The Origin of the ‘Maltese’ Surnames

Godfrey Wettinger

Early in Angevin times, less than half a generation from the proscription of Islam from Malta, government officials were repeatedly enjoined to keep personal records in the form of names and surnames. It might be taken that these merely implied that the use of nicknames would not be tolerated, as would be the case had the directions been made in our times, when it is still a commonplace that, in several parts of the Maltese islands nicknames, are popularly perhaps more widely used and known than the surnames themselves. However it must be emphasized: the real background of the government requirement was the then still prevailing survival of Arabic naming customs. This differed radically from the one that had been growing up and spreading throughout Europe since the year 1000 AD and was then being spread to the recently Christianized lands of Andalusia, the Balearic Islands, Sicily and Malta. The present study is concerned specifically with what seems to have happened in the Maltese Islands.

As late as 1241 Islam was still numerically strong in the Maltese Islands. The royal commissioner Giliberto Abate reported that Malta then had a total of 681 Saracenic households compared to the mysteriously small number of Christian ones: 47. The figures for Gozo are 155 Saracenic households and 203 Christian.1 Ibn Khaldun puts the expulsion of Islam from the Maltese Islands to the year 1249. It is not clear what actually happened then, except that the Maltese language, derived from Arabic, certainly survived. Either the number of Christians was far larger than Giliberto had indicated, and they themselves already spoke Maltese, or a large proportion of the Muslims themselves accepted baptism and stayed behind. Henri Bresc has written that there are indications of further Muslim political activity on Malta during the last Suabian years.2 Anyhow there is no doubt that by the beginning of Angevin times no professsed Muslim Maltese remained either as free persons or even as serfs on the island.

On 22 May 1271 Bertrando de Real, the magister and castellan of Malta was instructed to keep a note of the names and surnames of those who transported the falcons to the royal court from Malta.3 He had similarly to note the names and

surnames of the serfs who had servile duties to perform towards the royal estates, together with those of the other members of their families of both sexes together with their ages.\textsuperscript{4} The French soldiers engaged two years later for garrisoning duties in the Castle-by-the-Sea had similarly to be listed by name and surname.\textsuperscript{5} The latter does not occasion any remark, but the serfs in particular must have been largely descended from local Muslims and almost certainly still followed Muslim and Arab traditions in their personal and family nomenclature. In 1277 the authorities in Naples ordered the release of the widow, son and two daughters of the late castellan Robbertus Caffuri, and of their goods which had been distrainted in view of an investigation into Caffuri’s alleged extortions, but directed that a number of sufficiently wealthy persons should stand surety on the family’s behalf, listed by name and surname, \textit{nomina et cognomina}. Fortunately, an official copy of the list of 38 names and surnames has survived, drawn up and authenticated by Notary Antonius de Cappillerio, Martimus Calleya, the baglio Benedictus de Chaggio, Andreas de Calmera and Symon de Bonanocte (witnesses), providing the first direct evidence of the surnames then current on Malta:\textsuperscript{6}

Dionisius de Barba, Guillelmus de Asmundo, Leo de Ayaco, Jacobus ...
Albertus de Farlo, Girardus Machaliphus, Marcus de Asmundo, Robbertus de Bidos, Nicolaus de Friderico, Nicolaus de Capua, Michael de Assante, Dominicus de Vetulo, Jacobus de Messana, Simon Schiuchha [sic, Schiricha?], Raynaldus Ramia, Dominicus Far, Benedictus Machaliphus, Nicolaus Cubu [sic, Cumbu?], Silvester Buruchus, Jacobus Bellus, Iugus Quairatus, Andreae Cafarnia, Bartholomeus de Roscario, Leo Caleya, Raymundus de Cachuro, Maynus Picarus, Paschalis de Barba, Petrus Caniclenus, Jacobus Alayno [sic, Alayno?], Quaterius de Avaraco, Guido Resta, Dardanus de Famiya, Andreas de Messana, Johannes de Melacio, Nicolaus Grecus, Benedictus Xeni, Robbertus Yella [sic, Vella?], Johannes de Mistretta.

