The Morisco and Hispano-Arabic culture and Malta. Some highlights on late medieval and early modern links

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Resumen: El siglo XVI fue testigo de una política de represión e intimidación que llevó a la total expulsión de los descendientes de los arabófones convertidos; de hecho, un intento importante para erradicar la identidad de este, aún sospechoso, grupo étnico fue una pragmática dictada por el rey Felipe II, según la cual les estaba prohibido hablar y escribir en su propia lengua. En conexión con este proceso, la lengua maltesa y su historia fueron objeto de análisis por parte de los estudiosos hispano-árabes. El presente trabajo abre un nuevo campo de investigación.

Abstract: In Spain the 16th century finally witnessed a policy of repression and deterrence which led to the complete expulsion of the christianized descendants from the Arabic occupation. One important attempt to erase the identity of this still suspicious ethnic group was a ‘prematica’ of King Philip II which prohibited to speak and write their own Arabic language. In connection with this development, also the Semitic Maltese language and its history was touched and observed by Hispano-Arabic scholars. This subject opens up a new field of investigation.

Palabras clave: Relaciones hispano-árabes con Malta. Lengua maltesa. Orden de S. Juan.

Key words: Maltese and Hispano-Arabic culture. Maltese Language. Order of St John.

In general it is believed that it was the impact of the Great Siege (1565) coupled with the ‘gloire’ of the regime of the Knights of St John and the so-called economic desclianismo policies of French Grand Masters La Cassiere and Loubenx de Verdalle in the 1570s and the 1580s¹ that put the Maltese islands on the

¹. Both grand masters promoted an economic policy which sought new trade relationships in addition to those with the Spanish-ruled Kingdom of Sicily. For a case study of the English side cf. V.
European map. If one views the hundreds of historical, geographical, political or theological works and the innumerable travelogues of the late 16th, 17th and 18th centuries which deal with Malta and the Order’s state, one grasps the meaning of this perspective. Central and North European travellers who visited Malta before the Great Siege and wrote in greater detail about its culture and social situation, were André Thevet (1549), Nicolas de Nicolay (1551) or Fuerer von Haimendorf (1564)², who may be regarded as exceptions.

As up to 1530 the Maltese islands were under the dominion of the crown of Aragon, and following 1530 when Malta was granted to the Knights of St. John as a fief through the Spanish king and emperor of the Holy German Empire Charles V, the Maltese islands and their specific cultural heritage had achieved a wider development from the Hispanic world. Many of the characters of Spanish 16th and early 17th century autobiographic literature have the Mediterranean as the setting or background of their exploits and adventures. Many of them have ample references to Malta and the knights. With the exception of the biography of the soldier of fortune Alonso de Contreras who later became a knight of the Order himself³, these writings are totally neglected by Maltese scholars. Ironically Contreras was only a mediocre author and much more gifted writers dealt with Malta. The contemporary Ordoñez de Cevallos, who even travelled to America, used Malta only briefly as the background of his bloody revenge story of an Andalusian lady⁴, while the Duque de Estrada, one of the most famous heroes of the time, gives more details about his various visits to the island and his prestigious receptions by the old bon vivant Grand Master Antoine de Paule⁵. A nother interesting author who started his vida in the course of his service as a soldier in Malta in 1612 was the Castillian Miguel de Castro⁶.

³ The quoted dates indicate the year when these travellers and authors visited Malta. For further details regarding these persons or their stay at Malta see the monograph by Th. Freller, The Life and adventures of Michael Heberer von Bretten. Malta, 1997.
⁶ Cf. Miguel de Castro. “Libro que comenzo en Malta (…), de su nacimiento y demás razones
This automatically leads to a comparison with a genre of literature then enjoying widespread popularity: the Spanish *picaro* novels which embrace elements of travel literature, chivalric novel, biography, as well as farce. The semi-fictional characters of these novels are motivated to see the foreign world by a search for adventure, fame, money, and, most of all, *honra* (reputation). The heroes of the books by Cervantes, Quevedo, Lope de Vega, Gongora, or else in the autobiographies of adventurers like Alonso de Contreras or Miguel de Castro, set out for the foreign world on a journey in a struggle for *honra*, personal success, and wealth. Rich in experience, they returned home years later, disillusioned and tempered. Many of them close their writings by indicating the utility of their reports for the education and the instruction of others. In this the Duque de Estrada's work does not differ much from the contemporary autobiographical notes of the members of the lower strata as the Madrileña Alonso de Contreras, a friend of Lope de Vega's, or the Castillian soldier Miguel de Castro. Their works make interesting reading especially for their contribution to Maltese literature studies. However they will not form the gist of this paper.

