

LOOKING BACK ON 'THE CANTILENA OF PETER CAXARO'*

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ABOUT this time ten years ago, my friend Father Michael Fsadni, O.P. and myself were very busy preparing the publication of a hitherto unknown poem of 20 lines going back well into the fifteenth century. We were both highly excited about it all and in a bit of a quandary about seeking advice because of the need to preserve secrecy until we brought it out. As it was, it took us about two years before we were able to present Peter Caxaro's little song to the Maltese public and to the wider world of scholarship abroad. Nine years have passed since then, and it is perhaps time to take stock of the situation again.

Ten years ago no one, least of all myself or Father Fsadni, dreamed that it could ever happen that a poem in Maltese two hundred years older than the oldest one then known should have remained and still lie in the archives waiting for its chance discovery by some researcher or other. It was universally believed, by ourselves as well as others, that no one ever bothered with the Maltese language except for some eighteenth century 'zealots' like Agius de Soldanis and Vassalli and an increasing number of popular writers of the nineteenth century – that is, before the language got caught up in the explosive political fight of English versus Italian. Bonamico's *Sonnet* was itself a bit of a freak, going back as it did to the later decades of the seventeenth century. Neither Father Fsadni nor myself was looking for specimens of Maltese poetry in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century notarial registers which we were examining. We were both, in fact, searching for documentation separately on different subjects of study – he about the early sixteenth century history of the Dominicans in Malta, I on slavery in Malta, at the same time with a longing side-glance, so to speak, at the earlier stuff so useful in understanding the social and economic condition of the people. We had frequently discussed our problems and had both remarked to each other how interesting it would be to find anything whatsoever concerning the

*A Public Lecture given at the Libyan Arab Cultural Institute, Palace Square, Valletta, on 3 December 1977.

Maltese language. Father Fsadni had already noticed certain occasional, if rare, references to the language and I was well aware of the importance of the late medieval place-names recorded plentifully in the surviving records. But that was all. When at last, on the 22nd September, 1966, the poem came to light we were astonished and excited beyond measure.¹

Doing anything about it was not easy. A few minutes' whispered conversation and even a cursory examination (taking care that we were not being observed or overheard by anyone) were enough to convince us fully that we had before us a finder's dream, a scoop to beat all scoops where our Maltese tongue is concerned. It was immediately settled between us that the two of us should work on the project together and publish it in a joint publication, each one contributing his knowledge to the project.

That very day we made a rough transcript and Father Fsadni, a week or two later, took a photo of it with proper authorization, one of us arranging to distract the attention of others present to prevent them from noticing precisely which page we were photographing and what it was all about. That operation completed it was relatively easy for us to start cracking, making discreet inquiries in scholarly circles on doubtful points etc. And we both for some time postponed our other interests in order to concentrate on this poem. We were determined to examine the whole sixty eight registers of Notary Brandan Caxaro to find out if he had recorded any other poem there, and that was no easy task seeing that that portion of the notarial archives is only accessible for public scrutiny for just over a couple of hours per week. Nothing else was discovered there or elsewhere in the notarial archives.

One of our main early worries, and the first one to be solved, was the genuinness of our copy: we both had a great responsibility here – a *personal one* because we were and are determined not to get involved in anything the least bit shady affecting our standing as historical researchers and as men of integrity, and also a *national one*, because Maltese scholarship has already had to bear the burden of living with the memory of the activities of Abate Vella, who discovered so many fantastic documents supposedly dating back to Muslim times but all apparently faked by himself. In fact, the most careful examination of our document could not reveal any suspicious feature about it. Its handwriting in all its minutest

¹ G. Wettinger and M. Fsadni O.P., *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena: a Poem in Medieval Maltese*, Malta, 1968.

details agreed fully with that in the rest of the volume, its ink was the same and had aged to the same extent and in the same way. The page on which it was written was an integral part of the register. Father Fsadni had been going to the notarial archives every Saturday since the previous spring; I had started to go at the beginning of the summer. A few other persons occasionally turned up as well and one or two others had also before us visited the archives regularly for short periods (as far as I know) on historical research of a geneological nature. During all this time, the staff of the office of the notary of the government would be hovering about in and out of rooms or sitting very close to us. We had little doubt that in the circumstances it was next to impossible for our document to have been faked so well that no sign of its faking remained – certainly not by members of the public.

However, other problems remained. Our copy of the poem was undoubtedly made by Notary Brandan de Caxario in his unmistakable handwriting very different from that of any one else on the island, then, before or after. But he attributed its composition to a Petrus de Caxario, his ancestor who was a 'philosopher, poet and orator' about whom I then knew nothing but whom Fsadni had already encountered as one of the benefactors of the first Dominican priory in Malta. Even then we had the difficult task of identifying our poet; could there not be others with the same name and surname? In fact there were at least four persons named Petrus or Peru Caxaru or de Caxario who lived before Brandano's time. One was a freed man of Notary Peru Caxaru and not an ancestor of Brandano's at all; another was a Gozitan, related distantly to Brandano but a contemporary of Brandano's. A third was a convert from Judaism and not a relative at all.² The only one who fulfilled all requirements was already known to Father Fsadni. He lived more than a generation before Brandano. It is true that he was not a direct ancestor but he could certainly be referred to quite legitimately and correctly as 'mei maioris' by Brandano. The work involved detailed research into the whole Caxaro family during the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century, substantially before the time when births, marriages and deaths were regularly registered by parish priests.

