

Late Medieval Maltese Surnames of Arabic and Greek Origin

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Abstract: As a contribution to the historical study of Maltese and Greater Sicilian onomastics, this article is an analysis of fifteenth-century Maltese surnames of low frequency (5 or less occurrences in the militia lists of 1419 and 1480) which are of certain Greek or Arabic origin. Each surname is analysed in terms of its etymology, meaning and known geographical distribution in Sicily or elsewhere in Italy.

Keywords: Albanian, Algeria, Apulia, Arabic, Calabria, Catalan, Classical Arabic, Greek, Iberian, Islam, ism names, Italian, Italy, kunya names, laqab names, Lebanon, Maghrebine Arabic, Medieval Malta, nasab names, nicknames, nisba names, Norman French, onomastics, Padanian, Romance languages, Salento, Sicily, Siculo-Arabic, Siculo-Greek, toponyms, Tunisia, Tuscan.

The comprehensive Maltese militia rosters dating from between 1417 and 1480 and edited by Godfrey Wettinger in 1968 have provided historians and linguists with invaluable insights into the ethnological conditions prevailing in the island at the end of the Middle Ages, a time when vestiges of the island's Arabic and Islamic past (beginning at the earliest in the late ninth century) had been overlaid and submerged by a new Latin and Catholic cultural order based in Sicily.¹ Following on from important contributions by Stanley Fiorini and Mario Cassar,² the present writer in a recent study analysed in terms

1 G. Wettinger, 'The Distribution of Surnames in Malta in 1419 and the 1480s', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, 5 (1968), 25–48.

2 S. Fiorini, 'Sicilian Connexions of some Medieval Maltese Surnames', *Journal of*

of etymology and geographical origin the 85 fifteenth-century Maltese surnames that occurred six or more times in the *angara* lists of 1419 and 1480.³

This analysis found that just under half of these family names (42.5%) were of Arabic origin, almost all of them attested also in contemporary Sicily, and that 17% were of Siculo-Greek origin. The remainder were mostly of Southern Italian origin, mediated through Sicily (23.4%), with a substantial number of relatively recent Catalan and other Iberian surnames (9.5%) and a small number of names of Norman French, Tuscan, Padanian (Northern Italian) and Albanian origin. The oldest Maltese surnames presumably go back to the resettlement of the island, beginning in the mid-thirteenth century and culminating in the period after 1249, when the last confessing Muslims were expelled. These surnames hailed largely from the Agrigento district and were mainly the mix of Arabic, Greek and Southern Italian names just described.⁴ Later onomastic arrivals indicate an increasing wave of immigration from the south-eastern and eastern regions of Sicily.

In the present study those Maltese surnames of transparent Siculo-Arabic and Siculo-Greek derivation which occur five or less times in the same fifteenth-century lists are similarly examined in terms of their etymology and geographical distribution outside Malta. Because of their very frequent mention, two sources of onomastic data are not cited in the endnotes, as in normal practice, but indicated parenthetically in the text by their initials: *PB*, standing for the on-line Italian telephone directory *Pagine Bianche*, an invaluable resource for the current frequency and geographical occurrence of surnames in Italy, and *OK* = *Onomástikos Katálogos*, the corresponding Greek on-line telephone directory.⁵ The following abbreviations of Sicilian province names need also to be noted: AG = Agrigento, CT = Catania, CL = Caltanissetta, EN

Maltese Studies, 17–18 (1987–8), 104–38; M. Cassar, *The Surnames of the Maltese Islands: An Etymological Dictionary* (Malta, 2003); ‘Vestiges of Arabic Nomenclature in Maltese Surnames’, paper presented at the XXII Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Onomastiche/22nd International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (Pisa, 4.9.2005).

3 G. Hull, ‘The Oldest Maltese Surnames: A Window on Sicily’s Medieval History’, in C. Karagoz and G. Summerfield (eds.), *Sicily and the Mediterranean: Migration, Exchange, Reinvention* (New York: 2015), 77–110.

4 G. Hull, *The Malta Language Question: A Case Study in Cultural Imperialism* (Malta, 1993), 322–7.

5 *Pagine Bianche* [= *PB*] On-line Italian telephone directory at: www.paginebianche.it/ (retrieved 27.8.2015); Ονομάστικός Κατάλογος [= *OK*] On-line Greek telephone directory at: 11888.ote.gr/web/guest/white-pages/search?who... (27.8.2015).

= Enna, ME = Messina, PA = Palermo, RG = Ragusa, SR = Siracusa, TP = Trapani.

Only a relatively small number of the apparently Arabic surnames listed by Wettinger with five or fewer occurrences have so far eluded etymological clarification and are not treated here. These are *Bercax*, *Cachma*, *Gibasal*,⁶ *Hajede*, *Heller*, *Heris*, *Kindebu*, *Xulejbeni*, *Cubie*, *Murki/Murkie*, *Zebi*, and (if actually Arabic) *Actas(i)*,⁷ *Cherdica*, *Situri*, and *Ziguchi*. The remainder have proved to be semantically transparent, or suggest more than one plausible etymology.

In the following study the spellings of Maltese surnames in the fifteenth-century lists are given in italics, and the juxtaposed figures in brackets separated by a semi-colon refer to the 1419 roster and the 1480 roster respectively. Where a single figure is given in brackets, it refers to the 1419 *angara* list. Early modern and modern Maltese spellings of surnames are distinguished with boldface type, as are medieval graphies which are orthographically identical to the later-attested and present-day forms of the same names. Since the focus of this study is the occurrence of these surnames outside Malta, their fifteenth-century distributions (carefully noted in Wettinger's editions) are generally not indicated.