It will be noticed that these persons belonged to the wealthy class and they obviously did not include any serfs or peasants. That explains why the list does not include any surnames of Arabic derivation. The surname \textit{Far} which has been hitherto regarded as deriving from an Arabic or Maltese nickname meaning exactly ‘a field rat’ is most probably derived instead from the place-name near Messina called Io Faro.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid.}, doc. xix, same date, p. 117. Unfortunately these particular records have not survived.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, doc. xxxii, dated 20 March 1273, 128.
\textsuperscript{7} E. De Felice, \textit{Dizionario dei cognomi italiani} (Milano, 1978), 122, s.v. Faro.

it led to the formation of the place-name Rahal Far, now Hal Far.\textsuperscript{8} It is interesting to find the surname Ramia, itself undoubtedly giving rise to the Siggiewi place-name Rahal Ramija, now Harramija. The surname Assant, now Sant, is recorded once in the place-name Casali Tamim Assant, Hal Tmim. Melacco refers to the Sicilian town of Milazzo and seems to have been modified eventually to form the Maltese or Gozitan surname of Mejlaq, morphologically an Arabic diminutive form.\textsuperscript{9} As such it has survived to the present time and has travelled round the world. Grech of course is still a very common Maltese surname, unlike Picardus, another ethnic surname. Micallet is also still a very common Maltese surname. In the late fourteenth century it is recorded to have been held by Maltese Jews.\textsuperscript{10} Buruclus itself was probably a Jewish surname in spite of the ‘Christian name’ Silvestrer.

From the whole list only Asmundo, Barba and Friderico are undoubtedly patronymics, that is formed from an ancestor’s first name. By far the larger number refer to localities of origin: Ayaco (Ajaccio?), Capua, Mistretta, Messina, Far(o), Milazzo, Alayno (?). For Calleya a Greek origin has been claimed by no other than Commodatore Abela. Seeing that its presence in this list antedates Malta’s connection with Spain by a few years, he could very well be right.

The list represents precisely the type of Christian settlers on Malta one expects in post-1127 times, those who reintroduced their religion into the island which was otherwise apparently still solidly Muslim until well into the thirteenth century. They had no direct connection with the recently converted peasants largely or completely reduced to the status of serfs. Most of the surnames in the list did not survive in the Maltese Islands down to the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{11} Even as late as 1419 the survivors are still largely to be found mostly concentrated at Mdina and Rabat and possibly the larger villages.\textsuperscript{12}

8. In my \textit{Place-names of the Maltese Islands} I gave what I then thought were unanswerable reasons for thinking the surname Far was of Arabic origin. I was not then aware of its presence in this particular list.

9. It is therefore not derived from the Maltese word \textit{mejlaq}, a term that would make excellent dictionary sense but no real sense; its current form recalls that of the surname \textit{Sejkel}, perhaps derived from the name of the Sicilian town of \textit{Secli}; again possibly an Arabic diminutive form, but \textit{Sejkel} could possibly have another independent Arabic derivation. Diminutives were in fact favoured forms for surnames derived from names of foreign towns or showing ethnic origins; thus Pullicino from Polizzi, Majurkino from Majoreca, Turentini from Taranto (?), Tartari [sic, Tartozzi] from Tartar (only surviving in the place-name Rahal Tartari).}

10. Machalufi was the name of a Gozitan Jew retained in captivity at Tunis on the turn of the fifteenth century; Archivio di Stato di Palermo, Real Cancelleria, vol. 40, ff. 16-17, doc. dated 14 May 1403.

11. Asmundo, Ayaco, Farlo, Bidos, Capua, Vetulo, Ramia, Buruchus, Bellus, Quairatus, Cafarnia, Rosicario, Cachuro, Picardus, Caniclenus, Avaraco, Resta, Famiya, Xeni, Yella and Mistretta. Barba and Friderico did not survive the fifteenth century, and Far died out also at about the same time.

