

Malta and Sicily: An Overview of their Cognominal Kinship

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Abstract

The geopolitical, cultural and religious connections between Malta and Sicily have been extensively reviewed by several historians and ethnographers. In my case, I would like to back up this manifest bond in a collateral way. In fact, the aim of this paper is to enhance the long-standing ties between the two neighbouring islands via the scrutiny of their overlapping cognominal pool. The number of Sicilian surnames in Malta is simply staggering; however, Maltese surnames are equally discernable in Sicily. Thereby, this cross-fertilization of family names has undoubtedly been a two-way affair. The conditions and circumstances underlying this intriguing process are therefore worthy of examination.

Keywords: *surnames, Malta, Sicily, Girgenti, Licata, Pachino*

Introduction: Siculo-Arabic Surnames in Malta

A substantial number of old Maltese surnames can be traced back to Arabic, or at least to sub-Muslim, times. According to the *Chronicle of Cambridge*, Malta fell into Aghlabid hands in 870. However, the Maghrebine geographer Al-Himyarī (d. 1494), writing in 1461, categorically states that henceforth, the island remained an uninhabited *khirba* ('ruin').¹ The same author then asserts that in 1048–49, following a system collapse which had left Malta in the doldrums for whole decades, the Fatimid Muslims decided to repopulate the island. This demographic injection is likely to have been induced by Arabic-speaking (and perhaps Berber-speaking) people from neighbouring Sicily, at a time when that island was teeming with massive interfighting between the numerous *tayfas* (clans).

From the outset, one can observe that a good number of Maltese surnames of Arabo-Muslim origin are to be clearly detected also in Sicily, which makes perfect

1 Al-Himyarī's geographical encyclopaedia bears the name *Kitāb ar-rawd al-mi'tār*. The segment concerning Malta is probably derived from al-Bakrī (1020–1094) and al-Qazwīnī (c. 1203–83). Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. iii, 1971, pp. 675–76, and J.M. BRINCAT, *Malta 870–1054. Al-Himyarī's Account and Its Linguistic Implications*, Malta: Said International, Malta, 1995.

sense, as the larger island itself embraces its fair share of Arabisms, both in its lexical and onomastic heritage. In Girolamo Caracausi's monumental *Dizionario onomastico della Sicilia* (1993), one encounters the vast majority of typical Maltese surnames, either as they stand or else in some cognate or related form.

During their 200-year rule in Sicily, the Saracens managed to entrench their language, artistic tastes, cultural acumen, scientific know-how, and religious mores in overwhelming terms. This Moorish heritage prevailed simultaneously in Malta. Many historians and linguists, local and foreign alike, believe, albeit not conclusively, that Malta was just a codicil of the Palermitan emirship, and that the Maltese language itself perhaps comprises the last vestiges of the Siculo-Arabic dialect spoken in medieval times on that island.²

In fact, some of these surnames might have ended up in Sicily via immigrations from Malta itself. For example, Caracausi states that the surname *Micallef* (**Micallef**) is certainly of Maltese origin (Caracausi 1993, p. 1016). In the Late Middle Ages and throughout the whole period of the Knights, many Maltese settled in Sicily and in southern Italy, especially in times of economic hardship. Yet again, many Arabic names were already in evidence in Sicily during Norman times, as recorded in Salvatore Cusa's *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia* (Palermo, I–II, 1868–82). Most of them are the names of Muslim serfs: **Buhagiar** (1145), *Busalib* (cf. **Saliba**, 1178), **Borg** (1178), *Tabuni* (cf. **Tabone**, 1178), **Agius** (1145), *Fitien* (cf. **Fiteni**, 1183), **Zammit** (1183), **Sammut** (1145), **Galea** (1178), **Caruana** (1178), **Xerri** (1095), **Curmi** (1095), *Ghaxaq* (cf. **Asiak/q**, 1095), *Ghebejjer* (cf. **Ebejer**, 1145), **Mintoff** (1178), and **Said** (1178) (Wettinger 1983, p. 61). The inclusion of **Galea** and **Curmi** is problematic as they can be explained as non-Semitic surnames via different criteria.

Most typical Maltese surnames are hence discernable in Sicily in the 12th century and by default, it is more probable that they reached Malta through the neighbouring island, particularly after the Arab reconquest of 1048–9. So even local Semitic surnames have an unmistakable Sicilian connection and since they happen to be among the commonest ones in Malta, they deserve particular scrutiny (Fiorini 1987-8, *passim*).

Maltese Surnames in Sicily

As already observed, most Maltese surnames of Arabic-Muslim extraction are unmistakably evident in Sicily as well. The following list of some thirty surnames is set to prove this state of affairs beyond reasonable doubt. The table is based on data provided by Caracausi in his *Dizionario onomastico della Sicilia* (1993).