Arabic Surnames

Surnames directly continuing Arabic personal (*ism*) names were in the minority in fifteenth-century Malta. Of these only four still occur in Sicily. **Cabebu** represents Ar. *ḥabīb* 'beloved' (M. *ḥabib*) and is matched by the Sicilian surnames *Cabibi* (Agrigento, *PB* 7) and *Cabibbo* (Ragusa and Catania provinces, *PB* 75: 16). **Garuf** (4) in all probability means 'persevering, constant' (Ar. *ṣarūf*), corresponding to the Arab surname *Gharouf*, *Gharoof* (= *ṣarūf*), the Lebanese toponym *Jabal ṣarūf* and Sicilian *Garufo*, an Agrigento-Caltanissetta surname (*PB* 14), with the much more common variant *Garufi* concentrated in Eastern Sicily (*PB* 147: Messina province 147, Caltanissetta pr. 86, Syracuse

6 Attested as *Al-Jibāṣal* in medieval Sicily; Cusa, 547, 576.

7 Formally identifiable with *Cattasi*, a fief situated near Milazzo in the former Sicilian Grecia, hence possibly of Greek origin. G. Caracausi, *Dizionario onomastico della Sicilia: repertorio storico-etimologico di nomi di famiglia e di luogo* (Palermo, 1993), I, 346.

13, Palermo 11).⁸ **Farragiu** (1 in 1480) represents a sicilianization of the Arabic personal name *Faraj* ‘comfort, consolation’ (the meanings of Maltese *faragħ*) and ‘joy, pleasure’.⁹ It was variously recorded as Φάραζ, Φαράκι, (*Burge*)*farragii*, *Farachi*, *Farachius* in Sicilian documents composed between 1137 and 1388,¹⁰ and continues as the Sicilian surname *Faragi* (clustering in Prizzi, Palermo province, *PB* 7). The variants *Faraci*, *Farace*, *Ferace*, *Falaci* are spread throughout central and eastern Sicily, while *Foraci* is proper to Mazara del Vallo in Trapani province.¹¹ **Mula** ‘landlord’ (M. id., from Arabic *mawlan* ‘master, lord’) corresponds to the Sicilian *Mula*, a surname of Agrigento province (*PB* 17), attested at Nicotera in Calabria in 1145 (μοῦλε ὁ βρούπτολος) and at Palermo in 1260 (*Johannes de Mule*).¹² By contrast *Mulè* (with the same meaning) formally matches Maltese *mulej*, originally ‘overseer’, derived from Maghrebine Arabic *mulay* ‘lord’ (CA *wallā* ‘to put in charge’).¹³ *Mulè*, typical of the formerly Arabic-speaking zones of central and western Sicily, is much more widespread than *Mula*, with 543 *Pagine Bianche* occurrences today (208 Agrigento pr., 128 Palermo, Trapani 79, Caltanissetta 77).

Only one *ism* surname is known to have been Siculo-Arabic: **Debbus**, first recorded in Malta in 1496. It parallels the *nasab* (pedigree) name *Bin Dabbūs* ‘son of mace/club’ at Corleone and Calatatrasi in 1178.¹⁴ The widened meaning here is specifically Maghrebine, as Classical Arabic *dabbūs* denotes a pin. The others of this category, apparently recorded only for Malta, are **Habedi**, from Arabic *ṣabadi* ‘humble, deferential’ (*ṣabd* ‘slave’) = *Al-Abadi*; **Cadus**, shortened from Arabic *ṣabd al-Qaddūs* ‘slave of the Most Holy’;¹⁵ **Muchtara**, from Arabic

8 Caracausi, I, 687. The author mentions also the possibility of derivation from Ar. *qarīf* ‘hard, cruel’. This does correspond to an Arab surname *Qarīf*, *Qarouf*, but initial *g-* in the romanized forms makes the first derivation more likely.

9 H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca, 1976), 702.

10 Caracausi, I, 580.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 106; Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 12.

13 Caracausi (II, 1079) connects Sicilian and Maltese *Mula*, but wrongly makes them variants of Sic. *Mulà* (< dialectal Gk. μοῦλᾶς ‘muleteer’). He is equally incorrect in deriving Sic. *Mulè* from Ar. *mawlan* (which he gives as *mawlā*, attributing the irregular stress to various Greek adaptations) rather than from Ar. *mulay*, the obvious etymon.

14 S. Cusa, *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia, pubblicati nel testo originale, tradotti ed illustrati* (Palermo, 1868–82), 249; 141; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 106.

15 For phonetic reasons (*-d-*) Fiorini’s derivation (‘Sicilian Connexions’, 115) from Maghrebine Arabic *qattūs* ‘cat’ (> Sic. *Gattuso*), is implausible, though certainly correct for the early

Al-Muxtār ‘the chosen one’ (the final *-a* here probably indicating a family unit, as in the case of *Sultana* from M. *sultàn* ‘king’); and **Hili** (5; 1 *il Chili*) ‘skilful’ (M. *ħili*), which is the Arabic name *Al-Ĥīlī*.¹⁶ **Hafaride** corresponds to the female name *Hafrida* still current in Algeria and Morocco. The name is Islamic but non-Arabic and non-Koranic, and appears to be a variant of the Persian *āfrīda* ‘created’, which, significantly, occurs in both the forms *Afrida* and *Hafrida* in Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia today.