12. This is of course not true of Calleya, Micallet and Grech or Mejlaq.
Such upper-class surnames have also been found on the island of Gozo for the year 1299.13 These include:

Ghelemus de Malta miles
Ghelemus, uxor Ghelemi de Malta
Lukina sua filia
Raynaldus de Barba judex Gaudissii
Manfridus de Arcudio judex Gaudissii
Johannes de Permuntio judex Hgaudissii
Leo de Puntetremulo notarius
Andreas comes insularum Malte et Gaudissii
Nicolaus de Lentini notary
Henricus de Montemurro witness
Chone de Lerro witness
Ghelemus de Tynart witness
Jacobus Susuvi witness
Rogerius de Daniele witness
Armanet Poulsë witness (signs in Greek characters)
Tristanus de Actardo witness

Again it would not appear that any of these persons had any blood relationship with any of the recently converted Maltese or Gozitan Muslims. Pontremoli is Latin for Pontremoli, an Italian locality close to Carrara and was to survive abundantly on Gozo at least right down to 1551, and Actardo was a Germanic personal name which has become one of the main surnames of the two islands right down to the present day and had certainly already been closely associated with casali Actard, one of the rahal place-names, even as early as 1419. Barba has been dealt with already. Poulsë is possibly connected to the surname Psaila for which a totally different derivation has been advanced by others. None of the other surnames has survived into much later times.

A notarial document of 1324 provides another short list of surnames:14

Caterina Greca
Basilius Limera
Lucas de Albano Judge of Malta
Rogerius de Alamanno notary
Fredericus de Burdino witness

Benedictus Camilla witness
Benedictus Cuskerius witness
Henricus Cuskerius witness
Nolunus de Hasmundo witness
Johannes de Salerno witness
Simon Sirha witness
Angelus Calimeta (= Calimera?)
Bartholomeus Biseti, a priest

Ignoring Hasmundo (=Asmundo) and Sirha (=Sciricha), already noticed in 1277, one finds the appearance of well-known ‘Maltese’ surnames like Cuskerius and Burdino, the latter of which however has not survived to the present day. Calimera means ‘Good-morning’ in Greek; cf. surnames Buongiorno and Bonanno; Limera = (Ca)limera, similar to Milleri = (Ca)milleri.

In the circumstances it would seem that the normal way the ex-Muslims could have been provided with surnames was to use their father’s name as a new family surname. Those of them who were first generation converts to Christianity, and that must have included most of them, would thus have acquired Arab personal names as surnames, some two scores of which have survived as such to the present time.15 A similar number of surnames seem to have died out during the course of the last eighty years of the fifteenth century, and an unknown number must have already disappeared between ca. 1250 and 1419, being purposely discarded perhaps for prudential reasons during times when delation to the Inquisition could have led to exile and the confiscation of their property.16 Such surnames represent only a small proportion of the Arab or Muslim names once current in Malta since those whose sons lived in times when they could keep their religion survived, if at all, only in the place-names which pepper the pages of later documentation. Thus though later documentation only provides Bugibba, Buhagiar, Buras, Busalib, Butigieg and possibly Busuttil among the kunja surnames of undoubted Arabic origin,17 place-names give us a total of some

15. All of these can or could be found in Arab countries: Abdilla, Agius, Axac, Bajjada, Buhagiar, Butigieg, Carama, Cassar, Furtuq, Galea [perhaps from ‘Ali’], Randun, Malia (=), Mann, Said, Saliba, Sammut, Sultana, Xeri, Xiberras, Xianeh, Zammit.
16. Aexula (=Rajun), Bakibac, Berqas, Bugibba, Buras, Busalib, Buturra, Cadide, Cadinu, Cadas, Cafor, Cakege, Cahun, Canzahuc, Carac, Curchune, Chakem, Cutti, Dejof, Durbah, Fartasi, Gzaal, Gibasal, Guaractu, Hafaride, Lifarca, Mahduf, Mahnuq, Mez, Mifsud, Mihalleh, Muhammad, Muftar, Mula, Muzangar, Sabbara (Zabbara), Sansuni (reintroduced from Sicily), Tabuni, Xara, Zanahac.
17. G. Wettinger, ‘The Distribution of Surnames in Malta in 1419 and the 1480s’, Journal of Maltese Studies, No. 5 (1968), examples on p.33. Buneza, Buturra and Bascell have been ignored as insufficiently studied. The abu names in the Maltese Islands are properly to be regarded as a variety of nicknames rather than kunja names properly so called.
twenty place-names of kunya form which must originally in all cases have had a personal reference: Bixrub, Bizbud, Bubagra, Budaq, Bufula, Bugimha, Bugineh, Bugharbiel, Bugharien or Bubahrien, Buleben, Bunixeb, Bunuhahala, Buqana, Burix, Busewdien, Busif, Buskieken, Busrawel, Butomna, Bužellag. Buskieken might be represented by the surname Biscone. The others fall into one type or other of Arabic personal nomenclature.