Identifying the author, however, only led to another problem – that of determining the precise respective function of Peter Caxaru

²He was one of the three sons of Rafaeli Ketib: G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (in the press).

and Brandano Caxaru. Did the latter not merely preserve a record of the very words in Maltese as they were strung together by Peter Caxaru or did he instead find a poem written by his kinsman Peter in some foreign language like Latin or Sicilian and then translate it into Maltese? In the brief introduction he appended to the poem he did say '*quam lingua melitea hic subicio*', which I am here giving in the Maltese tongue. This statement can be understood fully only by a complete consideration of the historico-linguistic context in which it appears. The Maltese language then was a linguistic fact which could not be ignored by anyone in the islands. Though public documents were invariably written either in Latin or some form of Italian, mostly Sicilian, they still had to be explained to the people and occasionally that is stated in the documents themselves or the dockets to them, and explained '*lingua materna*', in the mother tongue. It is far easier to think that someone like Peter Caxaru spontaneously expressed his emotions in a short poem in Maltese, his mother tongue, certainly his mother's and probably his father's tongue, than that Brandano should have been so struck by his poem in Latin or Sicilian that he actually sat down and translated it all into Maltese, and into Maltese verse at that: Maltese was the language of just about everyone born in the island, even when one parent happened to have been born abroad. What is surprising is that Brandano actually thought it preferable to preserve the Maltese wording rather than to translate it into Latin or Italian. During several years' reading of late medieval documents I have come across Maltese words or phrases a few score times (omitting the placenames). In every case, the Maltese was recorded because the writer either could not find a suitable Italian or Latin equivalent or could not be bothered to do so. On the other hand on innumerable occasions — in fact almost invariably — the original Maltese was translated into Latin or Italian. Even in slander or blasphemy cases, where it is so necessary to consider the exact wording, the whole of the latter is rendered in Latin or Italian usually in a literal translation.

As far as I am concerned therefore, it would be completely unhistorical, in fact, fantastic, to imagine that Brandano or anyone else translated Peter's cantilena into Maltese verse. And it would be just as difficult, if not more difficult, to imagine that Peter Caxaru himself filched his poem from some Sicilian or Latin, perhaps a goliardic, collection of poetry and translated it into Maltese, passing it off as his own. Of course, here we are in the realm of speculation through the lack of documentation, but it is usually

easier for a poet to express his own thoughts in his own words than to translate someone else's poetry. On the other hand, it cannot be excluded that he might have been influenced by poetry abroad, nor that he might have adapted a foreign poem. But one would like to see some detailed research on the point – especially on Sicilian popular songs of the time and on Italian or Sicilian poetry current at the time as revealed in the recently published book by Dr. Bresc on books and society in Sicily in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³ In the mean time we have Brandano's own description of Peter Caxaro as a poet and no one is known yet to have described Brandano as a poet!

It is such calculations as these, guided by what we both knew of the position of Maltese in the documents of the time, that forced us to the safe conclusion that Brandano's copy of Peter's cantilena in effect represented the very words which had been put together by Peter Caxaro.⁴ And as we knew that Peter had died in 1485 we felt and still feel that the oldest passage in Maltese is now precisely this poem of twenty lines, perforce written originally in or before, probably, in fact, much before 1485, – the oldest, that is, if we exclude place-names and the very rare occasional word, phrase or short sentence that might be found in the documents of the fifteenth century. Our task, after that, was the simpler one of placing the poem in its proper historical context, of explaining it, and of presenting it to the public in a way that would stimulate further study of certain aspects of it by those better qualified than we were to do so. By pooling our resources we were able to give an indication of the level of education in the islands at the time, of the attitude of people to their own language and of the sort of man both Peter and Brandano Caxaro were. Understanding the poem was terribly difficult, absolutely daunting at first, but by dint of scores of hours of poring over it upwards and downwards and from all sides and constant comparing of its lettering with that on other pages of the register we felt we could safely read the whole of the poem except the very last word. Some of the words were obscure even after we had deciphered them, as they had fallen out of use, but reference to Arabic dictionaries and some valuable suggestions from other scholars enabled us to arrive at the direct meaning of practically every part of the poem. It was, in fact a song that be-

³ H. Bresc, *Livre et Société en Sicile (1299-1499)*, Palermo, 1971.

