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LATE MEDIEVAL JUDAEO-ARABIC POETRY IN VATICAN MS. 411: LINKS WITH MALTESE AND SICILIAN ARABIC

by GODFREY WETTINGER

Some little time ago, in following up a footnote reference,¹ I came across eight allegedly late medieval poems in a pointed Judaeo-Arabic text. Preserved in a pocket-sized manuscript at the Vatican,² where I was eventually able to handle it, they were transcribed and published as long ago as 1949 by Ernest Mainz,³ but had somehow remained completely unnoticed and unknown here in Malta perhaps because it was then still universally believed that the Maltese language was not written down before the seventeenth century was well under way.⁴ Their author has remained unknown but experts suggested that he must have had contact with the Eastern Maghreb, i.e. substantially Tunisia.⁵ That he was a Jew goes without saying.⁶

¹J. Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic* (Oxford, 1965), 187.

²Vatican Library, Hebrew Ms. 411.

³Ernest Mainz, 'Quelques poésies Judaeo-Arabes du manuscrit 411 de la Bibliothèque du Vatican', *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 237 (1949), 51-83. This periodical is not available in Malta.

⁴The publication in 1968 of a *cantilena* written by Peter Caxaro (fl. 1439-ob. 1485) has shown that the Maltese language was certainly occasionally used for literary writings even if only rarely and those of a limited scope: G. Wettinger and M. Fsadni, *The Cantilena of Peter Caxaro: A Poem in Medieval Maltese* (Malta, 1968).

⁵Mainz, 54.

⁶Mainz, *loc. cit.*, thinks that the first seven poems had one author, possibly Salomo Aharon b. Pinhas whose name appears in the manuscript, but he could easily, Mainz thinks, have been merely the copyist. The eighth poem is totally different in style and content. Assemani attributed the

What struck the present writer most, of course, was that whole lines of the poems could be read off as Maltese and one could, if so inclined, imagine oneself to be reading stuff by an extreme exponent of Semitic Maltese, *Malti safi*. Repeatedly the thought struck one: 'Did we have here Maltese poems written by a Jewish inhabitant of Malta who was the contemporary, perhaps, of Peter Caxaro, the author of the *Cantilena*, the only poem in medieval Maltese so far known to have survived. Thus, in a language not unreminiscent of that of the *Cantilena*, this is how a lover addresses his lass:⁷

sammaytek fi ġanijeti u fhartek kətir
wawraytek muhabbeti ja waġh el-ġemil.

In modern Maltese this could be rendered intelligibly as:

*Semmajtek f'ġhanjieti u fahhartek bil-ktir
U wrejtek imhabbti, ja wiċċ il-ġmiel.*

The morphology of the language of the poems resembles that of North-West Africa. Thus the verb contains such normal and well-known characteristics of Maghribi Arabic as *n-* and *n-...u* for the first person singular and plural respectively of the imperfect:⁸

nəzul	I go away	naftakar	I remember
narah	I see him	naštərah	I rest
namšī	I walk	natəlob	I pray, I beg
and			
nəqulu	we say	nal'abu	we play
nərqədu	we sleep		

Finality is introduced with either *baš* or *'aleš*; 'a couple' is expressed by the word *zawġ*.⁹ Of course, all these features are also to be found in Maltese. Particularly striking to Maltese readers are

writing of the manuscript to the fifteenth century: 'Is codex decimoquinto Christi seculo videtur descriptus': S.E. Assemanus, *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Codicum Manuscriptorum Catalogus* (Rome, 1756), 382.

⁷ Extracts from the poems are here invariably given as in the transcription made by Mainz. The Maltese reader, in particular, must be warned that *ġ* = *rgħayn*, *ġ* = soft 'g' (Maltese *g*).

⁸ For this characteristic see Blau, 52-53, 119-120.

⁹ Alexander Borg, *A Historical and Comparative Phonology and Morphology of Maltese*, Ph.D. thesis, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 345, 347.

such verbal forms as: bəqayt, ġayt, sammaytek, habbayt as well as atraddayt and mēdayt.¹⁰ So far as is known, these are characteristic of Maltese, their diphthong -ay- in North Africa being normally represented by -i- though it has been supposed that the diphthong may have once existed there too.¹¹ The demonstratives include hamma (Maltese *hemma*, *hemm*) as a variant of tamma, unique so far as is known, to Maltese;¹² one notices also the presence of hekda, so (cf. Maltese *hekda fl-art*)¹³ and šayn, nothing (Maltese *xejn*), the former reported by Beaussier alone outside Malta and with a different meaning, the latter either having no diphthong or no -n in its North West African form.¹⁴ Mainz himself noticed resemblances to specifically Maltese morphological features, namely the use of the third and sixth verbal forms in place of the second and fifth with verbs containing -gh- as second radical (i.e. *biegħed*, *tbiegħed*).¹⁵ But his failure to use even the most common and popular Maltese dictionaries prevented him from giving the translation of at least five words:¹⁶ qerâreb, plural of *qarrâba*, phials, flagons; fum el-luf, which perhaps he should have transcribed fum el-lup, in modern Maltese *fomm il-lipp*, *naspli*, medlars (N.B. 'p' and 'f' are represented by the

¹⁰In modern Maltese the first four become *bqajt*, *gejt*, *semmajtek*, and *habbejt*; the other two no longer exist in Maltese but would have been pronounced *traddejt* and *mdejt*.