In the category of dynastic *nisba* names are *Brahimi*, *Hablabi*, and *Fiteni*. **Brahimi** (1) is identical with the Maghrebine Arabic *Brāhīmī*, based on CA *ġibrāhīm* ‘Abraham’ from Hebrew *Avrahām* ‘father of a multitude’. **Hablabi** (cf. the Egyptian surname *Al-Hablabi*, and its *nasab* variant (*Ibn-*) *Hablab*), is of obscure origin but possibly connected with Arabic *hiball* ‘tall, husky man’.¹⁷ **Fiteni**, a *nisba* variant of *Fitān* (recorded as part of the name *Fitān bin Barka* at Jatina, Sicily in 1183),¹⁸ is probably from a Maghrebine Arabi **fitān*, meaning either ‘annoying’ or ‘seductive, misleading’ going by the semantics of Moroccan Arabic *ften* ‘to pester’ and ‘to bewitch’.¹⁹

Toponymic, but of local formation, is **Melliehi** (2 *Millahi* 1419; 2 *Mellechi* 1480), i.e. ‘from Mellieha (in western Malta)’, literally meaning ‘from the salt pan’ (Ar. *mallāħa*). Semantically neutral is **Mahali** ‘local, native, indigenous’ from Arabic *maħalli*, occurring as a surname in North Africa usually in the form *Al-Maħalli*; *Abī Maħalli* was the surname of a fifteenth-century Moroccan mahdi. The only certainly foreign toponymic *nisba* name in this group is **Buni** (1), which occurred in Sicily in the late twelfth century (1178 and 1183) as *Al-Būni* ‘the inhabitant of *Būna*’ (It.M. *Bona*, Fr. *Bône*: modern Annaba in eastern Algeria/Numidia) at Calatatrasi, Raja, and Minzel Zarqun.²⁰ The Maghrebine toponym is derived from the Latin accusative form *Hippōnem Rēgium* (nominative *Hippō Rēgius*). The presence in Sicily of natives of Būna would have been a result of Roger II’s occupation of the Algerian seaport from 1153 to 1158.

modern Maltese nickname *Catus*, *Catusi* attested in 1522.

16 Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 7.

17 Wehr, 1017.

18 Cusa, 249; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 106.

19 R.S. Harrell and H. Sobelman (eds.), *A Dictionary of Moroccan Arabic* (Washington, D.C., 1966), 40.

20 Cusa, 173, 259, 271; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 116.

Occupational names are another subcategory here. **Zabbar** (1 *Zabar*) is M. *žabbàr* ‘pruner’ (which surname came to be applied to the village *Haž-Žabbar* in eastern Malta). **Cafor** (only 3 in 1419, but noted as *Caffuri* in 1277) is from Ar. *ḥafūrī* ‘ditch digger’, cf. in 1178 the Corleone Christian serf named *alḥāfūrī/ó* χαφούρης.²¹ A metronymic occupational name was **Maxita** (3; 1) which is the Arabic *mašta* ‘lady’s maid’ or ‘female hairdresser’, occurring at Catania in 1145 in the mention of *Awlād al-Mašta* ‘children of the maid/hairdresser’.²²

Kunya names beginning in *Abū* (Siculo-Arabic *Bū*) are less numerous. **Ebejer** (1 *Habejr*, 1 *Habeir*, 1 *Habeyr*) matches Siculo-Arabic *Bū al-šabāir* (Cefalù, 1145), literally ‘father of one-year old goats or sheep’ (Ar. *šabūra*, pl. *šabāir*).²³ Obsolete today but perpetuated as a toponym (an area near St Paul’s Bay) is **Buġibba** (1 *Buiubbe*, Luqa/Farruġ 1419, Rabat 1480), interpretable as *bū jubba* ‘owner of water mill wheels (which turn the bucket chain)’, a name recorded at Sūq al-Mar’a, Sicily, in 1178.²⁴ **Busalib** (3) < *abū šalīb* ‘cross owner/bearer’ arose as the epithet of a devout Christian, as possibly did the *laqab* (nickname) surname **Saliba** (4), though this could also indicate a landmark (cf. Sic. *salibba* ‘transverse irrigating furrow’). A serf named *Abū as-Šalīb* was registered at Qabiana, Sicily, in 1178.²⁵ The only *dū* (physical attribute-denoting) *kunya* surname inherited by Maltese is **Xuereb** [‘fwiərep] (4 *Xuerib*, 1 *Xuereb*), truncated from *abū šawārib* ‘man with the moustache’ (pl. of *šārib* ‘moustache’), cf. medieval Sicilian *šiyād Bū al-Šawārib* (Al-Qaryāni, 1183);²⁶ also Spanish *Suárez*, *Juárez*, Portuguese *Soares*.

Arabic *laqab* surnames are the most numerous group for the period under study. Most of these seem to be local Maltese formations, though a few have Sicilian counterparts. Original nicknames descriptive of physical characteristics were the metronymic **Zejne** (1) from the Arabic *zayna*, feminine form of the adjective *zayn* ‘beautiful’; **Zurki** (1) corresponding to the Arab family name *Az-Zurqī*, from the dialectal

21 Cusa, 146.

22 Ibid., 579.

23 Ibid., 477; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 108; Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 5; J. Aquilina, ‘A Comparative Study in Lexical Material Relating to Nicknames and Surnames’ *Journal of Maltese Studies*, 2; rpt. in *Maltese Linguistic Surveys* (Malta, 1964), 185–214; 192.

24 J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2 vols (Malta, 1987), I, 396; Cusa, 153; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 108.

25 Cusa, 163; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 109; Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 5.

26 Cusa, 280; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 109; Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 6.