⁴ We might even venture to state that the spelling itself is too archaic for 1533 and that therefore it is likely that Brandan actually possessed a written copy and merely copied specimen of it out into his register.

wailed the collapse of a wall which had been built on unsafe foundations, on clay instead of solid rock, a disaster that was therefore not caused by bad workmanship but because the structure was wrongly sited. The poet explains that he must go to another place and try again because a new site would give him a new chance of success.

It is clear, of course, that the poet could hardly have been seriously writing a song about something as common-place as building a wall, a song also able to enrapture the poet's kinsman Brandan so strongly at least forty five years later as to cause him to copy it out on a blank page of his first register of notarial deeds. There must, in fact, have been a deeper meaning to the poem in addition to the direct mundane meaning of its words. We suggested that the structure whose collapse the poet bewailed could have been a reference to some project of his which failed, perhaps an ambition concerning his career, or a love affair. We even suggested that 'the heart mentioned in the third line is the heart of the one he loved which had caused him all his bitterness and the downfall of all his schemes because, as he now realized, his love was misplaced'.⁵ Really it was impossible to say any more at the time.

Since the autumn of 1968 when our *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena* at last was published, we have both been able to return to our several separate interests. Father Fsadni has brought out two further volumes of the history of the Dominican Order in Malta⁶ and is on the point of publishing another.⁷ I myself gradually worked 'Slavery during the Rule of the Order of St. John' out of my system, leaving me free at last to concentrate on pre-1530 Maltese and pre-1551 Gozitan social and economic history. Both of us, however, have naturally kept up our interests in the fortunes of the Maltese language in those distant days, a couple of centuries before Bonamico and more than a century before Commendatore Abela. Father Fsadni has come across a member of his Order, Father Pasquale Vassallo, who was accused before the Inquisition of composing several songs before 1584 dedicated to children.⁸ He seems to have filled two 'libretti' or note-books with these songs or 'cantilene' in addition to others he scribbled on bits of paper. One of the 'libretti' of

⁵ *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena*, p. 39.

⁶ *Id-Dumnikani fil-Belt*, 1569-1619, Malta 1971, and *Id-Dumnikani fir-Rabat u fil-Birgu sa l-1620*, Malta, 1974.

⁷ This has since been published: *Id-Dumnikani Maltin fi Zmien il-Gwerra*, 1939-1945, Malta, 1977.

⁸ *Id-Dumnikani fir-Rabat u fil-Birgu sa l-1620*, pp. 219-220.

'octave Folio' size, contained cantilene in Italian, the other, contained 'canzone in lingua maltese' or 'canzone moresche' as well as some in Italian; it contained in all some sixteen small pages and five of the poems were dedicated separately to five boys of Mdina. Unfortunately Father Vassallo's poetical efforts were not appreciated and both 'libretti' were destroyed round about 1585. Whatever one thinks of Father Vassallo, it is clear that we have here someone who was expressing his feelings in all probability spontaneously and genuinely in poetry that was both Maltese and Italian: it is unlikely that it was merely and totally imitative of similar poetry already written elsewhere. Father Vassallo survived at least down to 1602 as Father Fsadni amply shows, but he is not known to have tried his hand again at the writing of poetry which had caused him so much trouble in 1585. Before Fsadni wrote about him, no one knew of Father Vassallo's literary efforts.

In the last nine years I have been, among other things, heavily occupied in amassing as extensive a documentation as possible on the medieval place-names of Malta and Gozo with particular attention being paid to their spelling peculiarities. Some 3800 separate place-names have been found and a large proportion of them have been recorded in several different spellings. Though some 50 per cent consist of, or contain references to, former landowners, and so on, by name, surname or nickname, our knowledge of the common vocabulary of medieval place-names can now be placed on a surer foundation. Their orthographical characteristics, in particular, should be of vital significance to any serious study of the linguistic peculiarities of Peter Caxaro's Cantilena. Thus the *-e* endings of words where we would expect *-a* is paralleled by the similar phenomenon in our late medieval place-names where hundreds of examples can be given and where eventually the switch-over to an *-a* ending could be discovered and studied.⁹ The language of the Cantilena is not really a unique phenomenon peculiar to Peter Caxaru.

Much more is now known of the author himself. He frequently served as a judge not only in the lay courts of the town of Mdina but almost as frequently in the bishop's courts throughout the last

⁹ G. Wettinger, 'Arabo-Berber influences in Malta: Onomastic Evidence', *Proceedings of the First Congress on Mediterranean Studies of Arabo-Berber Influence*, Algiers, 1973, and *Idem*, 'Non-Arabo-Berber influences on Malta's Medieval Nomenclature', *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Studies on Cultures of the Western Mediterranean*, II, Algiers, 1978, contain numerous examples.

twenty or thirty years of his life; though only a small amount of the records of the cases tried by him still survive. It can be safely said that he was the judge in every case where the name 'Judex Petrus' appears in the thirty years preceding 1485.¹⁰ An entry in a Palermitan register also reveals that in 1438 he was given an official authorization in the normal way to act as a public notary for the islands of Malta and Gozo, but it still seems improbable that his work as a notary extended any further than the making of an occasional public copy of some royal or viceregal document granting Malta one or other of the numerous privileges the island claimed.¹¹ Certainly not only do no registers of notarial deeds drawn up by him survive but not a single separate deed of his survives in any form whatsoever whether in the original or as a copy, nor are any such deeds drawn up by him ever cited in the surviving notarial or court records. I still have no hesitation in saying that it is highly unlikely that Peter Caxaru ever served as a public notary for any appreciable length of time, if at all.