Malta and Sicily: An Overview of their Cognominal Kinship

Maltese surnames	Sicilian forms
Abdilla	<i>Badalà</i> (PA, CT), <i>Adella</i> ? (PA)
Bajada	Bajada (PA), <i>Baiada</i> (PA), <i>Baiata</i> (PA, TP), <i>Bajata</i> (PA, TP)
Bigeni	toponyms <i>Biggeni</i> , <i>Bicini</i>
Borg	<i>Burgi</i> (PA, ME at San Pietro Patti, CT, also MT); toponyms <i>Burgio</i> , <i>Borgetto</i>
Briffa	Briffa (SR)
Bugeja	<i>Bugea</i> (AG), <i>Buggea</i> (PA, AG, CL, SR at Pachino), <i>Buggia</i> (PA at Altavilla Milicia)
Buhagiar	Buhagiar (AG), <i>Bugagiar</i> (CL), <i>Bugagior</i> (Gela); toponym <i>Buaggiaro</i>
Busietta	<i>Busetta</i> (PA, TP, AG), <i>Buscetta</i> (PA,TP)
Buttigieg	<i>Buttigè</i> (PA, CL)
Caffari	<i>Cafari</i> (PA, also RC, BR, LE), <i>Cafaro</i> (PA, CT)
Calafato	Calafato (PA, TP at Mazara del Vallo, AG, CL at Riesi, EN at Pietraperzia), <i>Calafati</i> (CZ, RC, LE)
Caruana	Caruana (PA, AG, CL, CT, SR, also CZ, TA), <i>Caruano</i> (AG at Canivatti, RG at Vittoria, also NA), <i>Carovana</i> (PA at Carini, CL at Gela)
Cassar	<i>Càssar</i> (PA, AG, CT, SR, also LE, NA)
Cutajar	<i>Cutaia</i> (PA, AG, CL, ME, CT, SR at Augusta), <i>Cutaja</i> (PA, AG, CL); toponym <i>Cuttaia</i>
Farrugia	Farrugia (SR), <i>Farruggia</i> (PA, TP, AG, CL, CT, SR, RG at Vittoria), <i>Farruggio</i> (PA, TP, AG, CL, EN at Piazza Armerina, ME, CT, SR at Palazzo Acreide, RG, also RC, NA), <i>Farrugio</i> (CL); toponym <i>Farruggi</i>
Fenech	Fenech (PA, AG, ME, CT, also Salento)
Gauci	<i>Gaudesi</i> (PA, CT)
Micallef	Micallef (CT), <i>Micalef</i> (PA, AG, SR, also NA)
Musù	<i>Musa</i> (PA at Cinisi, also NA); toponym <i>Musè</i>
Mula	Mula (PA, AG, CT, also TA), <i>Mulà</i> (PA, TP at Alcamo, AG, CT)
Said	<i>Saito</i> (PA, ME, CT, SR, also CZ, RC, NA); toponym <i>Saido</i>
Saliba	<i>Salibra</i> (PA, eastern Sicily, also NA); toponym <i>Salibi</i>
Sammut	<i>Zambuto</i> (PA, AG, CL), <i>Zammuto</i> (PA, CL)
Scerri/Xerri	Scerri (CT), Xerri (AG, SR), <i>Scerra</i> (PA, AG, CL at Gela, ME, SR at Priolo, RG, also PZ, TA, Calabria), <i>Sciarra</i> (CT at Mormanno, also Salento, NA), <i>Scierra</i> (CT), <i>Xerra</i> (PA, AG, CL at Gela)
Sciberras	<i>Scibbarrasi</i> (PA at Campofelice di Roccella), <i>Sciabbarrasi</i> (western Sicily), <i>Sciabarrà</i> (AG), <i>Sciabbarrà</i> (AG, SR)
Sciriha	<i>Scirica</i> (PA, AG, CT, also NA)
Sultana	Sultana (PA at Bagheria, CT, SR at Pachino), <i>Soldano</i> (western Sicily, CT, also CZ, RC, TA, NA)
Tabone	Tabone (PA, AG, CL at San Cataldo), <i>Tabbone</i> (PA, AG, CT), Tabona (PA)
Zahra	<i>Zagara</i> (PA, AG, ME, CT, also MT), <i>Zahora</i> (PA), <i>Zagra</i> (PA, AG at Licata, SR)
Zammit	Zammit (TP at Mazara del Vallo, CT, SR), <i>Zammiti</i> (PA), <i>Zammito</i> (PA, ME at Barcellona, also NA), <i>Zammitti</i> (PA, CT, SR, also NA), <i>Zammitto</i> (PA), <i>Zambito</i> (PA, AG, CT)
Zarb	<i>Zarbo</i> (PA, AG, CL, eastern Sicily), <i>Zarba</i> (PA, CL, CT, RG); toponym <i>Zarbu</i>
Zerafa	Zerafa (CT, RG at Scicli), <i>Zirafa</i> (AG)

[Provinces: AG = Agrigento, BR = Brindisi, CL = Caltanissetta, CT = Catania, CZ = Catanzaro, EN = Enna, LE = Lecce, ME = Messina, MT = Matera, NA = Naples, PA = Palermo, PZ = Potenza, RC = Reggio Calabria, RG = Ragusa, SR = Syracuse, TA = Taranto, TP = Trapani.]

A fleeting glance at the occurrences of such surnames shows the absolute preponderance of Palermo, the seat of the Arabic emirship. However, strong numbers are also evident in the Agrigento-Caltanissetta region and in Catania and Syracuse, on the eastern shores of the island. Far-flung Trapani and Messina are significantly less conspicuous while Enna and Ragusa are almost negligible. It seems that in present-day Sicily, there are no transparent traces of the common Maltese surnames **Mifsud, Mintoff, Chetcuti, Teuma, Agius, Busuttill, Axiak/q, Hili, Ebejer, Xuereb,** and **Seychell**; if there are, they have survived in unrecognizable forms.

Hull's Hypothesis of a Girgenti Colony

Given that the Maltese Christians in Norman and Swabian times were of predominantly Sicilian stock, at least through the male line, the question of their exact place of origin invites investigation. In the absence of standard research on the origin and distribution of surnames in late medieval Sicily, the obvious approach is to consider modern concentrations of surnames. Geoffrey Hull conducted such research based on the Sicilian telephone directories of 1980. Collectively, Maltese surnames as a group revealed themselves to be generally rare outside the area of southern and south-eastern Sicily comprising Noto, Ragusa, Modica, Pachino, Gela (formerly Terranova), Licata, Caltanissetta, and Agrigento (formerly Girgenti).³ By far, the largest number of correspondences to 15th century Maltese surnames was found in the province of Agrigento. This observation seems to contradict the results deduced from Carcausi's data. However, Palermo seems to prevail in terms of mere correspondences whereas Agrigento enjoys the upper hand in terms of aggregate numbers.