¹¹Ph. Marçais, *Esquisse Grammaticale de l'Arabe Maghrebin* (Paris, 1977), 48, 49, 48, 60, 51-52. A. Borg, *op. cit.*, 232. The same could be said of *rayt*, *šrayte* (*x'rajt*) and *wraytek* among the Muslim speakers of the Maghreb, but the Jews of Tunis retain the diphthong: D. Cohen, *Le Parler Arabe des Juifs de Tunis*, II, 63, 106.

¹²G. Barbera, *Dizionario Maltese-Arabo-Italiano* (Beyrouth, 1939), *sub voce*; E. Serracino Inglott, *Il-Miklem Malti*, s.v. The poems contain several examples of *tamma* and only one of *hemma*. *Hemme* occurs several times in P. Caxaro's *Cantilena*.

¹³For *hekda* see E. Serracino Inglott, s.v., citing Beaussier, *Dictionnaire Pratique Arabe Français*, and for its first recording in Maltese: F. Uzzino, *Doctrina Cristiana tradotta in lingua araba ... e trasportata adesso in Maltese* (from the Italian version), (Rome 1752), 36. See also C.L. Des-soulavy, *Gate of the East*, 922.

¹⁴Marçais, 207, 209.

¹⁵Mainz, 71, 81.

¹⁶E.D. Busuttil, *Kalepin Malti-Ingliz*, (Malta, 1942), s.vv.; G.B. Falzon, *Dizionario Maltese-Italiano-Inglese* (Malta, 1845), s.vv. (also gives *qarreb* as plural of *qarraba*).

same sign in Hebrew); ġisi (ġ = rghayn), wrong transliteration for ġisi, in modern Maltese ġiżi, stocks (flowers); 'asġar el-lawq, in modern Maltese siġar tal-luq, poplar trees; 'asqunfi, in Maltese xkomp, a kind of citrus resembling a lemon, the whole line where it occurs

laranġe atronġ 'asqunfi wə lumi

reading in modern Maltese:

laring, trong, xkomp u lumi

and would be perfectly readable and understandable to anyone knowledgeable in citrus fruit-trees. A knowledge of Maltese would also have enabled Mainz to avoid translating ġewabi as 'response' instead of 'citernes, reservoirs', ignoring as he did the reference in the poems to the sea-fishes to be seen in them.¹⁷ Other words or phrases understandable in Maltese, modern or medieval, which Mainz translated correctly but did not notice their relevance to the problem of the poems' provenance, include ahmar qerulli (Maltese *ahmar qrolli*), coral red, qarlin (as in Maltese Judaeo-Arabic;¹⁸ modern Maltese: *karlin*, surviving in the phrase *iliet karnijiet*), is-sardin, sardines, ġerasya (modern Maltese *ċirasa*), cherry, cherry-tree, qurtina, veil, screen, curtain. It will be seen that all of these words are of Latin origin and could hardly have been in use in the Maghreb in the late middle ages, though Arabic dictionaries now give ġerasya and sardin¹⁹ while qurtina was in use in Moorish Spain but with a different meaning.²⁰

Several word formations different from Classical Arabic are iden-

¹⁷ *Giebjā, ġwiebi* in E. Serracino Inglott, citing Beaussier and Kazimirski; see also Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (London, 1966); the word was particularly common in Arab Sicily, where it has survived in the Romance Sicilian dialectal word *gebbia*: A. Traina, *Nuovo Vocabolario Siciliano-Italiano* (Palermo, 1968), s.v., and in Malta where it is still in common use together with its plural *ġwiebi* and is recorded several times in one form or another in the late medieval place-names of Malta.

¹⁸ Nine documents in Maltese Judaeo-Arabic, mostly mere fragments, are being published by the present writer in his *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (in the press).

¹⁹ For *ġerasya* and *sardin*: E.A. Elias and E.E. Elias, *Elias' Modern Dictionary, Arabic-English*, s.vv. (for *ġerasya* see under *qarasya*).