It is here presumed that all Christian parents whether belonging to Old Christian families or to New Christian ones would normally strictly avoid giving Muslim pre-names to their offspring, and that therefore all new surnames with such an origin would have been conferred on sons of Muslims. This would mean that the ‘Arabic’ or ‘Muslim’ surnames would largely antedate the year 1300 by a number of decades. In the Maltese Islands a certain permanence and stability of surnames was established as early as 1300 except for the progressive elimination of Arabic or Muslim connections.

An important point to make is that few if any Arabic female names ever seem to have led to the formation of surnames. Neither Ghajja and Mejmuna, names, incidentally, of two of the wives of the Prophet, nor Halima, Muhammad’s foster-mother or nurse, ever became surnames in the Maltese Islands. Moreover, Nwawar, blossom, flower, and its plural Nuwwar, as well as Zahra and Zahri both became surnames, only Zahri surviving to the present time. To these one may also add Zejne, fem. of Zejn, beautiful, pretty, grace, only recorded as a surname once in 1419 at Hal Gharghur. One may add that the words bin and bint were obviously carefully proscribed from all surnames, so that the ‘Maltese’ surnames do not have the equivalent of Stephenson, Johnson, O’Brian, Prichard, Fitzgerald, and soon. Possibly this was the result of a desire to distance themselves from the universal Arabic use of such words in personal nomenclature. Sephardic Jews in general, however, suffered from no such misgivings and Ben surnames can easily be found in Israel, for example among their descendants.

This brings us to another point, that several Maltese surnames of Arabic origin end in the letter –a, as if it were a feminine word when that is absent in its Arabic form. Thus one finds Rahal Farrug among the place-names corresponding in Arabic to


22. Grima moglie di Donadou, doc. 358, Grima moglie di Giovanni, ..., doc. 479, Grima vedova del quondam Jocaro (?), ..., doc. 7, 8, index entries on p. 296 in Ministero dell’Interno, Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, XXV, Abbazia di Montevergine, Registro delle Pergamene, a cura di G. Mongelli, OSB, vol. I (Roma 1956). See also: ... sua moglie Galegrima, abitante in Tarassu, doc. 616 dated 1177, in ibid., p. 173, ... sua moglie Gaytelgrima, doc. 833, dated 1190, in ibid., p. 223, Sikelgrima, figlia del giudice Aldenano e moglie di Uso, doc. 68 and 69 dated 1065, 1066, in ibid., and Adelgrima, doc. 20, dated August 1003, in ibid., index entry on p. 312. All these instances of Grima refer to personal names.

23. G. Wettinger, ‘The Distribution of Surnames, ...’, s.vv. The following surnames ending in –a have been omitted because they obviously originated from the name of a locality with that final letter: Alagona, Agusta, Asti, Bezzina, Bugela, Calava, Cardana, Catania, Daiana, Damata, Davula, Franca, Gala, Licata, Mazzara, Mollica, Muntana, Sagona, Sardigna.


25. Most of these can be found in the Militia List of 1419 and it is not possible to tell whether they were actually created in Malta or alternatively when they entered the island from abroad.
the figures given by Giliberto Abate after all more precise than what most historians have allowed for? Possibly it is a mere defect of our documentation. Several of them can be found in the present surnames of Malta as patronymics, usually preceded by the possessive word 'de', but these are all either later formations or intrusive surnames which did not form part of the islands' surnames during the late middle ages. On the other hand was there scarcity merely the result of a psychological reluctance to adopt Christian names as patronymic surnames in preference to other types of surnames, such as those derived from locational or nickname sources?