Arabic adjective *zurqi* ‘bluish’ (CA *azraq*, M. *izraq* ‘blue’), a reference to eye colour; **Chamux** (1 in 1480), corresponding to the Arabic plural noun *xumūš* ‘scars’ (plural of *xamš* ‘scar, scratch’), i.e. ‘scar face’.²⁷ **Fartasi** ‘bald’ (1) is Maltese *fartàs* and Sicilian *fartasu*, recorded as *Sadaqa al-Fartàs* at Malbit in Sicily in 1182.²⁸ The others are **Felfuli** (1 in 1480 = M. ‘with frizzy hair’); **Xeluki** ‘left-handed’ (= M. *xellugi*); **Xeibe** ‘grey hair’ (M. *xejba*; recorded as *Abū Šayba* at Catania in 1145);²⁹ **Xehbun** ‘grizzled, with greying hair’ (cf. M. *xehbien*, id.); **Sigir** from Arabic *sayīr* ‘small’ (M. *zghir*); **Semen** from Ar. *samīn* ‘fat’ (M. *smīn*).

Clearly Arabic but etymologically obscure is **Hantusa** (1 *Hantuse* in 1419). In Maltese *Hantus* is the name of an extinct hamlet near Siggiewi.³⁰ It matches the Arabic surname *Ḥantūs* common in Tunisia and Algeria as well as Lebanon, and is the old name of a southern suburb of Beirut (now Al-Uza’i). Given its geographical distribution, the name may belong to the Punic substratum of these regions and, deriving from a quadriliteral *ḤNTS apparently based on the Semitic triliteral *ḤNT, is probably a nickname meaning ‘hunchbacked’.³¹ It would therefore be the agentive form of an obsolete verb *ḥantas ‘to be bent, curved’, cf. Maltese *ghaddas* ‘to plunge’ ~ *ghaddùs* ‘reckless’, lit. ‘plunging’.

Comments on character or state appear in the surnames **Meheri**, from M. *meghieri* ‘ensorious, carping’ (*megher* ‘to criticize’),³² **Bakibac** (4) ‘the gurgler’, i.e. ‘the chatterbox’ (= M. *baqbieq*), Siculo-Arabic *Al-Baqbāq* at Ġar Šu‘ayb (1183);³³ **Canzuhuk** (3), probably meaning ‘petulant’ (M. *qanzuh*); **Harabi** (3; 1) ‘warlike, belligerent’

27 There can be no connection with the Islamic given name *Khamush* as this is Pakistani and represents the Punjabi *khamoš* ‘silent’.

28 Cusa, 279; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 114.

29 Cusa, 571; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 109.

30 Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, I, 497. Aquilina’s etymological suggestion is phonologically implausible as well as fanciful: ‘[It] seems to be made up of *Hal*, short for *rahal* + *ntus*, of unknown origin and meaning.’

31 I am indebted to Dr Lance Eccles (ex-Macquarie University) for this elucidation. Semiticists associate the root ḤNT with ḤNW, the semantically most representative derivative of the latter being *ḥanā* ‘pencher, incliner la tête, courber, plier; avoir une grande tendresse’, cf. Maltese *henn*; see D. Cohen *et al.* (eds.), *Dictionnaire des racines sémitiques ou attestées dans les langues sémitiques, comprenant un fichier comparatif de Jean Cantineau* Fasc. 9 (Leuven, 2010), 891.

32 Any connection with the Arabic surname and ethnonym *Mahri*, *Mehri*, denoting a native of southern Arabia (present-day eastern Yemen and western Oman), is contextually unlikely.

33 Cusa, 281; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 116.

(< Ar. *ḥarbī*); **Malf** ‘thrifty, parsimonious’ (Maltese id.);³⁴ **Carcar** (1) meaning ‘dawdler’ if in fact based on the Maltese verb *karkar* ‘to drag’; **Kerfixi** (1; 1 *Kerfix*) ‘bungler, mess maker’ (M. *gerfix*); **Mahduf** ‘rejected, banished’ from Ar. *maxdūf*, an Arab surname current also in Malaysia and Indonesia (there spelt *Makhduf*). The surname transcribed as *Cheffut* by Wettinger seems to be erroneous, the actual name being in all likelihood **Kettut**, a surname still current in the sixteenth century,³⁵ as well as a Gozitan placename.³⁶ This appears to be an onomatopoeic noun from an Arabic **kattūt(i)* ‘hummer’, cf. Arabic *katta* ‘to hum softly’ and *katt*, *katīt* ‘soft humming’.³⁷ The modern Arab surnames *Kattout* and *Kattouti* are found in Algeria and Tunisia as well as in the Middle East. For obvious phonetic reasons (tonic *ū*) it cannot be connected to Ar. *qaṭṭāt* ‘turner’, recorded at Iaci in Sicily in 1095.³⁸

Etymologically problematic is the now-common Maltese family name **Dimech** (1 *Dimag* in 1419, 4 *Dumach* in 1480, both from *Ḥaz-Zebbuġ*). All attempts at finding its origin have so far fallen short; **Di Mecca* ‘from Mecca’ (!) suggested by Aquilina is both fanciful and phonetically impossible.³⁹ Derivations from Southern Italian *De Mec(c)o* (pet form of *Domenico*) and from the obsolete village name *Ḥal Dmigh* similarly fail to account for the tonic vowel *a* occurring in both fifteenth-century instances, nor does any derivative of *demgha* ‘tear’ fit the bill here. My impression is that we have in this name a continuation of the Arabic common noun *dimāy* ‘brain’, now obsolete in Maltese (replaced by *moħħ*) but possibly once used as a nickname for someone very intelligent and semantically paralleling the Palermo surname *Cervello*. Also ambiguous is **Camemei**, which appears to match *Camemi* and *Cameme*, the name of at least three localities in Ragusa province (*Sinatra Di Camemi* occurring as a rare Catania surname). The Maltese surname is almost certainly Arabic but the form is unclear. If it is a nickname, it could derive from a **ḥamāmi* ‘doveline’; if of Sicilian toponymic origin, both *ḥamām* ‘doves’ and *ḥammām* ‘bath’ are plausible candidates for the etymon.⁴⁰