Primarily, this essay investigates the awareness which may have been shaped by the inherent ethnological and political circumstances of late medieval and 16th century Spain. Secondly, this exercise exposes how fruitful a deeper investigation of the Spanish archives -apart from obvious political aspects- would be to gain a wider illuminating insight into the cultural and especially linguistic patrimony of 15th and 16th century Malta.

These last two or three decades have witnessed an intense investigation into the subject of the Maltese language, and especially through the works of Godfrey de su familia, según la tenía y una memorias que llevó a España*". Biblioteca de Autores Españoles. vol. XC, pp. 487-627.

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Wettinger and Michael Fsadni, Arnold Cassola, Joseph M. Brincat, Joseph Aquilina, Thomas Freller and Albert Friggieri, the origins, roots and development of written Maltese and the further shaping of this Semitic language by way of an admixture of Italian, French, Spanish, and Greek influences gained more transparency. Up to 1968, the six-page word list presented by the German scholar and ‘Ordinarius historiographicus’ Hieronymus Megiser in his ‘Propugnaculum Europae’ (first edition Leipzig, 1606) was thought to be the first written specimen of the Maltese language. Then, it was Godfrey Wettinger and Michael Fsadni who came across the ‘cantilena’ of the Maltese Pietro Caxaro written around 1450.

The latter example leads us to the period when Malta was under the dominion of the Crown of Aragon (1284-1530). The status of the Maltese islands and their


15. The best survey of this period to date is presented by A. T. Luttrell. “Approaches to Medieval Malta”. A. T. Luttrell (Ed.). Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the knights. London, 1975, pp. 1-70. In fact the change of dynasty in 1412 when Fernando de Antequera, a prince of Castile, was
part in the sphere of the powerful Aragonese empire can be defined as an eastern frontier and naval base, as well as an intersection of commercial exchange between the western and eastern Mediterranean. The role of Malta engulfed between the Aragonese -later Castille-Aragonese empire- and the western Mediterranean 'common market', were never limited only to aspects related to politics, strategic and economical interests, but also embraced a special cultural relationship borne out by artistic implications. Although the social, economic, as well as political ties lay firmly with Sicily, the specific development and shaping of late medieval Spain could not have left the Maltese islands untouched. Up to the late 15th century and beyond, the Iberian peninsula was marked by a heterogeneous mixture of Christian, Arabic and Jewish cultures. When, on the 2nd of January 1492, the last Moorish ruler of Granada Boabdil surrendered the city to the 'reyes catolicos' Isabella and Fernando, the so-called 'Reconquista' had come to an end in Spain. The problems of integration and
identity of the remaining Moorish communities in Spain -especially in the country of Andalusia and the region of Valencia- remained unsolved, even more so during the following decades when the Spanish Empire was ruled by Carlos I -after his election to emperor of the Holy German Empire as Charles V- and his son Philip II, the situation of the Moriscos, as the newly christianized Muslims living in Spain became known, created conflicts and tension. This in turn, gave way to a period fraught with psychological undertones, fear and enmity. As several recent studies have made clear, a person recognised as ‘Morisco’ at the height of this obsession with ‘limpieza de sangre’ (= ‘purity of blood’) during the second half of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, meant the exclusion from all military and many of the religious orders, from the prime positions within the state bureaucracy and from all university colleges.

It is interesting to note however that some noble families of Moorish descent were able to integrate themselves into the Spanish nobility and consequently figure among the leading classes of Andalusia. Especially noteworthy is a member of this class of Andalusian nobility who left a deep impact on Maltese history too. It was Juan de Venegas, whose original ancestors -Venegas de Cordoba- hailed from Granada, and who between 1599 and 1622 played a key role in the exceptional revival of the Pauline cult in M alta centred around St. Paul’s Grotto at Rabat. Whilst in Malta, during the first decades of the 17th century, he became known as ‘Fra. Giovanni della Grotta di San Paolo’. The motives for his coming to Malta and his dedication to the cult of St Paul are not clear, although they may be rooted in the exceptionally strong devotion to the Apostle of the Gentiles in the

21. The term ‘Moorish’ would not only incorporate the descendants from the Arabo-Spanish stock but would also include North-African people. The term ‘Moriscos’ actually defines those christianized Muslims living in Spain.