The following names, in fact, are commoner in Agrigento (and occasionally in nearby Favara and Aragona), than anywhere else in Sicily: **Vella**, *Farruggia* (cf. **Farrugia**), **Schembri**, *Burgio* (cf. **Borg**), *Cassaro* (cf. **Cassar**), *Mangione* (cf. **Mangion**), **Pace**, **Camilleri**, *Falzone* (cf. **Falzon**), *Buggea* (cf. **Bugeja**), *Frenda* (cf. **Frendo**), *Gallea* (cf. **Galea**), *Zambuto* (cf. **Sammut**), **Tabone**, *Bono* (cf. **Debono**), **Cumbo**, *Moscato* (cf. **Muscat**), **Vassallo**, *Gutaia* (cf. **Cutajar**), *Cuschera* (cf. **Cuschieri**), *Pisano* (cf. **Pisani**), and **Caruana**. Even when another centre yielded the highest count for a Maltese surname, the form in question was found to be well established in Agrigento as well. This was the case with: *Zammiti* (cf. **Zammit**), *Greco* (cf. **Grech**), **Sacco**, *Atardo* (cf. **Attard**), **Conti**, **Bonanno**, *Brancato* (cf. **Brincat**), **Mallia**, and *Puglisi* (possibly **Pulis**) in Syracuse; *Zupardo* (cf. **Azzopardi**) and *Scicolone* (cf. **Scicluna**) in Gela; *Bennici* (cf. **Bonnici**) in Licata; and *Spataro* (cf. **Spiteri**) in Pachino (Hull 1993, p. 324).

The only cases in which some other centre has a complete or near monopoly of surnames extant in Malta are the following: **Formosa** and **Storace** in Syracuse; **Cilia** in Ragusa; *Camisuli* (cf. **Camenzuli**) in Pachino; *De Bartolo* (cf. **Bartolo**), **Portelli**, *Magnuco* (*Mahnuc*, now extinct), **Cauchi**, *Scerra* (cf. **Scerri**), **Psaila**, and *Ascia*

³ Incidentally, Girgenti is the name of a rural district in Malta.

(perhaps **Asciak**) in Gela; *Callea* (cf. **Calleja**) and **Baldacchino** in Licata; and *Galia* (cf. **Galea**), **Bonanno**, and **Barbara** in Trapani (Hull 1993, pp. 324-5).

Consequently, contrary to one's expectation of finding in the south-eastern corner of Sicily the closest onomastic agreement with Malta, the Gela-Caltanissetta-Agrigento axis appears to be the source of most of the oldest Maltese surnames, with the latter district as the obvious epicentre. One important characteristic which 12th century Girgenti had in common with Malta was that it was then (with the rest of the Val di Mazara) a bastion of Arabic speech and Islamic faith in a Sicily that was in the process of being Latinized and Christianized. A valid question should now be asked: might the Swabian authorities, in planting Christian colonists in the Maltese archipelago in the early decades of the 13th century have deliberately recruited Christian speakers of Arabic from Girgenti whose knowledge of the language of the infidels would have also served the interests of the emperor? Or were they a flock of exiles in consonance with Frederick II's notorious policy of mass deportations?

As a metropolis, and the closest one to Agrigento, Palermo often yields the largest number of surnames extant in Malta today. However, it must be presumed that most of the Maltese names in large concentrations evidently belong to families originally from the neighbouring province, the validity of this assertion being borne out by the fact that these names very rarely occur elsewhere in the province of Palermo, whereas they are well distributed in that of Agrigento.

Many typical Maltese surnames are extant in modern-day Sicily, although often carrying different spellings. A brief list will suffice: *Attardo*, *Attardi* (cf. **Attard**); *Zuppardo*, *Zuppardi* (cf. **Azzopardi**); **Baldacchino**; *Balzano*, *Balsano* (cf. **Balzan**); **Barbara**; **Bartolo** (besides *Di Bartolo*, *De Bartolo*, *Lo Bartolo*); *Bizzini*, *Vizzini* (if inferring **Bezzina**); **Bonanno**; **Bonavia**; *Bennici*, *Bennico*, *Bennica*, *Bennice*, *Bonica* (cf. **Bonnici**); *Burgio* (cf. **Borg**); *Brancato*, *Brancati* (cf. **Brincat**); *Buggea*, *Buggia*, *Bugea*, *Buggè*, *Bugè*, *Bugia* (cf. **Bugeja**); **Calafato**; *Callea*, *Callia*, *Calia* (cf. **Calleja**); *Cammsuli*, *Caminsuli* (cf. **Camenzuli**); **Camilleri** (besides *Camillieri*, *Cammalleri*, *Camalleri*, *Camillieri*, *Cammillieri*); **Caruana**; *Cassaro* (cf. **Cassar**); **Cassia**; **Cauchi**; *Procopio* (cf. **Chircop**); **Cilia**; **Consiglio**; **Conti** (and **Conte**); **Cumbo**; *Cuschera*, *Coschiera*, *Cuscheri* (cf. **Cuschieri**); *Cuttaia*, *Cutaia* (cf. **Cutajar**); **De Bono** (besides *Di Bono*, *De Bonis*, *De Boni*, *Bono*); **Delia** (besides *D'Elia*); *Falzone*, *Falzoni*, *Falsone* (cf. **Falzon**); *Farruggia*, *Farruggio* (cf. **Farrugia**); **Formosa** (besides *Formoso*, *Formusa*, *Formuso*); *Frenda*, *Frenna* (cf. **Frendo**); *Galia*, *Gallea* (cf. **Galea**); *Gaudesi* (cf. **Gauci**); *Greco* (cf. **Grech**); **Grima**; **Mallia** (besides *Mellia*); *Mangione*, *Mangioni* (cf. **Mangion**); *Moscato*, *Muscato*, *Muscati* (cf. **Muscat**); **Pace** (besides *Paci*); **Pisani** (besides *Pisani*, *Pisana*); *Basile* (if related to **Psaila**); *Puglisi*, *Pulizzi* (if related to **Pulis**); **Sacco**; *Zammuto*, *Zambuto* (cf. **Sammut**); *Xerra*, *Scerra*, *Sciarra* (cf. **Scerri**, **Xerri**); **Schembri** (besides *Schembari*, *Schemmari*, *Schembre*); *Scichilone*, *Scicolone* (cf. **Scicluna**); *Spitaleri*, *Spitali*, *Spitale* (cf. **Spiteri**); **Tabone** (besides *Tabbone*); *Tona* (if inferring **Tonna**); **Vassallo**; **Vella** (besides *Vedda*, *Bella*, *Di Bella*, *La Bella*); *Zammito*, *Zambito*, *Sammito*, *Sambito*, *Zammitti*, *Zimmitti*, *Zammitto* (cf. **Zammit**) (Caracausi 1993, *passim*).