²⁰ R. Dozy, *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes* (Leyden, 1881/Beyrouth, 1968), s.v., explains it as '*vestibule, portique devant la maison*'.

tical with their Maltese respective forms or meanings but are also to be found with those characteristics in one part or other of the Maghreb though perhaps never all in the same locality as here. Thus, *yahsəlu*, they wash, where the 'h' has replaced the original *rghayn*,²¹ *taqbəz*, jump, where the 'b' has taken the place of the Classical Arabic 'f',²² *naftakar* (Maltese *niftakar*), where the 'f' represents the original Arabic 'ج',²³ *sağra*, a tree, where the 's' stands for the original 'š',²⁴ *lanğas*, pears,²⁵ and *laranğ* (Maltese *laring*), oranges,²⁶ where the 'l' is really the definite article. One observes also the word *'ankəbut*, Maltese *għanqbuta*, with the same meaning as in Maltese: a cobweb, not a spider as in Classical Arabic, a transference of meaning which Malta also shares with Andalusian and possibly Algerian Arabic.²⁷ /are

Of the undoubted differences from modern Maltese a number can be easily explained away. Thus 'I', 'we' and 'they' in the poems are expressed by the words *ana*, *nehon* or *nhon* and *hom* respectively while modern Maltese prefers *jiena*, *aħna* (dropping the initial *n-*, like most of the dialects of the Maghreb), and *huma*. However, as late as 1660 Philip Skippon gives *anna* for 'I', *nehen* for 'we', and *hom* for 'they'.²⁸ Possession is at least twice in the poems expressed by the word *mita*, invariably represented in modern Maltese by *ta'*; but *mita* has been found in fifteenth century Maltese place-names together with *bita*.²⁹ The Arabic for 'to an-

²¹ It is given as an alternative to the *rghayn* form in K. Stowasser and Moukhtar Ani, *A Dictionary of Syrian Arabic: English Arabic* (Washington, 1964), s.v. 'wash, to', but seems absent from the Maghreb where its occurrence would have been more relevant. Mainz also noticed this resemblance of *yahsəlu* to Maltese, citing Sutcliffe, *A Grammar of the Maltese Language*, 6: Mainz, 56.

²² Dozy, s.v.

²³ *Ibid.*, citing Beaussier.

²⁴ Ph. Marçais and M.-S. Hamrouni, *Textes d'Arabe Maghrébin* (Paris, 1977), s.v. in 'Lexique' section.

²⁵ Serracino Inglott, s.v.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, s.v.; alternatively the 'l' of *laring* could be derived from the original 'n'.

²⁷ Dozy, vol. II, 182.

²⁸ Ph. Skippon, 'A Journey thro' Part of the Low Countries, Italy and France', in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, ed. A.J. Churchill, Vol. VI, 626.

²⁹ G. Wettinger, 'The Morphology and Syntax of Maltese Place-names in Early Modern Times' (forthcoming).

swer' in the poems is *ġawaba* as in Classical Arabic, while modern Maltese has *wieġeb*, but Skippon here again says that the Maltese for 'to answer' was *goab*, apparently indicating that the metathesis of the first two radical consonants had not yet taken place.³⁰ 'Eleven' in the poems is expressed by *aħdaš an* while modern Maltese prefers *ħdax-il*, but Judaeo-Arabic documents from Malta of 1476 show the same particle *an* instead of *-il*,³¹ widely spread in Eastern Algeria and Tunisia.³² The use of *ildi* instead of *illi* is probably a mere Judaeo-Arabic orthographic archaism in the same way that in Maltese one writes *għandna* but pronounces *anna*.³³ The use of *kân li*, I had, in the place of the modern Maltese *kelli* is paralleled by its similar occurrence in the fifteenth century Judaeo-Arabic writings from Malta. The fact that some care is taken to distinguish between some of the emphatic and the non-emphatic consonants, though the distinction no longer exists in modern Maltese, is again paralleled by the same feature in Judaeo-Arabic writings from Malta.

The vocabulary of the poems shows major and minor differences from that of modern Maltese. Among the minor differences one might mention that in the poems 'to forgive' is expressed by the word *aġfer*, not *aħfer* as in modern Maltese, and 'e^zor, 'bed-sheets', and *mā*, 'water', have not been fused with their definite article as in the Maltese *lożor* and *ilma* (cf. *lanġas* and *laranġ* above). The verb *qal*, 'he said', has not been replaced in the imperfect by the verb *għad*, *jgħid*, as in modern Maltese.³⁴ The original meaning of the Maltese word *moħxiġa*, i.e. 'stuffed', has now been relegated to a mere dialectal survival on the island of Gozo: cf. in the poems the phrase *wəfakruna muħšiya*, 'and a stuffed turtle'.

An idea of the scale of the vocabulary dissimilarity of the language of the poems to modern Maltese is perhaps best obtained by a detailed examination of any of the poems. Not one of the following verbs in the first poem has survived in modern Maltese in pre-

³⁰ Cp. Serracino Inglott and Skippon, *op.cit.*, s.vv.