22. Contemporary works which give an idea of the Christian point of view of the time, as well as the relevant mentality and spiritual background of Spain in the ‘Siglo de Oro’, are presented by Pedro Aznar Cardona. Expulsión justificada de los moriscos españoles y suma de las excelencias de (...) Filipe (...) Tercero. Saragossa, 1612, Fr. Marcos Guadalajara y Xavier. Predicción y destierro de los moriscos de Castilla hasta el valle de Ricote con las disensiones de los hermanos Xarifes y presa en Barberia de la fuerca y puerto de Alarache. Pamplona, 1614 and Blas Verdu. Engaños y desengaños del tiempo, con un discurso de la expulsion de los moriscos de España. Barcelona, 1612.

Morisco culture of Andalusia in the sixteenth century. In fact, it was his Moorish ancestry which prevented Venegas from being accepted as a full Knight within the Order of St. John when he first arrived at Malta. He later achieved his ambition and was received as a Knight of Obedience through papal dispensation by Paul V.

However, this successful assimilation into the Christian Spanish society as shown by the case of the Venegas de Cordoba family cannot be considered as typical of the Moriscos in general. In a further attempt to erase the identity of the still extant suspicious ethnic group, Philip II promulgated a ‘pragmática’ on 17th November 1566, which prohibited all Moors in his empire -even though more than two generations had been baptized- to speak and write their own Arabic language. The protests against this prohibition were strong and widespread and finally led to a Moorish insurrection.

From the Maltese point of view, especially in considering a number of petitions and ‘memoires’ against the king’s decision, one is of particular interest as it not only reflects how well aware the Spanish were of the situation then prevailing at Malta, but also gives an insight into the use of the Maltese language as found in the ‘memoria’ of the Morisco and knight Francisco Nuñez Muley. The scholar Nuñez Muley wrote a vigorous and elaborate defence in favour of the Arabic language, which can be tentatively dated to late 1566 or 1567. The situation of Malta partially figured as a decisive role in this ‘contra’ thesis to the ‘pragmática’. For Nuñez Muley and his Morisco compatriots the situation was uncompromisingly clear. Although Malta was given to the Order of St. John as


25. For this ‘pragmática’ and its consequences see the works listed supra.

26. This policy of repression and deterrence finally led to the complete expulsion of the Moriscos in 1609. Its consequences for the Spanish economy, culture and science were disastrous.

27. There are two manuscripts of this ‘memoria’ in existence, both are preserved in the ‘Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid’ under the cedes P. V. fol. Caj. 25; No. 41 respectively R. 29; ff. 321-341. The latter one seems to be Nuñez Muley’s own handwriting. It was published in Reue Hispanique, Sixieme Année, (Paris, 1899), pp. 205-239. For Nuñez Muley and his role in the Moorish insurrection see also K. Garrand, “The original memorial of Don Francisco Nuñez Muley”. Atlante, Vol. 2, 2, (October 1954), pp. 199-226.
a fief in March 1530, the Maltese islands were still politically part of the Aragonese Crown. But then, how could the following politico-linguistic anachronism be tolerated? Nuñez Muley declared that no one forbade the Maltese to speak ‘their’ Arabic language. The Granadine scholar, in fact, stressed the point declaring that a kind of Arabic was the spoken tongue native to all Maltese, even by their nobility: ‘...esto es muy notorio, dize mas cerca ques la ysla de malta donde ay los catolicos cristianos hijos de algo ansi mesmo hablan aravigo...’

Even more interesting is the declaration of this ‘cavallero morisco’, of how well-known (‘muy notorio’) in Spain or at least in Andalusia was the fact that the Maltese also wrote ‘Arabic’ (‘escriven aravigo’) and use it for Mass and liturgical rites (‘...hablan aravigo y escriven aravigo la que toca a la santa fe catolica y la demas de cristianos.’)

The message and intention of Nuñez Muley’s writing are clear: he strictly strove to separate the questions of language from religion. In so far as there might be an element of exaggeration to lay more weight to the authors’ claim to protect Arabic writing, or if there was in fact a recognition of written Maltese in Andalusia in the middle of the 16th century, the question remains wide open for a thorough investigation. It would be especially interesting to find out if Nuñez Muley has actually examined those examples of written ‘Maltese’ Arabic forms.