More is also now known of his parentage and close relatives. I and Father Fsadni had drawn up a detailed family tree of the whole Caxaru family basing ourselves very largely on absolutely authentic original documentation. Unfortunately it now seems that the secondary source we relied on for a small part of the family tree in its topmost part owing to the lack of original sources, now turns out to have been incorrect. Contemporary documentation discovered lately seems to show that his mother Zuna was probably the sister of Valentinus, Franciscus and Catherina, children of Bernardus de Vetero, tax-Xih.¹² Manfre Caxaru and Antoni Caxaru were uncles of Petru Caxaru not his brothers, Liuni Caxaru, Petru's father, being their brother.¹³ It does now seem that Peter Caxaru had just one brother Nicholas. Extremely interesting and possibly closely related to the composition of the poem are the few surviving pages of a set of proceedings concerning Peter Caxaru's proposal of marriage to Francia or Francha de Biglera, whose surname before her marriage had been de Burdino.¹⁴ They are dated only by means of an

¹⁰ Cathedral Museum, Mdina, *Curia Episcopalis Melitensis*, Acta Originalia, vols. 1-4, *passim*.

¹¹ Archivio di Stato di Palermo, *Protonotaro del Regno*, vol. 34, fols. 128v-129.

¹² Cathedral Museum, Mdina, *Curia Episcopalis Melitensis*, Acta Originalia, vol. 1, fols. 74 et seq.

¹³ *Ibid.*, fols. 271v et seq; see Appendix.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

indication of the Indiction, and they would seem to belong either to 1463 or to 1478. Peter Caxaru's proposed marriage seems to have met with the determined opposition of Francia's eldest brother, Don Herrigu de Bordino. He claimed that Petrus Caxaru and donna Francia de Biglera his sister were related to each other spiritually because Francia had had Liuni Caxaru, Peter's father, as one of her godparents at her baptism. Don Herrigu testified that he knew through the very words of his own father Orlandu de Burdino that Liuni Caxaru, his father's friend and companion, had been Francia's godparent and that Manfre Caxaru, Peter's uncle, had been the godparent of Bartholomeo de Burdino, one of Don Herrigu's brothers. Don Herrigu insisted that his father and Liuni Caxaru had always considered each other as comrades and friends both in Malta and in Barcelona and Valencia 'essendu in cathalogna', throughout Francia's own life. Peter Caxaru himself did not omit to claim, when he commissioned the town notables Johanni de Machara and Jorge de la Chabica to negotiate his marriage to Donna Francia with Don Herrigu her brother that 'Ja lu dictu metrimoniū intra ipsu et la dicta Francha intra lu animu loru Ja era formatu et spachatu', in other words, 'that the said marriage between himself and the said Francha had already been agreed to and settled in their minds'. At length Don Herrigu declared he had no further evidence to produce to back up his opposition to the marriage and on 8 October the bishop's court declared that the marriage could take place. Still it does not seem that Petrus Caxaru left a widow or any offspring at the time of his death in 1485, nor is there any positive evidence that he actually ever married Francha de Biglera. It is of course quite possible that the Cantilena was originally written at this time and that it expressed precisely the wishes of Peter Caxaru on this matter of his marriage, being as intended a sort of answer to Don Herrigu who would not let him marry his sister Donna Francha — he would therefore seek pastures new, build up his house somewhere else, once this one seemed to have been built on clay. Perhaps in the end Francha herself refused to have him after all, and he felt hurt. Peter did leave a portion of his property to a certain freedwoman named Mica and her three freed sons. In a document concerning their inheritance copied out into a register at Palermo, reference is made to their 'patre notario Petro de Caxario', their 'father notary Peter', but the clerk deleted the word 'patre' and wrote 'patrono' 'patron' instead.¹⁵ The four of them had adop-

¹⁵ Archivio di Stato di Palermo, *Tribunale del Real Patrimonio*, Lettere Viceregie, vol. 161, fol. 204r-v.

ted the surname of Caxario or Caxaru like that of their former owner, but that was a normal proceeding once they had been baptised and abandoned their former religion, whether it was Islam or Judaism.