Some Maltese surnames in Sicily, strictly in their present orthographic form, are in all probability recent imports and hence do not necessarily date back to the Middle Ages or to the Early Modern period. Hull supplies the following examples: **Attard, Bonnici, Borg, Cassar, Chircoppi** (cf. **Chircop**), **Falzon, Farrugia, Galea, Frendo, Grech, Fenech, Mangion, Micallef** (cf. **Micallef**), **Moscatt** (cf. **Muscat**), **Psaila, Saito** (perhaps **Said**), **Zammit, Sillato, Sciabbarrasi** (cf. **Sciberras**), **Xerri, Portelli, Missud** (perhaps **Mifsud**), and **Spiteri** (Hull 1993, pp. 383-86). On the other hand, **Asciak, Curmi, Seychell, Agius, Ellul, Busuttill, Xuereb Hili** and **Dingli** are apparently unrecorded in present-day Sicily.

Maltese Settlers in Sicily

In the Middle Ages, Malta was simply an appendix of Sicily. Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Swabians, Angevins and Aragonese ruled Sicily, and by default the Maltese islands. For four whole centuries (1130–1530), Malta was merely a geographical entity within the Kingdom of Sicily and enjoyed the same political status as any Sicilian commune.

Before the advent of the Knights Hospitallers of St John, depopulation in Malta was an endemic curse. The fear of Muslim invasions often led to mass evacuations from the islands. Things being what they were, it should come as no surprise that the Maltese found it so natural to settle in the various Sicilian communes and fuse with ease with the inhabitants of mainland Sicily. Large-scale migration to the larger island proved such a great worry to Palermo that, for example, in May 1437, the Maltese residents of Sicily were compelled to return to the island (Valentini 1941, p. 105).

Migration from Malta to Sicily during the Hospitaller period was not infrequent. Immediately following the debacle of 1551 (when the Turks virtually depopulated Gozo, Malta's sister island, in a lightning *razzia*), some 3,000 non-combatants were transferred from Malta to Sicily. Another *bando*, urging *gente inhabile* ('undesirables') to evacuate the island, was issued in 1561. As early as January 1565, months before the Great Siege, the Venerable Council of the Order deliberated to deport from Malta all those who were deemed unfit for combat, including women, children, and 'useless foreigners'. Again, in 1566, all those who were considered to be a liability to the defenders, as well as those who did not have enough provisions, including many impoverished peasants, were compelled to leave the island. Such people were ferried free of charge to Sicily on board the Order's galleys. Some may have returned; others quite likely, remained (Cassar 2000, pp. 97-8).

However, the most noteworthy migratory movements involved Maltese families of high standing. With the arrival of the Order of St John, the political powers formerly exercised by the *Università* (the local Commune) were doomed. Rather than suffer political irrelevance, some of the nobles left for Sicily (Ciappara 2006, p. 22). These included the *Nava, Platamone*, and *Mazzara* families (Montalto 1979, p. 65).

The Maltese nobility were never in the Order's good books. Giacomo Bosio, in particular, emphasises the fact that it was the poorer classes who behaved valorously during the Great Siege, as many *famiglie* (families belonging to the aristocracy and the upper middle classes) fled in a cowardly fashion on the eve of the Turkish invasion (Bosio 1602, pp. 737-8).

The retreat of the Turkish forces hardly put an end to the collective terror. Virtually everybody on the island believed that an even larger Ottoman armada would return the following year to avenge their ignominious defeat. A better documented exodus of nobles and well-to-do families occurred in 1566, just one year after the Great Siege. These wealthy families left their homes to be transported, some to Syracuse, others to Modica, Licata, Terranova, and Girgenti. These places started to look like colonies of Maltese, Greeks, and Rhodians who were deserting Malta (Bonello 2008, p. 24).

A sprinkling of Maltese family names turns up in many Sicilian localities but, as pointed out by Giovanni Bonello, what one finds in Licata is quite astonishing: **Calleja**, **Caruana**, **Cassarò** (cf. **Cassar**), **Camilleri**, **Farruggia** (cf. **Farrugia**), **Bondi**, **Bonello**, **Scerra/Xerra** (cf. **Scerri**), **Zarbo** (cf. **Zarb**), **Zirafa** (cf. **Zerafa**), **Sortino** (cf. **Sciortino**), **Sciculuni** (cf. **Scicluna**), **Portelli**, **Piscopo**, **Meli**, **Schembri**, **Sciria** (probably **Sciraha**), **Sacco**, **Rizzo**, **Pace**, **Spiteri**, **Falzone** (cf. **Falzon**), **Tabone**, **Gatt**, **Macri** (cf. **Magri**), **Butticè** (cf. **Buttigieg**), **Galia** (cf. **Galea**), **Mallia**, **Troisi**, **Trigona**, **Vella**, (**A**)**Zuppardi** (cf. **Azzopardi**). One of the more common surnames in Licata is incidentally *Maltese* (Bonello 2001, p. 35). In this respect, Bonello's observation may be reviewed in contrast with Hull's already-discussed Agrigentine hypothesis. However, it is fair to point out that Agrigento and Licata are, after all, quite close to each other.