Although speaking an ‘Arabic’ tongue, just a few months prior to the ‘memoria’ of the Morisco knight, the Maltese had proved to be faithful Christians in the course of the Great Siege endured against the Turks. But Nuñez Muley...
also points out the ‘technical’ side and consequences of the edict by Philip II. As the local people in Malta (‘esta ysla’) and those in Andalusia and the other Spanish dominions, many of the Moriscos would not know how to speak and write another language if not their ‘own’ Arabic strain: ‘…y creo que dizen las misas en muchas partes susodichas como en esta ysla en aravigo en no saben hablar ni escribir castellano los unos ni los otros’ 34. It was the contemporary scholar and traveller from Granada Luis del Marmol Carvajal who in his description of the Morisco insurrection presents a short conclusion of the ‘memoria’ of his Granadine fellow citizen Francisco Núñez Muley. The passage relevant to the linguistic aspects here dealt with reads as follows: ‘Pues vamos a la lengua Arabiga, que es el mayor inconveniente de todos, como se a de quitar a las gentes su lengua natural con que nacion y se criaron? Los Egipcios, Surianos, Malteses y otras gentes Christianas, en Arabigo hablan, leen, y esciven, y son Christianos como nosotros, y aun no se hallara que en este reyno se aya hecho escritura, contrato, ni testamento en le tra Arabiga desde que se convirtio’ 35.

Unfortunately, lack of sources does not allow us to have a fuller knowledge of Francisco Núñez Muley’s biography or his exact social and educational ‘milieu’. Likewise, we do not have a detailed insight of the sources which Núñez Muley consulted when he referred to the linguistic and cultural situation related to Malta in those times. He was certainly familiar with one or two of the numerous pamphlets describing the Great Siege of Malta (1565) published in his own time. But none of these accounts deal with the use of the Maltese language.

1565. Venice, 1566.

Today, less known Spanish descriptions of what happened in 1565 in Malta are Pedro de Salazar’s, Hispania Victrix, Historia en la qual se cuenta muchas guerras succedidas entre Christianos y infieles asi en mar como en tierra desde el ano de mil y quinientos y quarenta y seys hasta el de sestenta y cinco. Madrid, 1570, cf. especially pp 156 seq. or Diego de Santisteban Osorio. Primera y segunda parte de las guerras de Malta y toma de Rodas. Madrid, 1599. For the raid on Gozo and the attack carried out on Malta in 1551 cf. Pedro de Salazar, Hystoria de la Guerra y presa de Africa. Con la destrycion de la villa de Monazter, y ysla del Gozo, y perdida de Tripol di Berberia, con otras muy nuevas cosas. Naples, 1552. It is most likely that the learned Francisco Núñez Muley knew about the publications of Balbi, Alessandrini or Gentile. For another contemporary scholar and traveller from Granada who wrote about Malta see Luis del Marmol Carvajal. Descripcion General de Africa. Madrid, 1953, (fac. edn.), for Malta see vol. I, f. 276 et seq. Marmol Carvajal’s historiographical work was published for the first time in 1573 in Granada.


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To understand better this leading figure in Morisco politics we have to take a look at the broader political and social context of the times. Growing fear of Turkish penetration in the western Mediterranean in the 1560s and the ever present danger posed by the Turks who aspired after expansion, or the possibility of a Morisco rebellion which would have turned Andalusia and the south east-coast of Spain into a bridgehead leading to a Mohammedan invasion of the entire Iberian peninsula, led the Spanish crown to an ostracizing policy against the Moriscos' which left no space for any compromise. In fact many Moriscos' of the old kingdom of Granada still had relatives living in Tetuán, who had emigrated after the Christian conquest of Granada in 1492.

That Malta soon became involved in the events of Andalusia and Spain in general, became obvious when a certain Morisco was tortured by the Inquisition in Summer 1565 (the Great Siege of Malta was still in progress) and had revealed that the Moriscos' were ready to seize the main ports along the Granadine coastline should the Turks succeed in capturing Malta. However, not all Morisco spies sent to Malta seem to have passed incognito. In fact Grand Master de Valette seemed to have been so well informed about the likeliness of a great Morisco upheaval in Spain, that he warned Philip II of Spain through a letter about this oncoming danger. The 16th century historian of the Order of St John, Giacomo Bosio writes 'che l'G. Maestro con Corriera a posta mandati haveva a S. Maesta; facendo le sapere, che per mezo di fedelissime Spie, ch' egli teneva in Constantinopoli, haveva penetrato, & era stato certificato, che i Moreschi del Regno di Granata, erano risoluti di sollevarsi, e di ribellarsi contra di fei; e che per tal effetto havevano mandato secretamente a chiedere aiuto a Selim, Gran-Turco; pregandolo, che mandar dovesse L'Armata sua in Ponente; offrendosi co'l braccio, e co'l favor di quella, di farlo in breve Padrone di quel Regno, e d' altre Province della Spagna'. To anticipate the possibility of a Morisco