It is unlikely that the wretched death of Peter's brother Cola is at all relevant to the theme of the Cantilena.¹⁶ Cola, in fact, is known to have led two of his male friends to the house of a widow at Siggiewi named Maria, but his attempts to reach an understanding with her failed disastrously. On their way back to Mdina the little group was attacked by a horde of peasants from Siggiewi and although Cola was able momentarily to calm them down, the arrival of Maria herself, her mother and a sister all screaming for revenge for the slight inflicted on the honour and reputation of their family, with cries of 'These traitors have come to betray us; they have come to dishonour us; tomorrow the people of the village will revile us!', passions were again aroused. The three Mdina men took flight, but Cola himself was soon cornered in a cave where he had hidden himself, and there he was done to death under a shower of boulders and lance and spear thrusts, in spite of his cries for mercy that could be heard resounding all over the moonlit countryside around Tabrija, Blat il-Qamar and Wied il-Hesri.

On the other hand, it is interesting to find in the contemporary documentation references to the singing of cantilenas. A young priest from Gozo was accused amongst other much more serious crimes that he was in the habit of accompanying a group of youths in the evening as they all went about singing cantilenas.¹⁷ There can be little doubt that these Gozitan youths could only have been singing songs in their own mother tongue, probably songs of love, certainly songs of a profane nature. The little titbit of information implies that the literary historian who wants to understand fully the background to the Cantilena has to remember that in addition to the straightforward literary influences from abroad there might very well have been a local spontaneous school of song composition possibly akin to the folk singing of Sicily especially when one bears in mind that Sicily itself had once had a strong poetic tradition in Arabic itself and that Arabic persisted among the Sicilian Jews right down to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 from the whole dominions of the King of Spain. There is also another type of occa-

¹⁶ See my forthcoming 'Honour and Shame in Late Fifteenth Century Malta'.

¹⁷ Cathedral Museum, Mdina, *Curia Episcopalis Melitensis*, Acta Originalia, vol.

sional poem or folk song arising from particular events that caught the fancy of the people. Thus when the house of Petro de Brancato was broken into apparently from the infants' school next door a *Canczuni* was composed and it was sung about the streets of the town.¹⁸ Similarly, when the 'mischina purchella de Antoni Desguanes' was killed and eaten, 'una epistula seu canczuni' was immediately composed which was sung in the streets of the town for a considerable time by boys, slaves and infant pupils.¹⁹ In this case we are told that it was composed by the salaried schoolmaster of the town named Thomasio de Habrami who probably had little respect for his colleague who taught in the infants' school. Since Thomasio de Habrami was almost certainly a foreigner it was not probable that his *canzone* was in Maltese. But it cannot be emphasised sufficiently that such poetry of a folk nature must be taken fully into account in any attempt at understanding the background to the cantilena of Peter Caxaru. After all even much later on in the eighteenth century references were to be made to popular songs in Maltese being sung here in Malta and a couple of specimens or so were recorded in the literature of the time:²⁰

Min jitma fit-tama
 It-tama tqarraq bih
 Jagħmel ir-riħ fil-bomblu
 Jahseb li jsiefer bih.

Smajt li int tarbit l-imħabba
 Għedt fl-imħabba xi ġralek?
 Ejja thaddet għommok miegħi
 Għax nahseb li jiena bħalek.

Għadira li tixrob minnha
 Nitolbok la ddardarhiex
 Għax imur żmien u jigi ieħor
 Tfitixha u ma ssibhiex.

I had made originally an effort to find out something about the nature of popular Sicilian poetry of the fifteenth century but found that the subject was too vast a one to master with less than a year's study, and I could not afford the time.

After the publication of the Cantilena a number of persons have published their own studies on it, though not quite as many as I

¹⁸ Cathedral Museum, Mdina, *Curia Episcopalis Melitensis*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*,

²⁰ L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, 1805, vol. I, p. 100.

had originally expected. Father B. Mallia of the Jesuits was the first one to do so in a carefully thought out article published in *Problemi ta' Llum* of April 1970.²¹ Mallia takes Peter Caxaro's poetic gift seriously and studies his technique in a most thorough way, showing that Peter Caxaru was not a mere popular rhymester or versifier but a master of his art, and claiming with some justification that the Cantilena reveals a surprising sophistication of technique perhaps arising from a first hand acquaintance with such classical works as the *Ars Poetica* of Horace. Mallia is particularly strong in his analysis of the Cantilena's internal structure, the way ideas, words and figures of speech balance each other, the way repetition is used, and the way onomatopoeic sounds are introduced and repeated. For Mallia the Cantilena is no mere relic of a bygone age, of importance solely for that reason, but a work of art of high literary value in itself, able to withstand the most searching criticism of the critic. He can be faulted on only one point and that is where he puts the accent in the word *mihammic* on the last syllable instead of the middle one, a mistake that has been appearing again more recently. A little consideration should convince anyone that *mghammik* should be pronounced with the accent on the vowel of the first radical in the same way as words like *mfannad*, *mfissid*, *mkisser*.

