

J. MICALLEF, *The Plague of 1676: 11,300 deaths*. Malta, 1984, pp.128.

This slim book is more significant than its 128 pages would suggest. It has entailed prolonged research in largely untapped sources. These include dossiers of the Inquisition and of the Bishop's Curia at the Cathedral Museum (Mdina), wills of the Notarial Archives, Parish Registers and Records of the Order of St. John at the National Library – all of which contain valuable though scattered material for our social history.

The author has written straight history in a highly readable form avoiding conjecture and speculation and never going beyond the facts as revealed by first hand documentary evidence. The names of the sick, of the officials and of the medical personnel mentioned in the text become individualised as human characters compelling our attention and winning our sympathy as their story of suffering and dismay unfolds over the period of eight months covered by the duration of the epidemic.

The book opens with the conflicting medical opinions regarding the nature of the disease and describes the precautions taken by the public health authorities when they became convinced that they were dealing with plague; the spread of the disease from Valletta to Attard and other areas; and the people's reactions to the fear of catching the illness and of enforced isolation at the Lazzaretto. Other sections deal with the impotence of physicians and surgeons in controlling the onslaught of the plague in their ignorance of its cause and of the means of its transmission; the vows made by religious individuals and organised bodies of divine deliverance from the malady; the wills of the dying; and the disruption of the economic life of the island following the cessation of the epidemic.

The book should be read in conjunction with the account of the same epidemic given in Chapter 18 of the reviewer's *Medical History of Malta* to obtain a holistic picture of the epidemic in all its facets; in fact the narrative in the reviewer's book exposes the medical facts of the disease while Micallef's monograph describes the individual and collective behaviour of the people under the duress of illness on a massive scale.

One notices two omissions in this otherwise scholarly and competent work. First, the absence of a final chapter to present a synthesis of the various features of the epidemic. Fortunately this gap is bridged over, to a certain extent, by the masterly Foreword from the pens of Mario Buhagiar and Joseph F. Grima who touch on the principal facts of the pestilence and who, very aptly, point out that the author views his subject mainly as a social historian. In fact, in the reviewer's opinion, it would be more in keeping with the contents of the book if in the event of a second edition or reprint the title is changed to *Social Aspects of the Plague of 1676*. The other omission is the lack of indices of the subjects and of the names of persons and places mentioned in the text. Apart from these last remarks the book is a welcome addition to plague literature and is warmly recommended to all those who are interested in the impact of disease on human behaviour.

Paul Cassar

G. WETTINGER, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages*. Valletta, Midsea Books Ltd., 1985, Xt 352 pp., illus.

This valuable and scholarly survey of the two Jewish communities of Malta and Gozo in the late Middle Ages is a welcome addition to the small but growing volume of Maltese mediaeval studies to which Dr. Godfrey Wettinger has for many years been devoting his research, along with Dr. A. Luttrell and others.

As a subject for academic inquiry the position of Judaism in mediaeval Malta has not attracted enough attention, most of the available information until very recently being found in the work of the Lagumina brothers in the 19th century and in two studies, one by Mgr. A. Mifsud in 1919 and another by Cecil Roth in 1928. Because of the complex, dispersed and relatively scarce primary sources the subject remained imperfectly studied. Wettinger's book now adds immeasurably to our knowledge in this field. On the basis of some 80 contracts, 9 Judaeo-Arabic documents, the proceedings involving Jews preserved in the local ecclesiastical courts archives and the early 15th century militia lists, he has reconstructed with great historical insight the life and institutions of Malta's mediaeval Jews. This hitherto unknown documentation was discovered by the author himself in the archives of Malta, Palermo and Syracuse over a period of years going back well into the sixties. Immersing himself in the study of these documents, he has succeeded in resurrecting the Jewish society which co-existed with the Christian Maltese population in the city of Mdina, in Birgu and in Gozo.

The Maltese and Gozitan Jews numbered some 500-600, forming approximately 3% of the total population of about 17,000. Some 300 lived in the small fortified town of Mdina, making up between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the old capital's population. A small number of Jews lived in Birgu, and the rest in Gozo. One striking feature is that while the Gozitan Jews lived in the suburb of Rabat, outside the Citadel, in Malta the Jews lived within the bastions.