³¹ G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (in the press).

³² Marçais, 178.

³³ It also appears in the Judaeo-Arabic documents from Malta.

³⁴ On the use of these words in Maltese compared to Maghribi, see J. Aquilina, 124-25.

cisely the form in which it appears there (surviving words with the same roots are given in brackets):³⁵

nahki – I'll recount	yisğədu – they prostrated themselves
'aftənu – be awakened	n(ə)teq – I can
titbašəru – you rejoice	našqor – I thank
nathayəli – I imagine (cp. <i>nistħajjilni</i>)	yinšərah – he is relaxed (cp. surname <i>Xiriha</i>)
nawsaf – I'll recount	nə'awwədu – we accustom (cp. <i>ğhawwad</i>)
yənur – he shines (cp. <i>mnawwar</i>)	na'bədu – we adore (cp. place-name <i>tal-Għabid</i>)
'zam t – I decided	ballağ – take
nantəzar – I await	na'təbar – I pay attention
ya'tabar – he avoids (cp. <i>ğħabbar, ġħabra</i>)	hadar – he was present (cp. <i>ħaddara</i>)
yašraq – he radiates	yətub – he repents (cp. <i>teuba</i>)
	yinşor – he helps

The same single poem also contains a very large number of other words no longer extant in Maltese:³⁶

ahl – people	ğard – intention (cp. <i>ğħarrieda</i>)
wədad – love, friendship	'alil – sick, ill, soft (cp. <i>ğħilla</i>)
ğəyad – good, perfect, excellent (pl.)	'ağul – hasty, rash (cp. <i>ğħağla</i>)
munam – dream	'adəmi – human being (cp. <i>bniedem</i>)
ansan – man (cp. <i>nisa</i> , woman)	səbur – patient (cp. <i>sabar</i>)
'afif – chaste, modest, pure	hawzə – possession, tenure
muhif – parched, thirsty	šəheq – sighing
šerif – distinguished, sublime	mağdur – muddled, blackened
dəlil – despicable, contemptible	haqeq – worthy, fit (cp. <i>ħaqq</i>)

³⁵ Mainz, 60-64.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

- [6] *ṣaḥbāq ṣabāṣaḡ nāna yṣāhi* [6] basilic, camomille et menthe excitent l'envie.
- [7] *el-mārdagūṣ w(ə)el-āklil zānūh 'alālār* [7] La marjolaine et le romarin l'ornent encore plus.
- [8] *fi nādrāhom yibqā (e)l-ansan[ə]-sāhi* [8] A leur vue l'homme reste diverti,
- [9] *|bāhi wādūhās yibqā fi (e)l-ḡṣ-wābi|* [9] étonné et ébahi (reste-t-il) pour la réponse.
- f. 18 r. [1] *hā[t]tā yorā fihom sām:k el-bāhāri* [1] Comme il y voit même, les poissons des mers,
- [2] *el-tānkə w(ə)el-buri šil yā hābibī* [2] ... et le mulet : prends-les, mon ami,
- [3] *ādhon wāqli w(ə)āšwi foq[ə] nāri* [3] mets-y de l'huile, frits et rôtis sur le feu.
- [4] *qāšb el-ḥālu hu nāzha lišəbēbi* [4] De la canne à sucre est l'amusement de la jeunesse
- [5] *fi kollə māwsām w(ə)ā'yādi w-qāri* [5] à toute solennité, fête et réunion (?).
- [6] *|tāktor səruri waqt ān fihom [7] nādhol|* [6] Ma joie est grande, quand j'y [7] entre.
- [9] *yawḡād munabāt tanmā kol[lə] 'ātri* [9] On y trouve des plantations de tous les aromates :
- [10] *fālfol wəqarfa qāqu[l]a qə-runfol* [10] du poivre, de la cannelle, du cardamome, du girofle
- [11] *w(ə)el-zāṣəran el-ḡibli w(ə)el-bāhāri* [11] et du safran de la montagne et de la côte,
- f. 18 v. [1] *ḡāwzā ḥə'unḡān basbasā wə-sonbol* [1] noix muscade (?), du macis et de l'aspic :
- [2] *min ḡuməlāt 'atyāb tāwḡād l'āmri* [2] tu trouveras de tous les aromates, par ma vie.
- [3] *|ḥūlā fi dāhni nabni fih qāsrī|* [3] Et il me vint dans l'esprit d'y construire mon château,
- [6] *sāmēḥ wə'albrāḡoh 'āsrā yəkunu* [6] haut et ses tours seront dix,

Fol. 18 r. [1] *bāhāri* = pl. dial. de بحر. — [5] *māwsām* = موسم «fête religieuse» (BEAUSSIER). — 'ā'yādi = plur. dial. de عيد.