We have therefore two attitudes towards the Cantilena to consider: that of those who think of it as the uncultured work of a folk poet of little or no literary value, whatever importance it might have in the study of folklore and social history, and that of those like Father Mallia and subsequently Dr. Paul Xuereb, the librarian of the University,²² who maintain in effect that the literary qualities of the Cantilena are far from negligible. It is not for me to decide the matter. Certainly the structure of the poem is far more complicated than that of our popular *għana*, and there is a mastery of diction and a terseness of expression which reveal the careful purposefulness of the frequent repetition of phrases and motifs.

Turning now to another point, the Cantilena should provide us with much information on the state of the Maltese language in the late middle ages. I and Father Fsadni had originally largely limited ourselves to an analysis of the orthography of the poem in order to understand it. We did however add that compared to Modern

²¹ B. Mallia, S.J., 'Il-Cantilena ta' Pietru Caxaro', *Problemi ta' Llum*, X, Nru. 4 (April 1970).

²² P. Xuereb, 'Cantilena' — First Known Poem in the Maltese Language', *Poeżija*, Soċjetà tal-Poeżija/Malta Poetry Society, No. 1 (October 1971).

Maltese the words in the poem contain a large number of additional vowels separating consonants which nowadays belong to consonant clusters as in *rimietna* (irmietna), *nitla* (nitla'), *zimen* (žmien), *mirammiti* (imrammti). We insisted that the language was very different from Classical Arabic and pointed out some of the more obvious characteristics of dialectal Arabic, like the words *nitla*, *nargia*, *nenzel*, *mectatilix*, composite words like *halex*, *fen*, the *me* in *mechitali* (imma) and *lili* (l'ili). The archaic characteristics could be seen in obsolete plurals like *liradi*, in obsolete verbal forms like *nichadithicum*, *tumayt* and *timayt*, and in other obsolete words like *xidew*, *cada*, *tale*, *mule*, *mihamic*, *minzeli*, *mirammiti*, *miken*, *yeutibe*, *hedaun*. And we pointed out the existence of the non-Semitic word *vintura*. And we found one case of the use of the feminine singular verbal construction with a plural subject: *mectatilix il mihallimin*. These points are precisely what we should expect of a bit of writing in Late Medieval Maltese. The language together with other dialects of North West Africa had lost the moods and case endings of Classical Arabic and adopted morphological forms peculiar to the region (the *n-* prefix of the verb in the first person singular of the imperfect), but had preserved much more of the Semitic vocabulary than Modern Maltese has retained whether in actual words or in particular morphological forms. Of course it was enticing to analyse the feature of vowel position, but I soon realized that it was an immensely complicated subject and steered severely clear of it. More recently William Cowan of Canada has made a study of his own of the language of Caxaro's *Cantilena*, which he has published in the *Journal of Maltese Studies* of 1975,²³ concentrating on two important features, those dealing with the long vowel /a:/ and the short pretonic /a/ in an open syllable. In the first case in particular he has proposed that final *-a* was first transformed into *-e* in Medieval Maltese and then brought back to its modern *-a* form similar to its Classical Arabic shape. Thus the final *-a* in Classical Arabic *mawla*, became final *-e* in the late medieval Maltese *mule*, and was restored to a final *-a* in the modern Maltese *mula*. This particular feature has led to something like consternation among some linguists and the suggestion that perhaps Peter Caxaro was himself a foreigner and therefore tended to reflect foreign linguistic features perhaps Sicilian Arabic or the Arabic of Spain. I think what I have already said of him rules out

²³ W. Cowan, 'Caxaro's *Cantilena*: A Checkpoint for Change in Maltese', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, No. 10 (1975).

the suggestion and should make the linguists think again. Cowan himself seems satisfied with his own purely linguistic explanation too intricate for a layman like myself to go into here without mature examination of his words. I have also already said that just about every feature of the Cantilena's language can be paralleled from similar linguistic phenomena in the innumerable place-names of the time. I know that several other linguists are at last busily at work analysing this and other matters and eagerly await their findings.

Coming now to our version of the poem we were unfortunately unable to understand the last word. Since then Father Edward Fenech of the University of Malta has brought out the best suggestion, and that is that it is an obsolete form of *tmur*, *tmarra*.²⁴ It is very well known that the verb *mar* is irregular and doubles its last radical in certain morphological forms even in Modern Maltese. Others have told me, however, that there are still some difficulties in accepting it. Fenech's other suggestion²⁵ that *gueri* in the second line of the Cantilena is really *gweri* cannot be accepted because it goes directly against the orthography of the times, as *gweri* would have been written either *Jueri* or *iueri* or *giueri*. Possibly *gueri* was pronounced with a hard *g*- sound as *gidi* for *gidi*, but really its apposition to *fo homoroom* seems to demand a temporal meaning in preference to any other one, and I stick to our original reading of *wâri*, the past. Nor am I inclined to accept his suggestion that line 9 should be extended to give it the same length as the others.²⁶ The reason for this appears insufficiently strong to me. After all, why should the lines of a song all have to have the same monotonous length? And we do not know the way the words of the Cantilena were sung, and that could make a big difference!