36. It is interesting to note that it was the prominent Morisco Don Alonso de Granada Venegas, a relative of the above mentioned Juan de Venegas ('Fra Giovanni de la Grotta di S. Paolo'), who sent a report to the Spanish King Philip II, protesting against the intrigues between Granada and Tetuán. Cf. Archivo de Simancas; Guerra Antigua 1-202.
rebellion or the threat of a Turkish invasion the Spanish rulers laid out plans for the formation of a municipal militia throughout Andalusia; moreover, in Granada all staunch old Christian households were ordered to furnish themselves with arms. Spain's Archivo de Simancas hosts documents dating from that time which show that through a direct Turkish order, Morisco spies were sent to Malta to collect as much information as possible about the Spanish naval strength in the Mediterranean. It is quite certain that Francisco Núñez Muley was well aware of the existence of these Morisco spies who had connections with Malta, and may consequently have had first hand information related to linguistic and cultural aspects related to Malta.

Another possible link which still waits for a proper investigation is the role of the Maltese and the Morisco's as spearheads for catholic missionary work in North Africa. It is known that Ignatio of Loyola in the 1550s turned his eyes to both Maltese and Morisco's seeing them as an invaluable potential whence Arabic-speaking solid Christians could be recruited for missionary activity among Moslems in North Africa and the Oriental countries. This was even more boosted when the sheikh of Tagiora in Barbary requested Jesuit missionaries to preach Christianity there in Arabic. Already in 1553 the Maltese bishop Cubelles had tried to establish contact to the Jesuit Order. He also tried to promote the advantages of the Maltese language: 'Dominicus Cubelles Episcopus Melitensis Romae instanter agebat cum P. Ignatio ut aliquos de Societate daret ut collegium in illa insula, quae arabica utitur lingua, inchoare posset'42. In 1554 Ignatius intended to install a Jesuit college in Malta43. As this did not work out, a special college ("colegio arabe") was founded in Monreale in Sicily. There is enough early evidence of recruitment from Malta44.

As in the case of Francisco Núñez Muley, knowledge about the life, fate and
activities of an earlier Hispano-Arabic author may be of further interest in shedding some light in the development of the Maltese language which up to now is far from complete and satisfying. Fray Anselm Turmeda, born (ca. 1355) in the Aragonese island of Mallorca 45, was a Franciscan brother (‘de la Orden de los Frailes Menores’ 46) who engaged himself in a wide field of theological, natural, medical and literary studies 47. It was here that Turmeda first got interested in oriental disciplines and the Koran. In the late 1380s he finally travelled to Tunis, then capital of the mighty empire of the Hafsids. His voyage first led him to Sicily, from whence he might have travelled on to the Maltese islands 48. That Turmeda was not the first man of letters from Aragon who might have travelled to the Maltese islands is reflected by the fate of the Aragonese-Jewish cabalist scholar Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia. Between 1285 and 1288 this scholar is reported to have lived in exile on the little island of Comino near Malta. It was here that he wrote his ‘Sefer ha-Ot’ (‘The book of the Sign’ 49). Presumably, Turmeda found shelter within a Franciscan convent in Tunis 50, some time later practising as a physician to sultan Abu al-Abbas Ahmed. Around 1390 Turmeda must have abjured his Christian faith for the Muslim religion, consequently adopting his new name ‘Abdallâh ben Abdallâh al-Taryumân al-Mayûrqi al Muhtadi’ 51.