Fol. 18 v. [1] (*ḡāwzā*) *ḥə'unḡān* = خلنجان (Dozy, Voc.). — *basbasā* = بسباس «macis» chez P. d'ALE, mais autrement «fenouil» au Maghreb (Dozy). — *sonbol* = سنبل «lavande, jacinthe ou tulipe».

וְחֶבֶק עֲבָדֵינוּ נִעְנַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
 אֶל מִדְּרָקוֹ וְאֶל חֲכָלֵל וְאֶמְלֵחַסְתֶּה
 שִׁי גִּירָהּ יִסְתָּח אֶל אֲנִשְׁמָן שְׂמֵחַ
 בְּמֵחִי וְדֹמֶה יִסְתָּח שִׁי אֶל גִּירָה
 בְּמֵחִי
 בְּמֵחִי וְדֹמֶה יִסְתָּח שִׁי אֶל גִּירָה

חֲזִי יִבְא שִׂיחָה שְׂמֵחַ אֶל בְּחֵמֵרִי
 אֶל רִיבֵךְ נָא כִּי־יִי אֶל יֵא חֲכָמִי
 אֲדֹהֵן וְאֶקֶל וְאֶטֶן שִׁיךְ נִחִי
 קֶצֶב אֶל חֲלֹי הוּא נִזְחֵן לִטְבֵּחִי
 שִׁי כָל מִיּוֹסֶס וְאֶשְׂמֵחִי וְקֹדֶרִי
 תִּבְהִי־סִרְיִי וְקֶע אֶן שִׂיחָה
 נִכְסִיל

תִּבְהִי־סִרְיִי וְקֶע אֶן שִׂיחָה נִכְסִיל
 יוֹנֵד מִיּוֹסֶסֶת תִּמְחֵן כָּל שְׂמֵחִי
 כִּלְכִּיל וְקֶרֶבֶח קֹדֶרֶחֶן קִרְיָה
 נָא וְעִמְרֵן אֶל גִּבְלִי נִחִי בְּחֵמֵרִי

גִּיּוֹחַ כְּלֵמֶתֶךָ בְּכִסְמָן וְסִינְיָה
 מֵן נִמְלֵתֶךָ אֶמְיָחֶךָ בְּיוֹנֵד לִימְרִי
 וְעִלְעֵשִׁי לִחֵן יִבְכֶּה שִׂיחָה קִרְיָה
 נִעֵלֶה

נִעִלְעֵשִׁי שִׂיחָה עִבְדֵּי שִׂיחָה קִרְיָה
 שְׂמֵחֶךָ יִבְרָאֵלֶךָ עִשְׂרִי יִכְנֹן

These differences in vocabulary are perhaps not as serious an obstacle as one might at first think to identifying the language of the poems as fifteenth century Maltese. The only known surviving specimen of Maltese of that century, namely the *Cantilena* of Peter Caxaro, proves that there was a substantial vocabulary displacement in the centuries that have supervened. In fact, at least two of the obsolete words of the *Cantilena*, are also to be found in these Judaeo-Arabic poems, namely tale, come along, in the first line:³⁷

Xideu il cada ye gireni tale nichadithicum
and *yeutihe*, which suits it, in the sixteenth line:³⁸

biddilibe inte il miken illi yeutihe
The first word occurs twice in the Judaeo-Arabic poems:³⁹
raddat hi(yya) tanəya ta'la l(e) 'andəna
ta'la tatnazzah ya (a)hi fi (e) l nunayfar

The second is to be found in the line:⁴⁰

uqərareb təwatih min šurab gul(l)ənarū
One also notices the phrase *tala' u nižel*, he went up and down, to be found both in the *Cantilena*:⁴¹

Nitila vy nargia ninzil deyem fil bachar il halj
and in one of these other poems:⁴²
Sortə ṭala' wənazel min 'al bab el ġəzala

Several morphological and syntactic differences from modern Maltese will be noticed: (a) weak verbs with 'w' or 'j' as first radical retain the 'w' in the imperfect though it disappears in Maltese, e.g. compare *nawsaf*, I recount, with Maltese *nasal*, I arrive (from *wasal*);⁴³ (b) verbs with a 'liquid' second radical consonant in the imperfect and imperative plural take a helping vowel after it instead of before it as in modern Maltese, thus the poems have

³⁷Wettinger and Fsadni; 41-42.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 46.

³⁹Mainz, 75 and 79: 'She answered in her turn "Come up to our place."' and 'Come and enjoy yourself, Oh brother, among the nymphs!'.

⁴⁰Mainz, 66: 'and flaggons shall treat him well with pomegranate drink'.