Professor Aquilina has examined the word *talaw* which appears in the Cantilena as *tale* and derived from the Arabic *تعال*, come on, the sixth form of *عَلَى* or *عَل* plus the Maltese *haw*, a shortened form of *hawn*, here.²⁷ I have myself found the word *tagħla* with the same meaning in late medieval Judaeo-Arabic poetry attributed to someone who had contact with the eastern Maghrib. I am now prepared to give my main preference to this meaning of that word ra-

²⁴ Dwardu Fenech (ie. E. Fenech), O.S.A., *Wirt il-Muza: Studji Kritici Komparattivi*, Malta 1977, p. 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁷ J. Aquilina, 'Maltese Etymological Glossary', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, No. 8 (1973), p. 53.

ther than to any other one. The meaning was indicated in our publication, but we there gave it second preference. One other word *yeutibe* appears as *tawatib* in another late medieval Judaeo-Arabic poem I have come across. Finally I would also like to make one emendation to our original reading of the words of the poem and that is the word *bedann* which I now think should read *bedaun*, Otherwise I stick to the whole of our original reading.²⁸ I must say, however, I would certainly appreciate any suggestions for a better reading from anyone though it would be difficult for me to deal with them adequately here today.

During the last few years, in fact ever since the publication of the Cantilena, I have been working on a totally different source of information on the Maltese language which greatly supplements what we know about it during the fifteenth century, revealing for example the state of survival of emphatic consonants and to some extent the sort of influx of words of Romance origin into the language. But the texts, which are being published in my *Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages*, part II, present particular problems. That the word *virtura* in the Cantilena only represents the tip of a mountain of Romance words in the language is obvious in many ways – the multitude of Sicilian words that have survived down to our own times which could only have entered Maltese in the Middle Ages, the presence of nicknames of Romance origin in the fifteenth century, the occasional if rare presence of Romance words in the place-names of the same time, and an occasional word in Maltese phrases recorded in the documents such as that in the phrase *hubex isfiduene* 'u biex jisfidawna' (1473), which I have recognized only the other week.²⁹

Xideu il cada ye gireni tale nichadithicum
mansab fil.guerj uele nisab fo homorcom
Calb mehandihe chakim sultan ui le mule
Bir mihamic rimitine be tiragin mucsule
fen 'ayran al garca nenzel fi minzelj
Nitila vij nargia ninzil deyem fil bachar il halj

Huakit hi mirammiti lili zimen nibnj
Mectatilix mihallimin mechitali tafal merchi
Fen timayt insib il gebel sib tafal morchi
vackit hi mirammiti.

²⁸ 'Curait', the only word in the Latin introduction to Caxaro's poem, which we failed to explain, really stands for 'Curavit', he took care of.

²⁹ Cathedral Museum, Mdina, *Curia Episcopalis Melitensis*, Acta Originalia, vol. 1, fol.

Huakit hy mirammiti Nizlit hi li sisen
 Mectatilix il mihallimin ma kitatili li gebel
 fen tumayt insib il gebel sib tafal morchi
 Huakit thi mirammiti lili zimen nibni
 Huec ucahit hi mirammiti vargia ibnie
 biddilihe inte il miken illi yeutihe
 Min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura
 halex liradi 'al col xibir sura
 hemme ard bayda uhemme ard seude et hamyra
 Hectar min hedaun heme tred minne tamarra.

APPENDIX

Ultimo Septembris xii Indicionis (1463 or 1478) . . .

Informazioni et Juri informaturi de lu venerabili don Herrigu
 de lu Burdino li quali duna et offeri ala curte de lu Reveren-
 dissimo signuri Epsicopu Melivetanu acturi ex una parte con-
 tra et adversus notaru Peri Caxaru et Francha de Biglera con-
 venuti ex altera in quistione seu denunciacioni comu lu dictu
 atturi dichi comu li dicta Francha esti figlocha de quondam
 Liuni Caxaru pater de lu dictu convenutu in la quali prochedi
 etc.

In primis etc.

Item la presenti causa fu et è ut supra Juri et causa ut infra.

Item, in si fa circa misi octu vel citra ki lu dittu notaru Peri
 mandau a diri cum li magnifichi Johanni de Givara et Johanni de
 la Chabica a lu dittu venerabili don Herrigu ki lu dittu notaru Peri
 haviria plachiri di fari matrimoniu cum la ditte Francha soru de lu
 venerabili don Herrigu et lu dittu venerabili don Herrigu li rispusi
 et dissi: 'Dichiti a notaru Peri ki tali matrimoniu non si po fari per
 alcuni rispetti et specialiter ki Liuni Caxaru patri de quistu notaru

Peri era compari de quondam Orlandu de Burdinu patri de quista Francha et baptichau ala dicta Francha et per quista raxuni tali matrimoniu de Juri non si po fari'.