When the Order transferred its seat to Valletta, many nobles opted to move to the new capital to the extent that by 1582, only half of the houses in Mdina remained occupied. The old city lost much of its identity and other families preferred to migrate to Sicily – the second wave to do so within a fifty-year period. Among the more eminent members of the aristocracy who left Malta at this time were those of *Stuniga* and *De Naso* (Montalto 1979, p. 69).

Agius de Soldanis, very opportunely, gives a whole list of Maltese and Gozitan *famiglie* who left Malta for Sicily during the 16th century. Examples of extinct surnames abound: *Alaimo*, *Aragona*, *Arexula*, *Arsina*, *De Astis*, *Auxona*, *Baglio*, *Baldesco*, *Begliera*, *Bernardino*, *Bordino*, *Calabacchio*, *Calavrisi*, *Calava*, *Cancello*, *Chilona*, *Cilino*, *Cippualto*, *De Clementis*, *Santa Colomba*, *Falca*, *Fanchini*, *Habica*, *Laureri*, *Manfredi*, *Mazara*, *Michiola*, *Paglia*, *Paternò*, *Ravella* (Agius de Soldanis, *Farrugia Gioioso* 1936-53, p. 144).

The severe famine of 1591 forced many locals to resettle abroad, again mostly in Sicily, a migratory pattern that persisted well into the 17th century. In 1645, in expectation of an imminent Ottoman invasion following the capture of the Sultan's own galleon, the Knights deported from Malta *tutti i mendicanti, e donne forestiere, e poi tutta la gente inutile alla guerra*. These, again, were taken to Licata, and also

found accommodation in Modica, Girgenti, and Sciacca, constantly aided by the Treasury of the Order (Bonello 2001, p. 36). It is no wonder that, to this day, a large area of Licata is known as *Il borgo dei Maltesi*.

In southeast Sicily, traditional Maltese surnames are quite common. This fact can be explained in two ways. As already indicated, the exodus of several Maltese to Licata and the surrounding province of Agrigento was a regular feature during the whole Hospitaller period (1551, 1561, 1565, 1566, 1591, 1645). Otherwise Siculo-Arabs from the neighbourhood had, during some earlier period, colonized and re-peopled a practically uninhabited Malta (as proposed by Hull).

Economic and Cultural Ties with Sicily

Gian Francesco Abela, in his *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano* (1647), emphasised the fact that Malta lies in the Sicilian Sea. One cannot fail to surmise that whatever lies in the Sicilian Sea must be Sicilian, and that what is Sicilian must be Italian. The 'Sicilian' character of Malta was truly overwhelming and could be discerned in both trivial and fundamental traditions, ranging from local cuisine to religious celebrations, from fashionable costumes to family codes of honour. The plethora of Sicilian surnames which reached the island during the whole Hospitaller period is just another aspect of this ethno-cultural interaction.

General political circumstances – from the 12th century onwards – had made the Maltese commune a natural extension of Sicily, sharing very much the same culture and comparable loyalties, with linguistic divergence apparently counting for little. Even during Hospitaller rule one encounters no detectable feeling of distinctiveness, with Maltese moving to Sicilian towns and villages with the same unconcerned ease that Sicilians moved into the Maltese commune (Cassar 2000, p. 257).

Before the Order's rule, Malta's links with the outside world appear to have been very scanty. Despite the fact that Malta had been under Aragonese rule since 1282, Sicilian influence and domination was complete as the island was under the direct jurisdiction of the Sicilian viceroy. Under the Catalan-Aragonese kings of Sicily, Catalan merchants could make use of their Maltese base in their trading activities in North Africa and the Levant (Dalli 2008, p. 252).

Sicilian cultural influence in the Maltese islands was never negligible. The upper crust families lived in constant contact with their Sicilian counterparts, while promising young men were dispatched to Sicily to pursue their academic or ecclesiastical careers. Lower down the social scale, Maltese seasonal labourers found their way to Sicily while a growing number of islanders settled permanently in the Val di Noto and elsewhere. By 1500, Sicilian influences had filtered down the social scale, becoming evident in all manifestations of material life and communal behaviour (Dalli 2008, p. 251). In 1536, Jean Quentin d'Autun, a French member of the Order, in his *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* (Lyons 1536), described Malta as being

fortunate enough to be 'part of Sicily'; he explains that since Roman times it has always had the same customs, the same rights, and the same government' (Vella 1980, pp. 18-9). He also observed that the Maltese 'have a Sicilian character, with a mixture of African ...' (Vella 1980, pp.18-9).

This proximity, indeed, continued to be felt long after 1530. Thus, while the Order of St John managed to create a heterogeneous environment and strengthen links with the other European states, especially after the Siege of 1565, Malta remained so highly attached to nearby Sicily that four-fifths of the total amount of shipping registered between 1654–1600 continued to be directed to that island (Cassar 2000, p. 73). Above all, Malta's dependence on Sicily (especially Licata) for its grain led to the creation of an unyielding bond between the populations of the two islands. These close ties with Sicily must be seen within the context of 16th century conditions. It should be remembered that the Maltese islanders were deemed *regnicoli*, that is, they technically belonged to the royal domain of the Sicilian kingdom. Very conveniently, it made them eligible for duty free food provisions from Sicily (Cassar 2000, p. 78).