Lack of space prevents us from expanding further upon the extensive activities

47. Ambitions and abilities which also led him to study at the University of Bologna. Cf. in detail M. de Epalza, 1965, pp. 117 et seq.
48. About this voyage see in more detail M. de Epalza, 1965, pp. 95-99.
51. Which literally means ‘Abdallah the translator, the Mallorcan, the good guide’. For further details regarding the origin of this name see M. de Epalza, 1965, pp. 136.
and writings by ‘Frare Anselm Turmeda, llamado también Abdallâh’\textsuperscript{52}. What is certain is that henceforth he carried out his studies in Tunisie\textsuperscript{51}. His profound studies in literature, natural science, astrology and poetry soon became known throughout the entire Western Mediterranean, and in 1402 the Aragonese viceroy of Mallorca, Roger de Moncada, had promised to issue a safe conduct for Turmeda should he ever return to Mallorca and reconvert to the Christian faith\textsuperscript{54}. In 1412 the same guarantee for a safe passage in favour of Turmeda, should he reconcile himself to Christianity, was endorsed in a bull by Pope Benedict XIII\textsuperscript{55}. In both instances Turmeda refused. Up to that time, Turmeda had carried out his writings in Catalan. Around 1420 he finally completed his major ‘oeuvre’ -the ‘Tuhfat al-adil fi al-radd ala ahl al-salih’- entirely in Arabic. This, presumably, was his last work before his death a few years later\textsuperscript{56}. According to some passages in a recently published study by Mikel de Epalza\textsuperscript{57}, this anti-Christian’s writing might contain the first hitherto known references to written Maltese\textsuperscript{58}. The Maltese Language, so far as its Semitic

\textsuperscript{52} Turmeda was referred to in this manner in a letter by the Aragonese king Alfonso el Magnanimo. Cf. A. Calvet 1914 pp. 52 et seq.

\textsuperscript{53} Turmeda was referred to in this manner in a letter by the Aragonese king Alfonso el Magnanimo. Cf. A. Calvet 1914 pp. 52 et seq.

\textsuperscript{54} Published by E. Sans. “Fra. Anselm Turmeda en 1402”. Estudis Universitaris Catalans, Vol. III (Barcelona, 1936), pp. 405-408.

\textsuperscript{55} This bull was published by J. M. Pou y Martí. “Sobre fray Anselmo Turmeda”. Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona, 7 (1914), pp. 465-472.

\textsuperscript{56} The exact date is not known. Turmeda’s modern biographers point to a period between 1425 and 1430 as the time of his death. Cf. the works mentioned, supra. Cf. also J. M. Miret y Sans. “Una visita al tomba del escriptor catalan Fra Anselm en la ciudad de Tunis”. Bulletin de Centro Excursionista de Catalunya, (Barcelona, 1910). For a 19th century British traveller touching upon this subject cf. N. Davis. Tunis or selections from a journal during a residence in that Regency. Malta, 1841, pp. 6 et seq.


\textsuperscript{58} De Epalza touches upon this subject briefly. As he was not familiar with the history and the shaping of the Maltese language he did not recognise the importance of his findings. This unfamiliarity is shown when he claims that there is no proof of written Maltese before the 17th century ‘...pero el maltès, lengua viva, no ha tenido literatura escrita hasta el siglo XVII...’. M. de Epalza, 1994, p 164. In fact in ca. 1450 the Maltese nobleman Pietro Caxaro wrote a ‘Cantilena’ in the Maltese language. In 1588 the Swabian ‘Ordinarix Historiographicus’ Hieronymus Megiser had visited Malta and had collected Maltese words and phrases. He finally published parts of this ‘collection’ in 1603 in his Thesaurus Polyglottus vel, Dictionarium Multilingue. Frankfurt a. M., 1603 and in his well known Propugnaculum Europae. Leipzig, 1606, 1609 and 1610, also published in Cracow, 1612.
element is concerned, is made up of two strata. The lower stratum was formed during the Arabic domination of Malta; the upper one, which came from North Africa, was formed during the Norman period in the 12th century and during later years owing to the closer commercial intercourse between Malta and the North African coast⁶⁰. Documents referring to Malta in the 13th and 14th century confirm that the social and cultural set-up in Malta was nearly identical to that obtaining in Sicily at the time: the upper class in Malta gave themselves troubadouric and Christian names like Tristano, Rinaldo, Ruggero or Andrea and Paolo⁶⁰. The spoken language, originally Semitic, therefore must have been influenced by the Romance languages, particularly Sicilian and Italian, and to a lesser extent Catalan. This Romance influence was not limited to the vocabulary alone, but involved also phonological, syntactical and morphological aspects.