34 Unless this represents the Southern Italian placenames *Amalfi* or *Melfi*.

35 Fiorini, ‘The Resettlement of Gozo after 1551’, *Melita Historica*, IX, no. 6 (1986), 203–244; 207.

36 Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, I, 645

37 Wehr, 812.

38 Cusa, 545; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 106.

39 Aquilina, ‘Comparative Study’, 192.

40 Carcausi, I, 257.

Names of objects associated with individuals are: **Casha** (4 *Casha*, 1 *Casiha*, 1 *Cassiha*, 1 *Cashja* 1480) = M. *qasgha* ‘fishmonger’s bowl’); **Cadide** (1), from M. *hadida* ‘iron rod’;⁴¹ **Zrejra** (2) from M. *żrajra* ‘tiny stone chip’ (diminutive of *żrara*); **Chalum** (1 in 1480) formally identifiable with Arabic *ḥallūm* ‘brined goat or sheep cheese’ (Egyptian and originally Coptic); and **Dua** (1 in 1480), from M. *duwa* ‘medicine’. **Zarier** (1 1419; 1 *Zarar*, 1 *Zarur*) appears to be the common noun *żrier* ‘yoke pin (of a plough)’ (= It. *chiovolò*) and probably ties up thematically with the Sicilian surnames *Magnone*, *Magnoni* if these indeed represent *maniuni*, *magnuni*, id. (this word being of Padanian origin, cf. Monferrine *magnun*, *maniun* < *MANICŌNE). **Zarb** (4 *Zarbu*;⁴² 5 *Zarb*) from Ar. *zarb* ‘enclosure (for cattle)’, cf. Sic. *zardu* ‘enclosure’, ‘hedge’, is matched by the modern Sicilian family name *Zarbo*, overwhelmingly Agrigentine (*PB*: AG 146 out of 187 in all of Sicily).⁴³

The present group of appellatives includes several names of phytonymic origin (like the older *Psaila*, *Sciberras*). Generic in meaning are **Zahra** (3 *Zahara* 1480) ‘flower’ (M. *żahra*),⁴⁴ **Zaira** (2 *Zayra*, 1 *Zajra*, 1 *Zairu*), from the Maltese diminutive *żhajra*, **Nuara** (2) ‘blossom’, also appearing in the collective form **Nuar** (1; 2), from Maltese *nwar-a*) and **Axisa** ‘herb’ (4 *Haxixe* 1419; 8 *Chaxixe* 1480), which is clearly the Maltese *ħaxixa*.⁴⁵ Of these, only *Zahra* and *Nuara* have Sicilian counterparts today. The surname *Zágara* is fairly evenly distributed throughout the island (*PB*: PA 16, CT 10, AG 8, TP 7) as are its rare variants *Zagra*, *Zara* (mostly eastern) and *La Zara* (Agrigentine). *Nuara* is a family name of the Agrigento-Caltanissetta zone (*PB*: AG 30, CTL 10). There is, however, also the interesting possibility that this Sicilian surname connects with the local common noun *nuara* ‘irrigated plot for the growing of vegetables and melons’ (cf. the placename *Novara [di Sicilia]*), which has been thought by some to derive from a secondary and specifically Sicilian meaning of Arabic *nuwwāra*.⁴⁶

41 No connection is possible with smoothing irons, as these were unknown in Europe until the seventeenth century.

42 Wettinger’s transcription here is *Zurbu*, but this appears to be an error, either in the original, or in the reading.

43 Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 10.

44 Ibid., 8.

45 The modern [aksisa] is an incorrect ‘speak-as-you-spell’ pronunciation.

46 See Caracausi II, 1119; A. Varvaro, *Vocabolario storico-etimologico del Siciliano*, II

Xiriha (3, 1 *Xeriha*; 1 *Xiricha*) is the Maltese *xriħa* (Ar. *šariħa*) which means ‘strip of meat’, but also (with the variant *xerħ*, -a) *Panicum silvestre* ‘wild panic grass’.⁴⁷ While it is possibly a metonym for a tall, thin person, given the series of phytonymic Maltese surnames, the second meaning is more likely if the Maltese plant name was originally synonymous with Sicilian *sciru* (= M. *xerħ* < Ar. *šarħ*), which denotes a variety of St John’s wort (*Hypericum quadrangulum*),⁴⁸ a traditional medicinal herb.⁴⁹ An interesting hybridism to be mentioned here in **Cusburella** (4; 1 *Cusprella*), literally ‘little coriander’ (M. *kosbor* + Old Sicilian feminine diminutive suffix -*ella*). Also phytonymic is **Rebis** (1) corresponding to the Sicilian surname *Ribisi*, *Ribbisi* found in the Palermo district (PB 12) and at Palma di Montechiaro (PB 6) near Agrigento. The variant *Ribis*, closer to the Maltese form, still occurs in Sicily but is rare. Its etymon is Arabic *rībās* ‘gooseberry’ (*Ribes grossularia*).⁵⁰