As already specified, in the 15th and 16th centuries, it became more common for the inhabitants of the municipality of Malta to move to Sicily in times of crisis and hardship. On the other hand, Abela could hardly resist pointing out that, by the middle of the 17th century, apart from being overpopulated, Malta was frequented by a multitude of foreigners, mainly Sicilians, who eventually settled there (Abela 1647, p. 75). These settlers often declared themselves to be citizens of Valletta or inhabitants of Malta, suggesting that early modern Malta was a haven teeming with alien immigrants.

To illustrate the close relationships between the Maltese and the foreign immigrants, it is sufficient to peruse the surnames in the baptism and marriage registers of local parishes, especially in the harbour area. The number of children with a foreign surname is almost equal to that of children with typical Maltese surnames, the main difference being that variety is greater in the former while frequency is higher in the latter. The marriage registers obviously show that intermarriage reached very high percentages in the harbour parishes and that, in the long run, the majority of grooms came from Italy, and even more so from Sicily (Brincat 1991, pp. 91-110).

It seems that even until the early 17th century, there was little feeling among the Maltese themselves that their commune was in any way unique or distinct from others in Sicily. Malta kept its representatives or consuls in the principal Sicilian towns. Their job was to ensure a regular supply of goods, particularly commodities, to the island. On the other hand, Sicilian businessmen had their representatives in Malta, and artisans were engaged side by side in all activities (Cassar 2000, p. 114). It seems that with the arrival of the Order, administrative autonomy from Sicily became more tangible although many generations had to pass before the Maltese could feel different from the Sicilians, or indeed from the Italians, at the individual

human level. In fact, Malta's independence was intermittently contested by the king of the Two Sicilies who looked upon Malta simply as a fiefdom, and as one more city like Palermo and Messina. It was also the king who chose the bishop of Malta, 'the fifth parish of Palermo', and to whom each successive Grand Master had to renew the oath of loyalty (Ciappara 2006, p. 8). On the other hand, the Order's government resented such conventions, considering these tendencies a threat to its sovereignty.

A.P. Borg, after scrutinizing the places of origin of Italian spouses in Malta (as registered in the respective parish records) for the period 1575-1650, observes that the majority hailed from Sicily. One can immediately observe the strong evidence of men from Messina (92), Palermo (51), Syracuse (49), and Catania (18). Besides, 66 are simply designated as Sicilians, without specific reference to their city of origin. Peninsular southern Italy is amply represented by Naples (86) and Calabria (15). Barring some dubious provenances, the Sicilians comprised at least 323 or 48.7% of the Italian contingent. Campania provided 13.4% of all spouses, Veneto 11.3%, and Liguria 10.6%; the remaining regions put together supplied just 16% (Borg 2003, pp. 207-14).

The 'Maltese' Colony of Pachino⁴

In 1756 the Starrabba family, holders of several public offices in Piazza Armerina, vowed to found a new colony in their feudal estate of Scibini (or Xibini), just a couple of miles away from Capo Passero, the southernmost tip of Sicily. The project was approved by Fogliani, the Sicilian viceroy, who had no qualms about accepting migrants from outside his kingdom. The colony, named Pachino, was to be populated by Christian folk of Greek, Albanian and Maltese descent.

Foreign settlers began reaching Pachino in 1760 and the first Maltese contingent arrived a year later. Among these pioneers, one encounters the families of *Zuppari* (Azzopardi), *Zarbo* (Zarb), *Vella*, *Greco* (Grech) and *Momo* (presumably Mamo). Some found employment in the stone quarries; others opted to take up land cultivation. However, it was merely a modest start as the new settlement needed more skilled hands to prosper satisfactorily. Therefore, in 1767, Don Gaetano Starrabba, Prince of Giardinelli, dispatched Don Ferdinando Grim[a], a Maltese merchant, to the latter's native land to procure more able-bodied men for Pachino. The second wave of Maltese migrants thus disembarked in 1767-8. New surnames can be discerned among the newcomers: **Scerri**, **Mangion**, **Chetcuti**, **Buttigieci** (**Buttigieg**), **Mallia**, **Xiberas** (**Sciberras**), **Gat** (**Gatt**), **Schembri**, **Cricop** (**Chircop**), **Sciriac** (perhaps **Sciraha**), **Salibba** (**Saliba**), **Cinacura** (**Ciangura**), **Caruana**, **Debono**, **Bartolo**, **Boagiar**

⁴ The facts and statistics provided in this short discussion are based on the paper by R. SAVARINO (2008) and the book by A. CASSOLA & S. ALIFFI (2014).

(**Buhagiar**), **Mizzi**, **Felice**, **Abela**, **Cassar**, **Ascisa (Axisa)**, **Bondici** (probably **Bonnici**), **Psaila**, **Spiteri**, **Cachia**, and **Bonanno**.

Other local family names which found their way to Pachino crop up in the State Archives of Syracuse; they include Camilleri, *Micallef* (Micallef), Borg, *Buggeja* (**Bugeja**), *Farruggia* (**Farrugia**), *Zahara* (**Zahra**), *Cammissuli* (**Camenzuli**), *Soltana* (**Sultana**), *Cortese* (**Cortis**), **Agius**, and *Falson* (**Falzon**). A few surnames of Maltese settlers are now locally extinct – e.g. *Sicropa*, *San* (if not an apocopated form of **Sant**), *Tela*, *Chinziner*, *Cugno*, *Montenegro*, *Scalia*, *Vizina* (if not a variant of **Bezzina**), *Dipietro*, and *Battaglia*. A handful of others survive in collateral forms – e.g. *Bianca* (for **Bianco**) and *Poggio* (for **Poggi**).

The Italo-Maltese Nexus since the *Risorgimento*

The repression of the liberal revolts in southern Italy and Sicily in 1821 brought the first trickle of political refugees to Malta. Subsequently, *Il Quarantotto* caused in Malta an upsurge of refugees escaping political persecution and vendettas; these included noblemen and members of the provisional government. Admittedly, some exiles merely used Malta as a place of transit before proceeding to other parts of the Mediterranean.