Item noviter lu dictu notaru Peri mandau a diri cum li magnifici Johanni de Machara (ie. Mazara) et Jorge de la Chabica alu dittu venerabili don Herrigu ki ja lu dictu matrimoniu intra ipsu et la dicta Francha intra lu animu loru ja era formatu et spachatu et lu dictu don Herrigu rispusi ki tali matrimoniu non si purra fari ut supra ne tampocu lu dictu don Herrigu fu et è contentu.

[Fol. 271v] Item, lu dictu don Herrigu frati di quista Francha comu primogenitu havi constatu et sa per bucca de sou patri quondam Orlandu pater de quista dicta Francha et paptichaula.

Item multi et assay fiati quondam Orlandu de Bordinu raxunava cum lu dictu don Herrigu et specialiter quando fu la briga de Bartholomeu de Burdino figlu di quistu quondam Orlandu cum Lyuni et Manfre Caxaru lu dictu Orlandu reprindia alu dictu Bartholomeu in presenciam de quistu don Herrigu et chi dichia comu Manfre Caxaru havia baptichatu alu dictu Bartholomeu et Lyuni Caxaru et misser Johanni de Caru havianu baptichatu ala dicta Franchia et lu dictu Orlandu de Burdino havia baptichatu ad Orlandu Caxaru et dedichi lu sou nomu Orlandu et tucti quisti iiii frati et hoc Antoni Caxaru, Liuni Caxaru, et Manfre Caxaru, eranu compari delu dictu Orlandu, pater de quista Francha.

Item, multi et assay fiati la dictu Orlandu de Burdinu raxuniava cum lu dictu don Herrigu de Burdinu sou legitimu figlu primogenitu de multi cosi et specialiter lu dictu Orlando de Burdinu chi dichia comu li parruni de don Herrigu foru tucti Catalani et li barruni[sic] de quondam Bartholomeu de Burdinu foru Manfre Caxaru et Micheli de Bernardu et autri, et li parruni de la dicta Francha fu misser Johanni de Caru et dedichi nomu Francha per lu nomu de la sua prima mugleri, figla de quondam Antonellu de Santa Sofia, et lautru parrinu de la dicta Francha fu lu dictu Liuni Caxaru pater de quistu notaru Peri et li parrini de don Rugeri foru misser Rugeri Surrimu et sua mugleri li quali lu pucharu ala Cathalana intrambu alu dictu don Rugeri et li parrini di Nardu foru notaru Fidericu Calava et dedi nomu Nardino, per lu nomu de sou patri de lu dictu notaru Fidericu et quistu lu sa lu dictu don Herrigu per bucca de sou patri, de causa sciencie [etc.].

[fol. 272] Item, lu dictu don Herrigu noli fari comu legitimamente li dicti quondam Orlandu de Burdinu sou patri et lu dictu Liuni sempri chamavanu lu unu alautru compari et compari tantu a Mauta quantu in Barselona et in Valencia essendu in Cathalogna.

Item, de presumiri a certu et certissimu ki lu dictu Liuni era et est parrinu de quista dicta Francha et baptichaula ca li altri figloli de lu dictu Orlandu de Burdinu foru baptichari da loru parrini nominati ut supra, et non si po diri ex parte adversa ki lu dictu Liuni havisse baptichatu ad altra creatura che este de li figloli de lu dictu quondam Orlandu.

Item, ki dictu don Herrigu voli probari comu lu dictu compari cho esti Orlandu de Burdinu et Lyuni Caxaru si tractavanu per compari et lu unu alautru chamava compari et compari ja si fa deli anni tantu quantu esti la etate de quista Francha figlocha de lu dictu Liuni.

Item si lu dictu don Herrigu havissi havutu curiali ki lu havissi indirichatu quista informacioni et capituli meglu ki li aviria factu tamen tali quali su indirichati per lu dictu don Herrigu ipsu lassa lu carricu ali consciencie deli judicanti et si lu dictu don Harrigu non dichì veritatem deū michanu (?).

Docket on fol. 272v:

Informaciones
donni Henrici de Bordino
contra

nobiles notarum Petrum de Caxario et donnam Franchiam.

iiii^o Octobris xii^e Indicionis [1463 or 1478] puplicatum est et hinc per totum diem Jovis et notificatum per me notarium.

vii eiusdem datus est terminus eidem convenuto ad defendendum et reprobandum dierum octo.

viii eiusdem. Quia venerabilis donnus Henricus ipse comparens coram Reverendissimo domino episcopo non nullis respectibus animum et conscienciam suam moventibus destitit et dixit quod non vult ulterius se impedire asserens non habere testes anteriores excepto illos quos produxit. Propterea ipse dominus episcopus visis ipsis testibus cum consilio sui iudicis declaravit dictum matrimonium tenere et canonice procedere et stare inter ipsos nobiles iudicem Petrum et donnam Franciam; presentibus magnificis Johanne de Guivara, domino Peri Johanne de Mazara, Johanne de Mazara et aliis pro testibus.

Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Curia Episcopalis
Melitensis, Acta Originalis, vol. 1, fols. 271-272v