It is not clear when the surnames originating from nicknames were formed. Generally they go back to a post-Islamic date as surnames though as nicknames they might be much older, whether they were of Arabic or of Romance origin, and belong originally to members of any of the three religious communities in the islands, Muslim (only if of Arabic and pre-ca. 1250 origin), Jewish or Christian: Bakibac, Blencu, Chetcuti, Fulca, Falzon, Fauchellu, Fantin, Felfui, Felu, Fenech, Ferraru, Furmicu, Gambinu, Gazal, Gigante, Grasso, Hafaride, Mahann, Mifsud, Fartasi, Mintuf. They would also include surnames resulting from occupations: Balesterra, Camilleri, Carbone, Cassar, Caxaru, Feraru, Baldachinu, Balzau, Millahi. Others reveal personal status: Vassaldu or Vassallo, Spiteri, Chiantar, Chakem.

Ethnic surnames which started off as nicknames include Armini and Durmanin, Alban, Albanu and Albanisi, Calabru, Casalun from Gascon, Causiri (Cosyra, Pamelliera), Cuzin from Siracusa, Urund or Corduba (from Cordoba), Ferriolu, Gaudiui and Gaudaxanu, now Gauci (Gozitain), Grech, Harabi (A)Jaman, Lumbardu, Luksi and Lukisi (Lucches), Majurkino, Half or Melfi, Maltsi, Navarru, Pisani, Ponz, Pullickinu, Ragonisi, Santurini, Sardu, Savoye, Scavuni, Spanu, Turentini, Xiruntu (Florentine), Vincianu (but Bindikku survived as a surname down to 1417). Some are not recorded to have made it to the status of surnames: Mersi, Gini, Sindai, Cerkes, Tartaru. Probable ethnic names also are Curmi and Dingli, the first possibly referring to the Crimean, the latter to Dongola down south of the Red Sea. Both seem far-fetched. Some would regard Azzopardi as ethnic, as associating it with the word Sephardic referring to an Oriental Jew, but the separate existence of Accio and Paro as surnames in the twelfth century counsels caution in reaching premature conclusions. However, the credentials of Ellul or Helul as a Jewish name or

surnames seem unimpeachable seeing that Hellul is identical with the name of a month of the Jewish calendar. Muxi for Moses must also be of Jewish extraction. Other Jewish surnames might be Parnis, Refello, Cagege, Sansuni, Episcopu, the latter frequently resulting from the conversion of a rabbi. It has also been suggested that Muscat could also be of Jewish origin.

To the ethnic surnames one might add those that refer to Sicilian or other European towns, such as Agusta, Avula, Catania, Girgenti, Xortinu, Palermu, Madiona, Mazzara, Mullica (i.e. Modica), Naso, Olna, Platamuni, Pontremulu, Pulisi, Ravel, Rigio (i.e. Reggio), Sagana or Saba, Santurini, Suria (in Spain), Tirrana, Galiata. Do all these foreign origins for such surnames of non-Arabic origin?

It is clear that there was a consistent effort during the later Middle Ages to move away from the more obvious Arabic and Muslim names. Thus surnames like Muhammed, Xara, Canzuhuc (whatever the latter meant), Razul, Calahun, Duhurami, Gibasal, Hafaride, Harabi, Muzangar, Busalib, Zumahac dropped out almost completely by 1500. Others were disguised so to speak. Thus we have Calabach from Halap (Aleppo, cf. Mahleb and the benefice called Ta' Halap), Cussurella from Kożbor; Werrato from Werrad (cf. Bin Werrad), Caruana from Karwan, Furrugia from Furrug, and others have already been discussed. There are then those that were eventually translated into a Romance form. The clearest case is that of Defj which was changed early in the sixteenth century into Magro or Magri. Here one must also consider that Defj itself was not originally the Maltese or Arabic word meaning 'lean' but the Arabic word meaning 'guest' in the theophoric personal name Defjullah. Other possibilities of such calques can be pointed out, such as that of Salam, Salam, Selun, Salma into Pace, the nicknames Dneri and Dnajjar into Aquilina, Kabir into Qrendi which however did not survive either, the same fate that happened in the attempts to replace Fenech by Coniglo and Psaila by Cipolla.