Purely toponymic are **Muxi** (1; 1), meaning in Maltese ‘wild rocky plain covered with very little soil’,⁵¹ and **Bellia** (4) which is M. *belliegha* ‘whirlpool, sink hole’ (from *bela* ‘to swallow’) as well as the name of a place in Rabat, Gozo. This corresponds to the Sicilian surname *Bellia* which, contrary to Caracausi’s assertion, is not a formation from the Latin adjective *bellus* ‘pretty’, but clearly the Semitic word.⁵² Significantly the surname is locally entrenched as a toponym in the north of the formerly arabicized Val di Noto, *Biddia* (= *Bellia*) being the appellation of a river and a forest near Piazza Armerina and also as a surname in the local provinces of Catania (PB 167), Caltanissetta (PB 20) and Agrigento (PB 54).⁵³ Another toponymic surname which Malta

(Palermo, 2014), 691–2.

47 Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, II, 1564.

48 Caracausi, II, 1498.

49 Caracausi’s suggestions (II, 1498) of Ar. *šariq* ‘rising sun’ ‘handsome youth’ and *šarika* ‘girlfriend’ fail phonologically: -*q*-and -*k*-do not produce -*h*-in Maltese.

50 Caracausi, II, 1351.

51 Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, I, 860. The possibility of a derivation from Hebrew *Muša* ‘Moses’ is ruled out by the final vowel -*i*, and the medial consonant excludes the Arabic *nišba* variant *Al-Mūsi* as the etymon. Caracausi (II, 1088) derives Sicilian *M scia* from the Hebrew name (see also Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 7), but it is surely cognate with Maltese *muxa*, *moxa* (cognate with *muxi*) meaning ‘moor, heath, barren land’, given its occurrence in the clearly toponymic form *La Muscia* and the occurrence of both the surname and the placename in the Noto, Scicli and Sciacca districts, all once strongly arabicized.

52 Caracausi, I, 134.

53 Where *Bellia* occurs in Northern Italy (mainly in the industrialized zones) it is almost

shared with Sicily was **Algaria** (1 in 1480). This is today an uncommon Palermo family name (*PB* 5) derived from *Acqua d'Algaria* (translating the Arabic *ṣayn al-ḡariyya* ‘the beautiful fountain’), the name of the smallest of three fountains at Palazzo Algaria near the city centre.⁵⁴

Later-arising surnames derived from names of animals are relatively numerous. **Zerafa** (5 *Zurafe*, 1 *Zurafa*; 6 *Zurafe*), from M. *żerafa* ‘giraffe’, was applied to someone with a long neck.⁵⁵ **Gazal** (2 in 1419 at Rabat) represents Arabic *ḡazāl* ‘gazelle’ (M. *ḡaḏḏiel-a*). **Dorbes** (1 in 1419 at Kirkop) is M. *dorbies* ‘lion’ (< Ar. *durbās*). **Debeb** (1 in 1419 at Siġġiewi), probably represents *Dbejjeb* ‘little bear’ (dim. of *debb*); for the semantics cf. *Ursino*, a common Catania surname. **Dub** (1) ‘bear’, from Ar. *dubb* (M. *debb*), also crops up as a given name at Cefalù (*Ṣāyša bin ad-Dubb*) in 1145 and at Calatatrasi (*Ṣabd Alsām ad-Dubb*) in 1178.⁵⁶ **Xidi** is ‘gadflies’ in Maltese and **Charuf** (2 1480) is *ħaruf* ‘lamb’.

Dud ‘worms’ (Ar., M. id.) designated a person inflicted with intestinal worms if it was not some reference to personal appearance. Semantically pejorative is **Far** (1 or 2 in 1419, but also attested in 1277) ‘rat’ (cf. It. *Ratto*, *Ratti*; and *Sorice*, *Sorge* ‘mouse’).⁵⁷ It was recorded at Palermo in 1095 as *Ibn al-Fār*, and at Corleone and Calatatrasi in 1178 as *Naṣma al-Fār*.⁵⁸

Siculo-Greek Surnames

Calabro (*Calabru* 2; 4) is the same as the Sicilian surname *Càlabro* (vernacular *Càlabru*), a proparoxytonic variant of the more common

certainly a surname introduced by Sicilian immigrants.

- 54 S. Morso, *Descrizione di Palermo antico ricavata sugli autori sincroni e i monumenti de' tempi* (Palermo, 1927), 295, n. 1; Caracausi, I, 35.
- 55 Cassar, ‘Vestiges’, 13. The name actually has six occurrences, but is included in the present study because it was inadvertently omitted from the foregoing one (Hull, ‘The Oldest Maltese Surnames’).
- 56 Cusa, 477, 168; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 114.
- 57 It also gave rise to the village name *Hal-Far*. This is not likely to be the Eastern Sicilian *Faro* (< Gk. φάρος ‘lighthouse’) as suggested by Wettinger in ‘The Origin of ‘Maltese’ Surnames’, *Melita Historica*, XII (1999), 4, 333–44; 334–5: the surname of the Maltese bearer mentioned in 1277 (*Dominicus Far*) was not latinized like most of the others, but kept in its vernacular form.
- 58 Cusa, 2, 137; Fiorini, ‘Sicilian Connexions’, 114.