⁴¹Wettinger and Fsadni, 37-39, 44: 'I go up and down always on the deep sea'.

⁴²Mainz, p. 69: 'I began to pass up and down before the door of the beauty'.

⁴³Borg, 227-28, 344; D. Cohen, II, p. 10 l.

aqleḇuh, turn it over, nefrəhu, we shall be glad, where modern Maltese would have *aqilbuh* and *nifirħu*;⁴⁴ (c) *ġiw taraw*, come and see,⁴⁵ where only the first verb is in the imperative while the second is in the imperfect, while Maltese would prefer *ejjeu* (for *igū*) *araw*, both verbs being in the imperative; (d) the poems contain several examples of the use of the particle *qad*, used invariably with verbs in the imperfect, to emphasise the completion of the action: e.g. *qad rewani*, refreshed me, *qad našer*, has unfolded, *qad lehani*, has distracted me, *qad ġa*, has come;⁴⁶ while in modern Maltese the word *qed*, of a totally different derivation, shortened as it is from *qiegħed*, is used with verbs in the imperfect in order to express the present continuous tense;⁴⁷ (e) the poems contain innumerable examples of the stress shift which are such a distinguishing feature of Maghribi Arabic and which does not seem ever to have occurred in Maltese: Cl. Ar. *qatala*, Maltese *qatel*, Maghribi Arabic *qtel*.⁴⁸ The last characteristic of the poem is the most serious of all obstacles to identifying the language of the poems with Maltese, medieval or otherwise.⁴⁹

If, indeed, a Maltese origin is ruled out owing to the presence of this stress shift in the poems, one must next consider a Sicilian origin. Though in 1949 it was well known that Sicily had had a large Jewish population down to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, it is, in fact, unlikely that Ernst Mainz and his advisers gave much serious thought to the possibility that they were written in a Sicilian milieu or by a Sicilian Jew, seeing that it was only in 1946 that Cecil Roth made it widely known that the Sicilian Jews continued to speak a form of Arabic right down to the latter part of the fourteenth century.⁵⁰ Only ~~the~~^{one} very much older Judaeo-Arabic docu-

⁴⁴Mainz, 67 and 65; see below p. 13.

⁴⁵Mainz, 70. Cp. Aquilina, p. 170, on Maltese imperative syntax formation.

⁴⁶Mainz, 76, 78, 79 and 68.

⁴⁷E.F. Sutcliffe, *A Grammar of the Maltese Language* (London, 1936), 69-70.

⁴⁸Borg, 202-204.

⁴⁹See below, p. 12.

⁵⁰C. Roth in 1946 wrote of the report of a wandering Spanish scholar in the late thirteenth century that the Arabic language had survived among the Sicilian Jews down to his days, but continued that 'this linguistic tradition decayed ... during the course of the following century': C. Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy* (Philadelphia, 1946), 82.

ment from Sicily was then known.⁵¹ Even now, after the publication of some sixty other Judaeo-Arabic documents from Sicily it is still impossible to obtain a clear idea of many aspects of the Arabic spoken there in the absence of a pointed text.⁵² Thus it is still unknown whether the stress shift that, according to one theory, overtook Maghribi Arabic in the fourteenth century affected Sicilian Arabic as it did Andalusian.⁵³ It should be remembered that the Jews of Sicily were very closely connected with those of Tunisia and Tripoli while those of Malta, themselves just as closely connected with their co-religionists of Sicily and Tripoli, were no doubt held back from adopting the stress shift by the failure of the Maltese language itself to accept it (in Sicily, of course, the Christian population had already for a long time forgotten all its Arabic). It is also quite possible that the poet himself, familiar through his travels or his own family origins, with the Maghribi stress shift, adopted it in his writings with or without a conscious effort on his part and quite independently of its use or lack of use in the Maltese or Jewish community to which he might have belonged. In any case, there is no doubt of the general Maghribi characteristics of Sicilian Arabic including, in particular the *nqtl/nqtlu* first person singular and plural of the verb in the imperfect, together with the use of *zawg*, a couple of, and *mita'* to indicate possession. Though the morphology of Sicilian Arabic is still insufficiently known, there is enough evidence of its generally close resemblance to the Maltese language for treating the resemblances noticed above between Maltese and the language of the poems as applying with equal strength to Sicilian Arabic with the added still unproven possibility that stress shift had occurred in

⁵¹ S. Cusa, *I diplomi greci di Sicilia pubblicati nel testo originale, tradotti ed illustrati* (Palermo, 1868-82), pp. 495-6, plate v, more recently studied by J. Wansbrough, 'A Judaeo-Arabic Document from Sicily', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 30 (1967).

