

Allies already in Italy, that the war would soon be over. Hence the communities of Kastoria, Ioannina, Preveza, Arta, Corfu, Crete, Rhodes, and Kos paid the terrible 'price of ignorance'; the price already paid by so many others in Greece.

Whatever its structural imperfections and factual errors may be, this sombre, dreadful story should be read by any one with the slightest interest in Greek Jewry.

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Joseph M. Brincat, 2000: *Il-Malti: Elf Sena ta' Storja*. Malta: PIN Publications, pp. 236, ISBN: 99909-41-68-8 (paperback), Lm5.75.

It is quite a common malady for some Maltese today to assume that scholarship, research and the quest for truth is the prerogative of a select few, and that others should not dare to question their findings. Fortunately, this mentality has been continuously challenged, successfully so during the ages.

Just to mention a few names, the medical practitioner Giovanni Francesco Bonamico was one of Malta's most successful men of letters in the seventeenth century; ecclesiastic Giovanni Pietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis has left us a grammar and a dictionary of the Maltese language and the most extensive history of Gozo in the eighteenth century; in the nineteenth century philosopher Nicola Zammit wrote novels in Italian, whilst advocate Giovanni Antonio Vassallo left us innumerable literary works in Italian and Maltese, whilst also producing an extensive history of Malta.

The inquisitive venture of Maltese scholars into areas which do not pertain to their field of specialisation has continued during the twentieth century. Maltese heritage would be very different today without the multifarious activity of him whom I consider to be the greatest curious mind of all, Temistocles Zammit. He was a doctor and certainly left his mark in the medical field. But his invaluable contribution to Maltese archaeology and novel writing have left an indelible mark on the cultural and historical identity of our country, which would certainly be much poorer without the fruits of his work.

However, the country owes a lot to many others who have ventured outside their field of specialisation. Maltese medieval literature would be totally unknown to us were it not for the discovery of the 'Cantilena' by historians Godfrey Wettinger and Michael Fsadni; knowledge of Maltese historical past would not be as extensive as it is were it not for the sterling work of mathematician Stanley Fiorini; Maltese arts in general have certainly benefited from the contribution of philosopher Peter Serracino Inglott, among others; whilst the noble art of thinking coherently and logically has been given a strong thrust forward thanks to the written and verbal contributions of writer Oliver Friggieri. Among others on the background of such framework, please allow me to include myself as 'l'ultima ruota del carro', with my modest and most imperfect contributions to the different fields of history of language, literature, history and politics.

By all rights, Joseph M. Brincat belongs to this group of twentieth-century scholars who have ventured into pastures other than strictly those of their own formation . . . and coming up with

important results. Brincat is a linguist by training. The Romance languages, Italian and French, are his major domains of study. And yet, he has also come up with other studies that have certainly left a mark. His works on Arab historian Al Himyari and on the rock structure in Wied il-Kbir are of the utmost importance, and have certainly made both historians and archeologists start reconsidering some aspects of our past history.

The latest work by Brincat, *Il-Malti – Elf sena ta' Storja*, is another example of the author venturing out of his original field of training, at least in part. The result is that the linguist with a specialization in Romance languages has come up with the most updated and comprehensive history of the Maltese language to date.

Of course, the title of the book is a bit misleading, and indeed a misnomer, on two counts. In first place, it is impossible to give a precise thousand year account of the Maltese language *per se*, since we do not have any documented evidence of the Maltese language which goes back that far. As far as I know, but I stand to be corrected, the first Maltese words ever to be recorded on paper, actually toponyms, crop up in the oldest known Italian portulan of the Mediterranean, *Lo Chompasso de Navegare*, which goes back to 1296. This short 1296 description of the Maltese archipelago contains thirteen references to Maltese placenames or landmarks, including the toponyms Malta, Comino, Gozo, Milliaro (Mgarr), Marsa Siloco (Marsaxlokk) and Marza Mosecto (Marsamxett). Therefore, seven hundred years of Maltese language could have been a more appropriate title.

The title is also a misnomer, because Brincat's little gem of a book is not only a history of the Maltese language; it is

much more than that. In fact, the author manages to give us an account of the evolution of the language in Malta, but never in isolation. Whilst keeping Malta as the focal point, the author links the evolution of the language on the island to what was going on in other linguistic areas which were influencing it. Therefore, Sicilian, from the origins till 1530 ca; Tuscan Italian from the 16th till the 19th centuries; English, during the 20th century. Of course, the emphasis lies heavily on the Romance components of the Maltese language. Brincat is very frank about this: being the honest scholar he is, he openly declares in his foreword that he will focus on the Romance element in the Maltese language. It is now up to other scholars to come up with a similar interesting account of the evolution of the Maltese language during the ages, with the major focus in its semitic component.

In the meantime, on the turn of the new millenium, Brincat has provided us with the most complete and indeed the first fully fledged-history of the Maltese language. His approach reveals all the best that is to be found in the Italian humanistic tradition, where philology, history of language and modern linguistics are not treated in isolation, but constitute the essential threads that weave together the complicated pattern that makes up the history of our language. The continuous synchronic references to what was happening in Sicily remind us that anything that happens in Malta (indeed, in life!) must never be seen in isolation. And the History of Language in Malta can never be written if one does not have an extremely good knowledge of the linguistic history of Sicily.

Indeed, today some seem to forget a very important detail: until 1530 the capital

city of Malta was Palermo. This meant that Malta was, in reality, the southernmost outpost of Sicily and, therefore, any change or innovation introduced in our island until the time of the Knights originated from our northern neighbour. Today, we might speak of Arabisms, Hispanisms, Gallicisms etc. in the Maltese language but, strictly speaking, this is not so, since the Arabs, the Aragonese, the Normans who first came to Malta did not come directly from their place of origin, but did so via Sicily. This makes Sicily a fundamental point of reference for any history of our language and, rather than speaking of Arabisms, Hispanisms, Gallicisms, etc., many times we really have to speak of Siculo-Arabisms, Siculo-Hispanisms, Siculo-Gallicisms, etc.

Alberto Varvaro has studied the Sicilian language in the context of contemporary historical events. Dionysius Agius, who has reconstructed the Sicilian variant of Arabic in the Middle Ages, has indicated the right direction for the study of the origins of Maltese, which he terms 'Siculo-Arabic-Maltese'. Joe Brincat continues in the line of Agius's suggestion and Varvaro's work as regards the historical aspect of Maltese and this volume is a most exciting result of his efforts.

Of course, his approach might sometimes be a bit too technical for the lay reader. But the author is aware of this and therefore he states frankly in his foreword that when necessary, 'I would be giving certain explanations, because I believe that educated people who are not experts in the area should get to know of certain principles that have substituted erroneous notions of the past. I have numbered the sections in such a way so that the reader may skip those parts which are felt to be

too technical in nature . . .'. The glossary of specialized terminology given at the end of the book should also help to facilitate things.

Brincat's volume constitutes a milestone. Indeed, it is the most extensive history of language, based on a purely scientific approach, published to date in Malta.

Brincat knows how to be rigorous and objective in his evaluations. There is no room for sentimentalism or prejudices in his work, something which had been so evident in the past. The hallmark of his book is that it does not play one against the other — the Semitic, Romance and Anglo-Saxon elements or the Maltese, English and Italian languages. There is no hidden political and/or cultural agenda behind his work.

The result: an excellent volume which not only makes the Maltese aware of their linguistic past, but also highlights the fact that different cultures and languages can co-exist peacefully together to continue nourishing what is considered to be the only national language of semitic origin in Europe, the Maltese language.

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