اربعه	ארבע	erbgha	four
خمسة	חמש	hamsa	five
ستة	שש	sitta	six
سبعة	שבע	sebgha	seven
ثمانية	שמונה	tmienja	eight
تسعة	תשע	disgha	nine
عشرة	עשר	ghaxra	ten

Note especially that Maltese and Arabic *t* and *s* agree against Phoenician *s* and *s*.

ARABIC	PUNIC	MALTESE	ENGLISH
قبل	לפנם	qabel	before
הכא	כן	hekk	thus
ما، شي	אין	m. . . x	not
لى	אל	lil	to
ورا	אחר	wara	after
مع	את	ma'	with
فوق	על	fuq	above
تحت	תחת	taht	under
علاش	לם	ghaliex	why?

The agreement of Maltese and Arabic against Phoenician is evident from the examples cited. I could not find one single case in which Maltese and Phoenician agreed against Arabic. There is, of course, a semantic evolution from Arabic to Maltese but this is easily traceable, which would not be so in the case of Phoenician.

Phoenician syntax is practically identical with Hebrew syntax. Both differ considerably from Arabic despite many common Semitic traits. Maltese syntax breaks away from Arabic under the influence of Sicilian and Italian, but remains fundamentally Arabic. The reader is referred to E. Sutcliffe's *Grammar of the Maltese Language* O.U.P., 1936.

We must now turn to the question of vocabulary. Out of about 14,000 entries in Barbera's dictionary (all figures quoted are approximate) no less than 12,300 are of Semitic origin. Barbera traces these back to 1,800 different Arabic roots. On the other hand, A. E. Caruana, in his *Vocabolario della lingua maltese*. (Valletta 1903) could find no more than 400 Hebrew roots corresponding with Maltese in spite of every possible straining of the imagination. Unfortunately, all these Hebrew roots have Arabic equivalents. Moreover, only a small percentage of Phoenician words have Maltese equivalents, and as all of them have Arabic equivalents as well it cannot be proved that they were not received into Maltese via Arabic. As an illustration to this point I shall refer to Plautus' Punic passages in Latin transcription in the fifth act of *Poenulus*. The text is in a rather bad state, but an admirable reconstruction of the passages has been made by L. Gray (*American Journal of Semitic Literature*, 1922-3, pp. 73ss). Out of 115 words in one recension only 11 correspond with Maltese. These are:

ARABIC	PUNIC	MALTESE	ENGLISH
يباركوا	יברכו	ibierku	they bless
أخي	אחי	hija	my brother
كل	כל	kull	every
ابن	בן	iben	son of
يكون	יכון	ikun	is
بنت	בת	bint	daughter
بكى	בך	beka	he cried
جدي	גדי	gidi	kid
سما	שמי	sema	sky
أنت	אתה	int	you (sing.m.)
بمي	דמי	demm	blood

It will be noticed that while the roots of all these words are common to the three languages Maltese and Arabic have in common that the *n* never assimilates itself to the *t* which it precedes. Unfortunately, Plautus's vocalization is too hazy for purposes of philological comparison although it does afford a valuable indication.

Two exhaustive Maltese-Arabic word lists were published almost simultaneously about twenty years ago. C. Dessoulavy, in his *Maltese-Arabic Wordlist*, London 1938 only examines the Semitic element in Maltese. His list includes 50 words which are thought to be Semitic but are actually Sicilian. But for about two hundred words Dessoulavy found no convincing equivalent in classical Arabic. On closer examination, 68 out of the 200 were identified as Tunisian (either in form or in meaning) by two North African scholars whom the author consulted.

G. Barbera's *Dizionario Maltese-Arabo-Italiano* (Beyrouth 1939-40, 3 Vols), like Dessoulavy's word list, is based on G.B. Falzon's *Dizionario Maltese-Italiano-Inglese*, Valletta 1845, 2nd ed. 1882. In spite of the author's windy introduction, and in spite of the conviction of the same that the Maltese do not know their own language and should go back to Arabic (which sounds like telling the Italians to go back to Latin or the English to Norman French or Anglo-Saxon!), the dictionary is a scholarly piece of work and cannot be ignored by anyone working on Maltese philology. Barbera agrees with Dessoulavy all along, and further explains 27 of the remaining problematic words by means of parallels in the Arabic dialect of Syria. As to the rest of the list of uncertain words, Barbera either says that they are not to be found in any Arabic dictionary, or endeavours, unconvincingly, to find some Arabic equivalent. It is very

significant that not one of these words can be explained through Hebrew or Phoenician, which could not have been so had the Arabic-Phoenician theory been correct. I shall proceed to give a full list of those words that have no equivalent (in form or in meaning) in classical Arabic.