⁵² H. Bresc and S.D. Goitein, 'Un inventaire dotal de Juifs Siciliens (1479)', *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire par l'École Française de Rome* (Rome, 1970); A. Giuffrida and B. Rocco, 'Una bilingue Arabo-Sicula', *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, vol. 34 (Naples, 1974); A. Giuffrida and B. Rocco, 'Documenti Giudeo-Arabi nel Secolo xv a Palermo', *Studi Magrebini del Centro di Studi Magrebini*, vol. 8 (1976).

⁵³ A. Borg, 203, citing F. Corriente, *A Grammatical Sketch of the Spanish Arabic Dialect Bundle* (Madrid, 1977).

Sicilian Arabic. That there were limited differences is also certain. Thus Sicilian Judaeo-Arabic documents prove that the verb *ra*, he saw, was used in conjunction with the personal suffix to express the concept of 'to be',⁵⁴ a well-known and widespread Maghribi feature⁵⁵ absent from the Maltese language: obviously Sicilian Judaeo-Arabic could be more Maghribi in character than Maltese is. Another feature of Sicilian Judaeo-Arabic not present in Maltese is the insertion of a helping vowel after instead of before the second radical consonant when this happens to be a liquid and is hemmed in by two other consonants, e.g. *jutlobu* (passive),⁵⁶ Maltese *jitolbu* (active), cp. *aqlebuh*, turn it over, share out (the food), and modern Maltese *aqilbuh*, with the same meaning.

The non-Arabic words in the poems could have originated in Sicily about as easily as in Malta. Thus *qurtina*, a veil or curtain, is of Latin origin and occurs extremely frequently in Latin and Sicilian documents of the fifteenth century both in Malta and in Sicily.⁵⁷ The word *ġizi*, which in Maltese refers to stocks (the plant), in its Greek form *γύζι* refers to the plant called *cassia*; though the plants are unrelated an etymological connection between the two words is most likely as there does not seem to be any possible Semitic derivation and Greek influence in Sicily has always been very strong so that *ġizi* could have entered Maltese through Sicilian Arabic.⁵⁸ The phrase *ahmar qerulli*, coral red, still a living phrase in modern Maltese (*ahmar qrolli*), could

⁵⁴ Giuffrida and Rocco, 'Documenti', 82.

⁵⁵ Marçais, 74.

⁵⁶ Giuffrida and Rocco, 92. It is worth remembering that present Jewish practice in Tunis in this respect resembles that of Maltese rather than that of these Judaeo-Arabic poems and of Sicilian Judaeo-Arabic: D. Cohen, *Le Parler Arabe des Juifs de Tunis*, II, 97.

⁵⁷ It occurs in the Judaeo-Arabic document published in Bresc and Goitein, 'Un Inventaire dotal de Juifs Siciliens (1479)'. A dowry contract from Malta of 7 July 1503 contains this item: 'una curta blanca: onze v': Notarial Archives, Valletta, Register of deed of Notary Cons. Canchur, R 140/1, f. 212v.

⁵⁸ The explanations given so far of the etymology of *gizi* are particularly unconvincing. Barbera, *op. cit.*, s.v., would have it originate in the Moroccan *husn iusf* abbreviated to *iusuf*. The derivation from *rancis*, a different flower, would have to overcome objections both with regard to flower identity and to the presence of the final *-i*, normally a most significant phoneme in Maltese. For the Greek *γύζι* see H.G. Liddel and R. Scott, *Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1940), s.v.

very well have existed in Sicilian Arabic, though the modern Sicilian for 'coral' now is *curaddu*,⁵⁹ but it is difficult to imagine it existing in Maghribi Arabic, where the Arabic for 'coral' is **مرجان**, *marġan*. The word *asqunfi*, a kind of lemon, exists in modern Sicilian (*scumpiu*)⁶⁰ as well as in Maltese (*xkamp*). Though the word *ġerasya*, cherries, now appears in Arabic dictionaries, it is unlikely to have formed part of the Arabic language in the fifteenth century. The same could also be said of *sardin*, sardines, a word which, of course, has existed for centuries both in Maltese and in Sicilian. The word *qarlin*, carlino, refers to a coin of ten *grani*, and therefore *beqarlin naqes habbayn*, in Maltese *b'karlin nieqes ħabbejn* (*ħabba* = *grano*) is equivalent to the sum of eight *grani* or *ħabbiet* in Maltese. The word itself refers to Charles of Anjou who seems to have brought the coin into use, but has survived in Maltese right down to the present, remaining in use in spite of radical changes of currency. It appears extremely frequently in the singular or plural in the nine Judaeo-Arabic documents from Malta but not a single time in any of the sixty such documents from fifteenth century Sicily.⁶¹ It would be difficult to see how this relatively minor coin could have been known in North Africa. The reference in the poems to the type of fish called *tanka*, a name apparently otherwise unknown in the Arabic world, except perhaps in French occupied Algeria, but probably cognate to the Latin *tanca* and English *tench*, forcibly recalls the references to the fish called *tenchi* in fifteenth century price lists from Catania.⁶² The two remaining words *milu* and *fustayn* are also interesting; though they both exist in Maltese, they are given in the poems in forms which show undoubted Sicilian as distinct from Maltese influence:

milu, a mile, modern Sicilian *migghiu*,⁶³ medieval Sicilian

⁵⁹ Traina, *s.v.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, *s.v.*

⁶¹ It is, however, to be found at least once in S. Giambruno and L. Genuardi, *Capitoli inediti delle città demaniali di Sicilia* (Palermo, 1918), p. 99: 'che la dicta universitati non havi un carlino di rendita'.

⁶² Mainz, 80; price-lists of 1417 and 1438 as transcribed in the surviving eighteenth century copies, vide H. Bresc, 'Il vocabolario della pesca nella Sicilia del '300 e del '400', *Bollettino dell'Atlante Linguistico Mediterraneo*, 16-17 (1974-75), 21.

⁶³ Traina, *s.v.*

miglu,⁶⁴ Maltese and Arabic *mīl*;
fustayn, *fustian*, Sicilian *fustaino*,⁶⁵ Maltese and Arabic
fustān.

If the author of the poems turns out to have been really a Jewish inhabitant of Malta or Sicily, it would be easy to understand how at length the manuscript containing them came to be at the Vatican Library. It is well known that the Jews of Sicily settled in Southern Italy after their expulsion from that island in 1492.⁶⁶ Those of Malta seem to have joined them at Messina before they crossed over to the mainland.⁶⁷ From Southern Italy they were expelled in 1515. From there some crossed the straits of Otranto and settled in the Balkans within the boundaries of the Empire of the tolerant Turk. Others no doubt travelled northwards along the Italian peninsula stopping wherever the local rulers offered them for some time a haven of peace and security. It is documented that in 1492 the Jews were allowed to take their books with them,⁶⁸ and this particular manuscript containing these ~~seven~~ ^{early} Judaeo-Arabic poems must have therefore gradually travelled northwards along the peninsula, perhaps even farther north than Rome before finally finding a resting place at the Vatican Library. By then, of course, the descendants of the Sicilian and Maltese Jews who may have remained in Italy had allowed themselves to be assimilated by the Italian Jews and, completely forgetting their Arabic speech, had no further use for the manuscript.

For the Sicilian reader and scholar these Judaeo-Arabic poems

⁶⁴ Cp. *miglu* in 'per spaciū de menzu miglu', for the space of half a mile, 23 July 1473: Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Curia Episcopalis Melitensis, Acta Originalia, vol. 1, f. 160.

⁶⁵ For its occurrence in Sicilian Italian: Traina, *s.v.*

⁶⁶ A. Milano, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia* (Torino, 1963), 223 ff.

⁶⁷ G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Later Middle Ages* (in the press).

⁶⁸ Milano, 231.

⁶⁹ Item eciam si supplica chi ipsi Judei poczano nexiri et extrahiri loro tori et altri libri Judaichi tanto di la dicta muskita como di li Judei. — Plachi a lu dictu Illustri Signuri vicere chi poczano extrahiri loro libri et tori Judaichi tanto di la muskita comu di li altri Judei prestando ipsi Judei idonea plegiria in potiri di lu dictu secreto di la cita di Malta di presentari quilli al dicto magnifico regio thesoreri: B. Lagumina and G. Lagumina, *Codice diplomatico dei Giudei di Sicilia* (Palermo, 1884-1890), doc. DCCCCLVII.

would have a special interest in that they would be the first such poems originating in Sicily to have been discovered so far,⁷⁰ and would give added urgency to the search and study of examples of Judaeo-Arabic from that island. To the Maltese linguist, always interested in the 'missing links' of his language, their importance is obvious. In addition, whatever their origin, the poems have an interest for the Maltese general reader all their own. With no further effort than would be required of him to read the oldest surviving poem in Maltese, he has here a set of poems on subjects as various and of as universal appeal as (a) a visit to heaven in the footsteps of the prophet Elias, (b) a lass greets her lover at home from the sea, (c) a lark's song, (d) a skit on marriage, (e) a humorous dialogue between water and wine similar to those which frequently appear on Maltese humorous or satirical periodicals, (f) a lover to his lass, (g) 'It is my intention to make a garden ...', and (h) a moral song on the transitoriness of human affairs.

⁷⁰ S. Stern, 'Un circolo di poeti Siciliani ebrei nel secolo XII', *Bollettino*, Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, 4 (Palermo, 1956), 39-59, is concerned with a group of Jewish poets in Sicily writing solely in Hebrew very much before the fifteenth century.