Some refugees were landed gentry; others were professionals or modest artisans. Most of them bore surnames which are still very much in evidence in Malta; obviously, not all stayed on and settled here but in some cases, we have proof that they actually did

Bianca Fiorentini includes the names of 891 Italians resident in Malta in 1849. Many surnames are at once familiar: *Balucci* (cf. **Baluci** and **Ballucci**), **Bianchi**, **Bruno**, **Carbonaro**, **Cesareo**, **Conti**, **Coppola**, **Costa**, **D'Agata**, **D'Alessandro**, **D'Amico**, **De Gaetano**, **Drago**, *Errera* (cf. **Herrera**), **Fiorentino**, **Gravina**, **Lentini**, **Lombardi**, **Lombardo**, **Lopez**, **Messina**, **Miceli**, **Navarra**, **Orlando**, **Palmier(i)**, **Parlato**, **Pirotta**, **Rizzo**, **Romeo**, **Rossi**, **Rosso**, **Rubino**, **Salerno**, **Salomone**, **Sceberras Trigona**, **Terreni**, and **Valente**. However, it is imperative to point out that most of these family names are also documented in Malta in earlier records and consequently, in most cases, their present-day bearers enjoy a much older ancestry.

The watershed in modern Maltese political history was indirectly created by events on the Italian mainland from 1861 onwards, when being pro-Italian became synonymous with being anti-British (Abela 1991, pp. 80-1). The Language Question unleashed in the 1880s actually owes its origin partly to the active presence of the Italian rebels exiled to Malta during the *Risorgimento*, and partly to the constant British efforts to introduce English and eradicate Italian, deemed by the colonial government as 'the language of disloyalty'.

During the acrimonious days of the Language Question, the Maltese Nationalists

made much emphasis on the fact that most Maltese had Italian surnames. The Italo-Maltese writer Annibale Scicluna-Sorge, writing in the 1930s, claimed, albeit without scrupulous investigation, that some 80%, if not more of the Maltese population, was of Italian descent, as was evident from the local surnames which '*suonano di armonioso accento italico*' (Scicilina-Sorge 1932, pp. 73-4).

By the 19th century Malta had, in appearance, a thoroughly Italianate culture. For every Maltese, to be educated and to know Italian was one and the same thing; for countless generations, Italian had been the language of the courts and of the local Curia (Frendo 1988, p. 187). For Enrico Mizzi, leader of the Nationalist Party, Malta was '*l'ultimo lembo d'Italia*' whereas Zauli Sajani described Malta as '*l'ultimo sasso d'Italia*, and indeed '*una continuazione della Sicilia*', both in a geographic and linguistic sense (Hull 1993, p. 128).

In the late 1920s, pro-Fascist Italian newspapers ascribed Malta as an Italian land with Italian history, culture, tradition, and language; an island populated by Italians, and where the aspirations of nationalists were being continuously thwarted by the British. These ideologists propagated the idea of Malta as *terra irridenta*. Meanwhile, Mussolini's government subsidised pro-Italian newspapers in Malta who kept insisting on the *italianità* of Malta and the Maltese.

World War II, as expected, unceremoniously brought an abrupt end not only to the Language Question but to all pro-Italian aspirations in British Malta. Shaken by the tumultuous events of 1940–43, Italo-Maltese relations were understandably slow to recover in the immediate post-war years. However, the friendship between the two countries, based on age-old historical attachments, assumed particular political value at the time of Malta's Independence in 1964, which was hailed with special warmth by the Italian Government and the Italian public opinion. Actually, the continuum of commercial, social, cultural, and artistic contacts gave birth to an authentic bond of solidarity that grew from strength to strength. This bond has since then grown into a consolidated network of bilateral, regional, and multilateral political co-operation.

When on 1 May 2004, Malta finally became a full member of the European Union, the two countries, now partners in the same economic bloc, merely consolidated their already strong political and cultural ties. Moreover, Italy and Malta have a Euro-Mediterranean vocation in common, which stands for countless chances of collaboration. The annual influx of Italian tourists in Malta has steadily augmented the social intercourse between the two nations. Meanwhile, the number of mixed Maltese-Italian marriages has never ceased, prompting the continued input of Sicilian and peninsular surnames into the Maltese cognominal pool. Migration has always occurred in both directions, with a substantial number of Maltese, mainly brides, joining their husbands in their Sicilian and Italian home-towns.

On the other hand, the provenance of Sicilian grooms recently marrying local women is easily traceable; this is a mere sprinkling: **Mangiafico** (Syracuse, 1964), **Susino** (Pozzallo, Ragusa, 1973), **Cappitta** (Syracuse, 1974), **Arciola** (Catania, 1977),

Cacciatore (Gela, 1988), **Gagliano** (Catania, 1989), **Zammataro** (Biancavilla, Catania, 2003), **Finochiaro** (Acireale, 2006), **Mancuso** (Marsala, 2007), **Trovato** (Catania, 2007), **Giuffrè** (Palermo, 2009), and **Zambuto** (Palermo, 2009).⁵

The Present Cognominal Situation⁶

During the two millennia of its history, Sicily has been invaded more times than any other part of Italy. Each invader has left its own mark on the language. As the centuries rolled on, increments from Byzantine Greek, Arabic, French, Occitan, Catalan, and Spanish were incorporated. Residues of these different elements are to be found in today's spoken language, particularly in place-names and in family names. Sicily's present twenty commonest surnames are (in descending order): **Russo**, **Messina**, **Lombardo**, **Caruso**, **Marino**, **Rizzo**, **Grasso**, *Greco*, **Romano**, **Di Stefano**, **Amato**, *Costa*, *Parisi*, *Puglisi*, **La Rosa**, **Bruno**, **Vitale**, **Arena**, **Pappalardo**, **Catalano**. (Caffarelli 2004, *passim*). Other surnames deemed typical of Sicily include *Giuffrida*, *Randazzo*, and *Trovato*. The surnames shown in bold type are all extant in present-day Malta. However, the almost negligible presence of the surnames **Pappalardo**, **Catalano**, **Randazzo**, and **Trovato** is quite surprising. Common Sicilian *Giuffrida* is now totally absent in Malta. As for *Greco* and *Puglisi* they are collaterally represented by **Grech** and **Pulis**.