A. *The Words of Tunisian or North African Origin are:*

Aħħar, last; *ieħor*, other; *aħna*, we; *bajtar*, figs; *baqqat*, to curdle milk; *barax*, to scrape; *bebbux*, snail; *bebbuxija*, tortoise shell cat; *belbel*, to winnow; *bennen*, to rock a cradle; *burqax*, a perch (fish); *čarčar*, to trickle down; *deff*, loom frame; *disghin*, ninety; *fartas*, bald; *ferkex*, to scratch (of a fowl); *furrax*, crab-louse; *ğewnaħ*, wing; *gods*, a heap, *germed*, to blacken with soot; *gerwel*, to mutter; *gidem*, to bite; *bħal*, like; *ħamla*, torrent; *ħanex*, a worm; *ħasel*, to wash; *kagħwex*, to roll over; *karfa*, chaff; *karwat*, to grind coarsely; *kaza*, shame; *kerfex*, to scrape; *la*, when; *lellex*, to shine; *lida*, a pestle; *lil*, for; *mexmex*, to gnaw; *mingħul*, the devil; *mkerxaħ*, weak; *muxmat*, a kind of sausage; *naħnaħ*, to talk through the nose; *għareb*, cornerstone; *għattuqa*, young hen; *qarad*, to clean clothes; *qrazzum*, sore throat; *qrempuč*, a trefoil; *saddad*, to grow rusty; *seqi*, chilblain; *saqsa*, to ask; *sfunnarija*, carrots; *siegla*, string; *siel*, to be a creditor (used in the present); *issa*, now; *siğra*, tree; *slan*, field division; *sufra*, cork; *tabxa*, sum of money due; *tengħud*, a spurge; *wieğeb*, to answer; *xesfaq*, horizon; *xejjer*, swing; *xellef*, to blunt; *xemx*, sun; *xandi*, dwarf; *xullief*, hangnail; *xott*, dry (also from *asciutto*); *zaddam*, to cause a cold in the head; *zunzan*, a wasp.

B. *The Words of Syrian Origin are:*

Bagħtar, to dabble, Syr *b' 4^o a 4^{ar}*; *bera*, to look fixedly; *berbaqq*, squander; *berwin*, a bird name; *bniadem*, person; *čaqačaq*, to make a cracking noise; *dorga*, a pitcher; *gerrem*, to gnaw; *ħabrek*, to be zealous; *ħafas*, prickly heat; *ħobb*, bosom; *ħuğğieğga*, a bonfire; *illi*, that (as in Tunis); *jekk*, if; *lablab*, to chatter; *maħtat*, to deride; *niggež*, to prick; *perreč*, to spread out, to air; *qanqal*, to heave; *qamuc*, gristle; *qaxqax*, to glean; *rewwixta*, a conspiracy; *troffa*, a bunch; *xenxel*, incite to lust; *xewlah*, to fling; *xqawqaw*, a vagabond; *iżzattat*, to be arrogant.

C. *The Words of Uncertain Origin are:*

Ajl, porcupine, *andana*, a series; *bajnsan*, certainly; *bass*, to fart; *baza'*, to be afraid (Arab with f); *bazi za*, a pet; *bekbek*, to sip, guzzle; *berfel*, to hem; *biqa*, a grass rope; *čajt*, fun; *čağħqa*, pebble; *dali*, often; *diksa*, a bad use of something; *feğğ*, to peep forth; *felula*, a wort; *ferrajna*, green food; *ğirdiena*, splinter, flake; *ğuna*, pigeon basket; *gajdra*,