During the 15th and earlier centuries the Jews were recognized as citizens of Malta but their citizenship was qualified in the sense that they came to be considered as 'servi cammerae regis', slaves of the royal household. They were subject to the same municipal laws and regulations as the rest of the citizens and at the same time, like their fellow-Jews in Sicily, they fell under the special protection of the Crown. After 1455 they were taxed separately and not conjointly with the Christian Maltese as before. The Jews had two separate communal organizations, one in Malta and the other in Gozo, called *Judayce*, each with its own particular set of officials and its own revenues. The Christian ecclesiastical Courts claimed, and exercised, an extensive jurisdiction over the Jews in matters concerning family matters or heresies.

Jews and Christians in Mediaeval Mdina lived frequently in adjoining houses. In 1458 an attempt was made to force the Jews of Malta to reside in a ghetto, but the project fell through. The author expresses the opinion that "no doubt further research at Palermo should reveal several other similar cases of Jews living side by side with Christians" (p.25). In reality, however theirs was a fragile co-existence. While Christian and Jewish communities collaborated at the military and some other levels, the two peoples lived their own separate ways. As was the case elsewhere, the Jews had to wear a distinctive mark on their clothes and on their property.

The Jews possessed arable land and also vineyards, but did not participate actively in farming. They acquired land in the course of money-making operations. Trade, wholesale and petty, was their main occupation. For their petty trading activities they used donkeys mainly to hawk their wares around the villages, cloth being their chief article of trade. But they also exported cotton and cotton yarn. Some Jews were craftsmen – almost the only blacksmiths on the island for three decades were three Jews. Also, candle-making and candle selling was an important Jewish occupation, and we read that they supplied candles to the Cathedral of Imdina for the feast of Ss. Peter and Paul (*l-Imnarja*) for ten out of twelve years between 1464 and 1475.

In Malta they had one synagogue at Imdina and another one at Birgu. There was another in Gozo. Though there was no great public feeling against the existence of the synagogues, some religious persecution occurred occasionally and, as in other countries, tension often heightened during Holy Week, sometimes justifying the intervention of the Sicilian Viceroy to protect the Jewish community.

The surviving proceedings of the ecclesiastical courts, discovered by Wettinger some years ago, have been utilised by the author to build up a picture of a small representative number of Jews of different walks of life with the aim of giving “a new dimension to our knowledge of Maltese Judaism”. A case in point was that of Azar Marsani. As his story unfolds, we learn how he was engaged in several lines of business; oil, cloth, export of yarn and ransoming of slaves. In the process we also come to know about the earliest known instance of the ransoming of a Maltese person enslaved in North Africa – Azar paying for the ransom of Pullichinu in cotton yarn. Another case concerns Abraham Safaradi, who was Doctor, Judge and Rabbi at the same time. He received a salary from the town authorities and attended the sick poor without charge. Safaradi was not the only doctor on the island. Indeed, to the names of known Jewish physicians practising in Malta in the 15th century Safaradi, Saba, Xema (or Zemah) and Girbi (a surgeon) mentioned in Dr P. Cassar’s *Medical History of Malta* (1964) one may now add those of Magister Abias Sebaha, who resided in Malta from about 1480 onwards, Gaspar de Monbron in 1476, Magister Andreas de Avula, barbitonsor, in 1498 and Magister Angelus Anello, a neophyte, who practised between 1498 and 1516 (pp. 109, 111, 138).

When the edict expelling the Jews from the Spanish dominions was issued in 1492, it applied equally to the Jews of Malta. However, it took some months for them to settle their affairs; although it is difficult to tell exactly when they left the island to join their Sicilian co-religionists being assembled at Messina, Wettinger concludes that ‘they left at about 12 January 1493’ (p.119). After this a community of ‘conversos’ established itself in Malta but within one or two generations they were completely assimilated and integrated with the local population, their former existence surviving faintly in folk-memory and in the island’s place-names of which the author gives quite a number which he traced in the notarial records of the period. Among these he includes *Gkiren Daniel*, unlocated, which he explains as meaning Daniel’s Caves. However, on the basis of the initial consonants *Gk* one would be equally justified in suggesting an alternative reading, i.e. *Giren Daniel*, Daniel’s huts, *girna* (pl. *giren*) being a word still used to denote the type of corbelled stone hut commonly observed in fields, especially in the northern parts of Malta.