It is equally pertinent to point out the occurrence of some of Malta's commonest surnames in present-day Sicily. In all Italy, **Camilleri** is extant in 128 communes but it is mainly concentrated in Sicily, especially in Palermo, Agrigento, Caltanissetta, and Catania. Its presence in the north (Piedmont, Lombardy, and Liguria) is best explained by internal migration. The diphthongal form *Camillieri* is almost exclusive to Ragusa. **Vella** is counted in 535 Italian communes. Strong numbers occur in southern and western Sicily as well as in the Agrigento area. There are significant nuclei around Rome and Naples and once again, this is also very conspicuous in the North (Tuscany and Lombardy). **Farrugia** is represented in 21 communes. The cognate form *Farruggia*, occurring in 160 communes, is mainly encountered in Sicily, especially Palermo, Agrigento, and Caltanissetta. **Zammit** occurs in 18 communes; its cognate form, *Zammitti*, is evident in 37 communes, registering a conspicuous presence in Syracuse, and a less pronounced one in Palermo. *Zammitto* appears in 12 communes but the dissimilated form *Zambito* occurs in no less than 96 communes, again prevailing in the Agrigento area. **Attard** is represented in 20 communes. The full forms *Attardo* and *Attardi* are much more abundant, appearing in 120 and 132

5 Records retrieved from the Malta Emigrants Commission (Dar l-Emigrant), Valletta.

6 The facts and statistics provided in this short discussion are based on several sources; these include CARACAUSI (1993); E. CAFFARELLI & C. MARCATO, *I cognomi in Italia: Dizionario storico ed etimologico* (2 volumes), Torino: UTET, 2008, and the cognominal maps available on the internet website <http://www.gens.labo.net/>.

communes respectively. The former is chiefly Sicilian, registering higher densities in the Agrigento area.

Spiteri occurs in 49 Italian communes. There is a somewhat marked presence in Licata, Sicily. **Cassar** occurs in 60 Italian communes, but *Cassaro* is extant in 138 communes. The latter mainly prevails in the Agrigento-Caltanissetta-Licata axis. Its significant presence in the North (especially Lombardy) is best explained by internal migration. **Caruana** is extant in 149 communes; it is particularly conspicuous in the provinces of Agrigento, Caltanissetta, and Palermo. **Muscat** occurs in just five communes, but its full form, *Muscato*, is counted in 43 communes, particularly in Sicily and Apulia. The cognate forms *Moscato* and *Moscati* are much commoner and appear in 423 and 106 communes respectively. **Schembri** occurs in 199 communes. It prevails mainly in Sicily, stretching across the whole southern part of the island from Agrigento to Catania. The numbers counted in northern Italy are probably the result of internal migration. **Fenech** is extant in 33 Italian communes. Its epicentre seems to be in the province of Palermo.

Postscript

Apart from the already-cited *Malta–Pachino, una storia in comune*, Dr Arnold Cassola has published four other books which have substantially augmented our understanding of Siculo-Maltese demographic transactions: *Malta: People, Toponymy, Language: 4th Century B.C.–1600* (The Farsons Foundation, Malta, 2011); *I maltesi di Trapani: 1419–1455* (Malta University Press, Malta, 2015); *Malta-Sicily, People, Patriots, Commerce: 1770–1860* (Morrone Editore, Siracusa & Il-Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ktieb, Malta, 2016), and *I Maltesi di Vittoria e Scoglitti: 1628–1846* (Morrone Editore, Siracusa, 2018). In Cassola's own words, his research works, mainly relying on documents available in Sicilian archives, "contribute to furthering our knowledge of the millennial relations between the two islands and their peoples, thus adding to the mosaic of Siculo-Maltese relations." However, in the process, Cassola has also unearthed an extensive and valuable repertoire of Maltese surnames (most of them still extant, a few now extinct) which ended up in Sicily through commercial and migratory routes.

Conclusion

The oldest Maltese surnames are etymologically Arabic. The Arabs probably peopled Malta by men from Sicily, and it is significant that a good number of traditional Maltese surnames are to be detected in Sicily itself, especially in sub-Muslim times. In fact, Girolamo Caracausi's *Dizionario onomastico della Sicilia* (1994) records the majority of these Maltese surnames, either as they stand or else in some cognate,

related or camouflaged form. Since then, and up to the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant cultural driving force in Malta has come from Sicily, Italy and other European, mainly Mediterranean, countries. For 400 years (roughly between 1130 and 1530) Malta was merely a geopolitical appendix of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Understandably, in late medieval times, a plethora of Romance surnames reached the island under the successive Norman, Swabian, Angevin, Aragonese, and Castilians rulers. The influx of new Sicilian surnames which entered Malta during the subsequent period of the Knights of St John (1530-1798) is simply overwhelming. A huge number of Sicilians, seeking employment and adventure, converged on the island, where they settled and intermarried. In fact, the number of Sicilian (and Italian) plaintiffs applying for a nuptial license at the local Curia was never negligible, and the still extant *Status Liberi* records only confirm this phenomenon. Many recent additions from Sicily and Italy, mainly confined to the capital city, date primarily from the time of the Italian Risorgimento (1830–70). Throughout the 20th century, mixed marriages did slow down; however, Malta's EU membership and the recent influx of foreigners working on the island have secured a fresh input of Sicilian and peninsular surnames in the Maltese cognominal pool.

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