bank-oyster; *gorbo ġ*, pigsty; *guga*, roch chamber; *hebeż*, to draw back; *bemm*, there; *bettef*, to speak unintelligibly; *ħalla*, a corn-stack; *ħamħam*, to provoke; *ħammud*, block; *ħarħar*, to save up; *ħazin*, bad; *ilu*, ago, since; *iżda*, but; *jaf*, to know; *jaqaw*, perchance; *kagħħbar*, wallow in dust; *keskes*, to heat up someone against another; *kieku*, if; *lala*, freedom; *lefaq*, sob, sigh; *madrab*, pilaster; *mandar*, a frock; *mingus*, a fish-name; *miżrek*, a lean man; *manfuħa*, a reed mace; *moxa*, a heath; *nibex*, to tease; *ghad*, to say; *gholob*, to grow thin; *brimba*, a spider; *ghanqra*, double chin; *ghasli*, a mulatto; *ghazżież*, press; *qandul*, a wattle; *qandel*, heave; *qamas*, to be wretched; *qarważ*, to clip; *qarqni*, dwarfish; *grada*, ridge of unploughed earth between furrows; *raddad*, to caress; *redus*, sheep's or rabbit's dung; *resaq*, to come near; *reżab*, to freeze; *sa*, until; *sefa*, to become; *sandar*, stroke of luck; *sbiēh*, to make wretched; *sibek*, to strip off leaves; *sittma*, forehead; *taq*, to nourish; *tewwet*, talk to no purpose; *tibwigh*, vomiting; *webbel*, cause to desire; *wett*, a ram; *xarbebb*, a plant name *xarrafa*, scratch; *zagħ žiġħ*, plant name; *zeblaħ*, to despise; *zingla*, a small basin; *zanżan*, to use anything new.

(N.B.) The above words and their meanings have been taken from Des-soulavy's word-list though some of them are somewhat doubtful.

Lastly we must turn to the alphabet. The discrepancy between the Maltese and the Arabic alphabet is not small. The Maltese letters *c*, *e*, *g*, *o*, *p*, *v*, and *z* do not exist in classical Arabic. On the other hand, the letters *d*, *gh*, *ħ*, *s*, *t*, and *ż* stand for two or more Arabic letters. Thus the Maltese alphabet seems to be nearer the Phoenician-Hebrew alphabet though it has only one *t* for ט and טו, and one *s* for ש, שׁ and שׂ. In spite of the similarity, very little can be argued either way for the reason that we do not know exactly how the Hebrew alphabet was pronounced. The *be-gat-gfat* rule already reveals a double pronunciation of some Hebrew letters which in Arabic have different letters to represent them; secondly, Maltese still retains a dialectic distinction between *ç* and *ċ*, and between *ç* and *ċ*, which reveals that the identification of these two sets of sounds is only recent. Lastly the letters lacking in the Arabic alphabet have been imported from Italian mainly to help pronounce Italian words. In all this confusion it is difficult to decide whether the Maltese alphabet is a simplification of the Arabic alphabet or a continuation of the Phoenician. As the vocabulary is Arabic the former supposition is the more probable one.

We must therefore conclude that both in grammar and vocabulary, where Arabic differs from Phoenician, Maltese mainly follows Arabic, and there is no single instant in which it follows Phoenician. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that there is no philological evidence that any traces

of Punic remain in modern Maltese. It is not impossible that some words which are common heritage passed directly into Maltese from Phoenician, especially those which are common with Syrian, but there is no evidence for this, and, if we take into consideration the vast number of cases in which Maltese and Arabic agree against Phoenician, the presumption weighs heavily against direct transmission from Phoenician. Maltese, today, is a language on its own. Its direct ancestor is the dialect of the Aghlabids who invaded Malta in the ninth century and came from North Africa. Whether Punic was still spoken in Malta before the Arabic invasion is a question which must remain unsolved for lack of evidence. As Malta formed part of the Byzantine Empire, it is more probable that the Maltese spoke Greek or low Latin as the Sicilians did, but whatever language was spoken was totally wiped out by the Aghlabids as happened in North Africa where the case for Punic is even stronger. However, whatever the origin of Maltese may be historically, the language is now part and parcel of the Maltese mind and heart, and it has been proved beyond any shadow of doubt that in the hands of able men it is an adequate vehicle for the highest thoughts.