Calabrò, from Greek *καλαβρός* ‘Calabrian’ (an early Byzantine-era meaning but ‘Salentine’ in imperial times). In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Calabrian Latin documents the name was written *Kalabròs*, with the final *-s* still intact.⁵⁹ It remains a common surname in Calabria (*PB* 711, of which 467 in Reggio province) and Sicily (*PB* 532: ME 345, CT 46, SR 55, TP 29),⁶⁰ the epicentre coinciding with the formerly Greek-speaking zones of the two regions. Ultimately Greek, but re-expressed in Sicilian, is **Xicli** (1 *de Xicli* in 1419), ‘from Scicli’, a town on the south-eastern coast of the island. The Sicilian toponym *Scicli* (medieval Latin *Sicli*, *Sycli*) represents a Siculo-Greek **Σίκλες* ‘the buckets/cisterns’, plural of *σίκλα*, from Latin *sītula*.⁶¹ An apparent Arabo-Greek hybrid is **Bezzina** (5 *Bezine*; 11 *Bezine*), a variant of the less common (Maltese) **Bezzini**, from Arabic *Bizīnī*, attested in medieval Sicilian as *Bizinas* (1090) and *Bizinias* (1093), and the modern Sicilian surnames *Bizzini* and *Vizzini*. A toponym of Catania province, the name *Vizzini* is perhaps connected with Greek *βυζίον* ‘breast’, in reference to a local landform.⁶²

Transparently Greek is **Cachia** (1 *Cakia*, 3 *Cakie* in 1419; 11 *Cakie* in 1480, and in modern Maltese pronunciation [ka'kija]). This is the Greek surname *Κακίας* (‘of bad character’, from *κακός* ‘bad’) most common today in the Thessalian district of *Tríkala*.⁶³ The modern Sicilian equivalent is *Cacia*, a Catania surname (*PB* 25) and in Calabria it clusters in Catanzaro and its district (*PB* 45).

By contrast the Greek connections of **Mallia** (5; 10), while certain, are not semantically transparent. The name clusters in Eastern Sicily today (*PB*: SR 90, RG 71) but is also Agrigentine (*PB* 34). It appears to derive from a Siculo-Greek **μαλλέας* (< Byzantine Gr. *μαλλίον* ‘wool’), meaning ‘wool merchant’.⁶⁴ However, whether the parallel Greek surnames *Μαλέας* (*OK* 153), and *Μαλλιός* (*OK* 100) have

59 G. Rohlfs, *Dizionario dei cognomi e soprannomi in Calabria: repertorio storico e filologico* (Ravenna, 1979), 58.

60 The *Pagine Bianche* figures do not distinguish between *Calabrò* and *Càlabro*, but the former is in the absolute majority.

61 Caracausi, II, 1493–4; Giuliano Gasca Queirazza *et. al.*, *Dizionario di toponomastica: storia e significato dei nomi geografici italiani* (Turin, 1990), 612.

62 Caracausi, I, 1717.

63 *Ibid.*, I, 227. Where *Κακίας* occurs in the Ionian Islands, a nineteenth-century Maltese origin may be suspected.

64 Caracausi, II, 924.

the same meaning is unclear.⁶⁵ **Delfe** (i.e. *Delfa*, 2 in 1419; 1 *Dilfe* in 1480) hails from central-eastern Sicily (*PB*: CT 53, EN 43, SR 8) and is a metronymic, continuing the Greek given name Αδελφά, feminine variant of Αδελφός ‘sibling’. The modern **Coleiro**, which first occurred as *Coloyru* in 1480 (1 only), is Sicilian *Calògero* (vernacular *Calòjiru*) from Greek καλόγερος, ‘monk’ (literally ‘good old man’), a surname predominantly of Agrigento (*PB* 424) and Caltanissetta (*PB* 124) provinces, but also Messinese (*PB* 165).

Calava (1 in 1480, = **Calavà*) is evidently a local variant of the Palermo surname written *Calivà* (*PB* 10), *Callivà* (*PB* 9) or *Callovà*, and derived by Caracausi from a Greek *καλυβᾶς ‘hut dweller’ (from καλύβη ‘hut’).⁶⁶ **Calabaci** (2 *Calabachi* in 1419), corresponds to the Greek diminutive surname Χαλεπάκης current in eastern Crete (Heraklion and Lasithi districts according to *OK*). The base adjective χαλεπός means ‘difficult, hard’, but in Calabrian Greek *halipò* is a noun meaning ‘bramble’, so the Graeco-Maltese surname could mean ‘little bramble’ if it did not originally refer to a person with a hard or difficult nature (in either case the semantics are similar). There seems to be no trace of the surname in its diminutive form in Sicily, though Caracausi cites the Sicilian surname *Calabò*, and the Calabrian toponym *Calipò* near Varapodio (Reggio province), while Rohlfs lists *Càlipa* as an Aspromonte surname (*PB* 8).⁶⁷

A problematic case is that of the surname **Calluso** (*Callus*), acclimatized in Reggio Calabria and its district (*PB* 27), whence it was introduced by a few bearers to Sicily (*PB* 6). It probably came to Malta directly from Calabria. Caracausi is certainly wrong in deriving it directly from a reflex of Latin *callōsus* ‘calloused’ because no such surname appears to be indigenous to other parts of Italy or the Romance nations.⁶⁸ The surname is italianized and latinized respectively as *dompnus Nicolaus Callusu* and *dompnus Riccardus Callusus* in a Calabrian document of 1325 cited by Caracausi.⁶⁹ These are clearly hybrid forms, and indeed assimilated to the South Italian adjective

65 The matching Greek surnames may also perpetuate the name of Cape Maleas (Ακρωτήριο Μαλέας, Demotic Κάβο Μαλιάς) in the south-eastern Peloponnese.