Dr. Wettinger has long been interested in the history of the Maltese language, and the publication of Peter Caxaro's mediaeval poem *Cantilena*, issued jointly with Fr. M. Fsadni in 1968, marks a milestone in Maltese studies. Sustained efforts on his part to unearth further examples of mediaeval Maltese were only partly successful, being limited to the discovery of a large number of Maltese place-names, surnames and nicknames. Towards the end of the first part of the book Wettinger makes an important statement, affirming that "the Maltese Jews were the only inhabitants of the Maltese islands who regularly used dialectal Arabic or Maltèse or something close to it in their business writings, because the Christian Maltese themselves used Sicilian or a mixture of that and Latin". In Part II of his work, made up of two comprehensive studies described as Appendices, he elaborates on this theme and gives a detailed analysis of 9 Judaeo-Arabic writings from Malta discovered by the author in the archives of the Cathedral Museum at Imdina, and an associated study of Judaeo-Arabic poetry from the Eastern Maghreb or Sicily, preserved in a Vatican Hebrew Ms.

It has long been known that the Jews normally used the local vernacular in their business, scientific and private writings, employing the Hebrew script. The Jews of Malta were no exceptions, and the local inhabitants must have been puzzled by the use of this secretive and unintelligible jargon. It may well be that the word *brejku*, derived by Prof. J. Aquilina from Sic. *ebbraicu* and still heard in such expressions as *gej bil-brejku*, 'to talk nonsense' and *tikkellem bil-brejku*, 'to use ambiguous language', originally related to this Jewish practice. Be that as it may, Wettinger's conclusion regarding the Judaeo-Arabic written in Malta by the Jews is that it must have been based on the island's spoken language, with other linguistic influences, the most characteristic one being their mixed vocabulary. The author stresses that these writings are very different from Caxaro's *Cantilena*, which has only one non-Semitic word, *vintura*.

In fact the language was in a state of flux at the time, and rapid changes were taking place in its vocabulary. Footnote 34 on p. 189 is so important that one cannot but highlight it in this review by reproducing it in its entirety: "In a case before the Magna Curia Castellaniae of Malta in 1557 involving the freeing of a slave by her mistress on the latter's death-bed, it was claimed that the word *franco* or *franca*, though properly an Italian and not a Maltese word, was commonly used when referring to the freeing of such a slave, "maxime in quista nova cità (Birgu) unde per la frequentia deli Italici, homines et donni mischiano lo vulgare Italico con lo Maltese come dire, "Esse nichalli he franca o franc": Cath. ARch. Mdina, Curia Episcopalis Melitensis, Acta Originalia, vol. 36, fol. 46v. In modern Maltese, the phrase in question would run, "*Issa nħalliha franka*, 'now I leave her free'.

Both on external and internal evidence the author's conclusion is that these writings belong to the Maghrebic group of Arabic dialects to which Maltese itself belongs, and that they were based on the current Maltese language, of which only one other specimen is known, i.e. the *Cantilena*. He further notes that the language of the Maltese Judaeo-Arabic texts shows a much greater resemblance to that of the sixty or so Sicilian Judaeo-Arabic texts published so far than to that of the Maltese contemporary *Cantilena*. Hence the need for a fuller investigation of its relationship with Sicilian Arabic.

In the second study (Appendix II) Wettinger shows that the late Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic poetry preserved in Vatican Hebrew Ms. 411 contains several word formations different from Classical Arabic and identical with their respective forms and meanings common to Maltese and other Maghrebic languages. However, there are equally undoubted difference from modern Maltese in the vocabulary of the poems as well as several morphological and syntactical differences from modern Maltese. His analysis leads him to conclude that "the non-Arabic words in the poems could have originated in Sicily about as easily as in Malta" (p. 198) and that "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 between Maltese and the languages of the poems as applying with equal strength to Sicilian Arabic. . ." (p. 197).

This brief synopsis cannot possibly do justice to the extensive analysis that Wettinger gives in his book. There can be no doubt that his judicious conclusions have significant implications for the study of the Maltese language in the medieval period.

In Part III the author reproduces the documents of Jewish interest in Latin and Sicilian, all found recently in Maltese archives. There are extracts from 8 name lists and miscellaneous documents, 79 deeds from the surviving notarial registers, and 37 legal proceedings traced in the ecclesiastical courts records. The inclusion of these documents in one volume with the author's text, and not in a separate volume as originally intended, makes for quicker consultation. An impressive bibliography of manuscript and printed sources used, taking up 9 pages, together with accurately compiled indices (i) of persons (ii) of places and (iii) of subjects treated in the book definitely enhance the value of this major contribution to Maltese medieval studies.

Midsea Books Ltd, are to be congratulated for undertaking the publication of this and similar works embodying the fruit of long and patient research. For serious students and scholars Wettinger's book fills a long-felt need and will serve as a vademecum in the study at home in libraries here and abroad.

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