26. For Balzau, see Jacomo Grasso de Balzamu Mediolanensi, 31 May 1205 in Giovanni de Guiberto 1200-1211, a cura di M.W. Hall-Cole et al., "Notai liguri del secolo xii," V", Genoa 1940, doc. 1360.
27. For Accio see Codice diplomatico della Repubblica di Genova, "Fonti per la Storia d'Italia", Roma 1942, III, doc. 44, p. 120; Azo Rovedus, Azo Borei, giugno 1197; and Azo de Pangiano, Azo, Salvaticus, Azo Rovedus, and Azo de Avalasca (ibid., doc. 50, pp. 113-116, 1198. Ogierus Aqapardus figures among witnesses to a notarial deed in Genoa on 4 August 1201; Giovanni de Guiberto (1200-1211), a cura di M.W. Hall-Cole et al., "Notai liguri del secolo XII, vol. V", Genoa, 1940, doc. 350 in vol. I, 173.

28. This arises from the consideration that Defjullah is a normal Arabic and Muslim theophoric name while defj, meaning 'lean', has not been found in the dictionaries of Arabic or Muslim personal names. That such theophoric names frequently drop the second and divine element is also extremely common.
30. See above, p. 4, for the relationship between Pousale and Psaila.
There is a group of surnames which seem to be of late Greek or Byzantine formation: Bonnici, Calura, Cacci, Calimeria, Cachia, Callus, Callea or Calleya, Gritti, Chalpas or Chappas, Cumbo, Percoppi, Cuscheri, Gamichi, Percopolli and probably Psaila. Stafracese seems to have been developed from Stauracius. The Greek connections may be vague in some cases, in others quite strong.

It is sometimes difficult to reach firm conclusions at the present stage of our knowledge of how particular surnames arose. Thus Tabone can be found throughout Italy at the present time and seems surely to be of Italian origin. Yet tabani, its earliest form in Malta, means a peasant oven or kiln low on the ground which is still to be found, for example on the Djerba Island in the pottery industry. Also Debono and Tabone were very likely interchangeable at one time. The surname Vella reached a frequency of some 3% in the militia lists and remains very common to the present day, especially in the north of Malta. It cannot be of Arabic origin. The common idea that it is derived from the Italian word veila, 'veil', seems particularly pointless. In Catalan vella means 'old' (fem.), raising the possibility that it replaced an original nickname xif, 'old' (mas), the final -a ending being the one frequently associated with surnames. The surname Borg, which disputes with Vella primacy of occurrence among Maltese surnames, could have resulted from the Sicilian town of Burgi, itself perhaps from the Greek pyrgos. This however would not explain its lack of occurrence in Sicily itself. It is very well known that it has a much wider occurrence in Europe, especially in


34. See Giovanni de Cachi, cittadino abitante di S. Maria, 15 May 1322, in P. Egidi, Codice diplomatico dei Saracensi di Lucera, Napoli 1917, 396, doc. 705.


because he had the habit of pulling at the ends of his beard while speaking. It is said that the Abbassid Khalif El-Mansur one day asked his minister Rebi' to promise this scholar a rich recompense if he stopped the habit. 'Prince of the Believers,' the vizir answered, 'He gets greater pleasure from pulling out his beard than if he obtained kingly power. How can I get him to agree to your offer?' The same nickname was held by two others."

It will be seen that surname study involves not only the preliminary documentation of the earliest occurrence of the surnames themselves in the Maltese Islands, but also much research into the dating and circumstances of their occurrence elsewhere. The field of study might range from medieval Baghdad to Renaissance Italy and Spain and involve linguistic research both of Indo-European languages as Latin, Greek, Spanish, Sicilian and Tuscan Italian as well as of Semitic tongues like Arabic and even (in a very few examples) of Hebrew itself. The dating is fundamental to such studies.