66 Caracausi, I, 248–9.

67 Caracausi, I, 233, 248; Rohlfs, 60.

68 Caracausi, I, 250.

69 *Ibid.*

callusu ‘calloused’. Its epicentre in southern Calabria points clearly to the Greek origin previously recognized by Joseph Aquilina: *καλός* ‘handsome’, ‘good’ and hence a conservative sigmatic synonym of the more vernacular *Calò*,⁷⁰ associated later through folk etymology with Neo-Italian *callusu*. Of Calabrian or Sicilian provenance is **Calimera** (1 in 1419). This name, rare today, is proper to the Polistena district of Reggio province (*PB* 8), while the Sicilian equivalent *Calamera* clusters at Serradifalco and Bompensiere, west of Caltanissetta (*PB* 7). It is an augural surname (‘good day’), equivalent to Italian *Bongiorno* and *Bondi* (cf. Maltese *Bondi*, *Bondin*). In Greece it occurs mainly in the form *Καλημέρης*, to which corresponds the Sicilian *Calimeri*, found in Messina and Tortorici (*PB* 6) and Catania (*PB* 4).

Another epithetic form is **Cialona** (1 *Chalona*), still found in Sicily today and a Trapani and Marsala family name (*PB* 7). This is a western Sicilian variant of the much more common *Celona* (*PB* 150), fundamentally a Messina surname (*PB* 113), but present also in the districts of Catania (*PB* 6), Agrigento (*PB* 9) and Palermo (*PB* 18). It comes from the Greek *χελώνη* ‘tortoise’.⁷¹ Its variant *Cilona* (*PB* 34) has a parallel distribution, and clusters at Palmi and Seminara in southern Calabria (*PB* 20).

Three Siculo-Greek surnames of this group are based on Christian forenames. **Mizzi** (1 *Mici* 1419; 1 *Miczi* 1480) is identical with the surname *Μήτσιος* (OK 1261), still widespread in Greece. Like the similar forms *Μήτσιος* and *Μήτσος*, it is a pet form of *Δημήτρης* ‘Demetrius’, which produced the Palermo surname *Dimitri*.⁷² This surname appears to have come to Malta from Apulia, where it is concentrated in Bari

70 J. Aquilina, ‘Race and Language in Malta’, in *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (Malta, 1961, 166–188), 179; Aquilina, ‘Comparative Study’, 201. The sigmatic Calabrian and Maltese forms contrast with the more vernacular type *Calò*, established in Malta by 1687. This variant is characteristic of Sicily (*PB* 97), and is extremely common in Salento and Apulia (*PB* 1075; see Rohlf’s, 60; Caracausi, I, 250. The modern Calabrian *Calò* appears to be a recent Sicilian import (*PB* 14). *Cali*, also present in Malta by 1687, and its apparent variant *Caliò*, are metronymic, deriving from *καλή*, the feminine form of the adjective (Caracausi, ie I, 246, 248).

71 Caracausi, *Dizionario onomastico* I, 356–7, 384. There is also the rarer variant *Celone*, formally closer to the Greek etymon.

72 Caracausi’s explanations (II, 1044) of the name as a plural of *Mizio* (< *Domitius*) or a form of the dialectal Greek *μισός* ‘little’, are both unconvincing. The name’s derivation from *Δημήτρης* is generally accepted in Greece, see for example the entry under M in the etymologically reliable website *Ανάλυση ελληνικών επώνυμων από Μ.Ν.Ξ.Ο.* at greekurnames.blogspot.com/2009/.../blog-post_14.ht. (retrieved 24.8.2015).

(*PB* 50) and Brindisi (*PB* 20) provinces. *Mizzi* does occur in Sicily, but as it clusters in Pachino (*PB* 13; 5 in Syracuse), a coastal town founded in 1760 by Ferdinand I and settled largely by colonists recruited from Malta, it is undoubtedly a recent Sicilian surname of Maltese origin. **Sandar** (1 in 1480) appears to be an arabicized form of Greek Ἀλέξανδρος. The rare Sicilian surnames *Sandre* (Palermo) and *Sandri* (Sciacca, Catania) may or may not be identical, depending on whether they are of direct Greek origin or were transmitted through Italian and Latin (*Alessandri*, plural of *Alessandro* < *Alexandrum*). **Michola** (1 in 1480) represents the Greek Μικόλας, a variant of Νικόλαος ‘Nicholas’, which produced the Sicilian *Nicolao*, *Nicolosi*, *Nicoloso* and Maltese *Niklaw*, *Niklusi* (fossilized in the toponym *Ħal Niklusi*, now part of *Siggiewi*). However, the Maltese variant with initial *m*- (doubtless due to crossing with *Michael*) and found also in certain Eastern European languages (cf. Slovene *Miklavž*, Hungarian *Miklós*, Polish *Mykota*, Ukrainian Микола)⁷³ may be a local formation, as it cannot be linked with any extant Sicilian surname.

Conclusion

Though by no means negligible as an archaic element within the Maltese onomastic corpus, this last group of non-Romance family names (introduced only after c. 1350, judging by their relative rarity in the following century) is thus numerically swamped by the Romance surnames in the same numerical bracket: 83 (= 29.6%) Siculo-Arabic names and 14 (= 5%) Siculo-Greek ones as against 179 Romance ones (= 63.9%) out of a total of 282 (with 4 or 1.4% being of obscure origin). This Maltese statistic bears eloquent witness to the progressive latinization of the Greater Sicilian population during the latter part of the period of Aragonese rule (1282–1409).

73 Similarly Ukrainian Микита (*Mykita*) for *Nykita* ‘Nicaretas’.