When referring to Christian rites and liturgy Turmeda’s text uses words and phrases which seem clearly separated from the Arabic then spoken and written in the Maghreb⁶¹. That Turmeda could hardly derive those words out of his own Tunisian environment is due to the non-existence of autochthonous Christian communities in the Maghreb, absent for a long time⁶². One of the most striking examples is the word ‘kansiya’ (church) which is frequently used in the ‘Tuhfa’⁶³. This word cannot be normally found in Arabic or in any derivative dialect of Arabic then spoken in Tunisia⁶⁴. It appears to be an old form of the modern Maltese word ‘knisja’. Again, an old Maltese expression seems to be the phrase
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‘safāfi al-kansīya’\textsuperscript{65} (benches in the church). Similarly, when referring to the consecration ‘hādā yismî’\textsuperscript{66} (this is my body) it appears to be different from the ‘normal’ North African Arabic and should thus be derived from a Christian arabophonic tongue. These words seemed to have not existed in early 15th century Tunisia but only in the nearby Maltese islands. There can be hardly any doubt that Islam was the religion of the absolute majority of the Maltese inhabitants from the 10th century down to the Norman conquest (1091/1127). This is testified by references dating to the early Norman rule. The numerous 12th and 13th century Muslim tombs found in Malta and Gozo also indicate that the revival and growth of the Christian population was a very gradual process. Furthermore, in 1175, the Bishop Burchard of Strassburg, who touched Malta on his way to Egypt, was then currently writing about an island named ‘Maltha, distans a Sicilia per viginti miliaria (...) Saracenis inhabitata, et (...) sub dominio regis Sicilie’\textsuperscript{67}, which proved that the inhabitants had definitely kept their ‘Saracenic’ culture and Arabic character. When in 1224 and 1249 Emperor Frederick II. of Hohenstaufen expelled the Muslims from Malta and Sicily this was not an act of ethnic cleansing but solely a religious and political affair. To escape expulsion, in all probability, a substantial amount of the local population had accepted formal baptism. From here onwards we may then consider an adoption and assimilation of Christian liturgical words and phrases\textsuperscript{69}.

\textsuperscript{65} Cf. “Tuhfa”, 1994, p. 355. ‘Cuando se han reunido los cristianos para las oraciones y han ocupado las hileras de la iglesia el sacerdote echa un poco de vino de la botella en la copa de plata y trae el pan ácimo en un lienzo limpio. Después se pone delante de las hileras, dirigiéndose hacia Oriente...’ Spanish translation of the Arabic by Mikel de Epalza. Epalza also prints the Arabic original version of the “Tuhfa”.


\textsuperscript{67} Burchardus of Strassburg. “Relatio de itinere in Terram Sanctam”. Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores, XXI, (Hannover, 1869), p 236.

\textsuperscript{68} For the linguistic aspects see also J. Cremona. “The survival of Arabic in Malta”. In M. M. Parry, W. V. Davies, R. A. M. Temple (Eds.). Papers in honour of Professor Glanville Price. Cardiff, 1994, pp. 281-294.

In general, the language spoken in Malta contemporary to Anselm de Turmeda, with the exception of those ‘Christian’ phrases, could not bee too distant from the Arabic then spoken in Tunisia. Owing to the importance of these passages dealing with Christian liturgy and rites Turmeda must then have consulted ‘un cristiano arabofono’, perhaps a Maltese. This source also opens up a new field of investigation for other words contained in the ‘Tuhfa’, not current in Arabic, as the formula for baptism ‘ana nugattisuka’ or the word ‘sabāg’ (soutane).

There is obviously room for further speculations and interpretations of Turmeda’s ‘Tuhfa’ and its ‘Maltese’ references. This work definitely deserves further study from linguists who may interpret more precise connotations and conclusions. What is also interesting is that a deeper study of the Arabic caliphats in Spain, the Mozarabic culture and the later interactions of the Spanish Moriscos with their Mediterranean contacts would most probably unearth further precious information about late medieval and early modern Maltese culture and linguistic origins.

Conclusión

In the 15th and 16th century the Mediterranean witnessed the transformation of their medieval patterns against the background of the permanent clash between Christian and Muslim powers. Spain and the island of Malta directly and deeply became involved in these events. Situated right between the European and the Semitic cultural areas historical developments since the high middle ages have more or less integrated Malta within European Mediterranean culture although linguistically it belongs to the Arab world. Both Spains and Malta’s frontier position has resulted in a blend of cultural and political phenomena, with a
southern Roman Catholic culture dominating since late medieval times. In Malta this culture was implemented by the Aragonese (1283-1530), with strong influences from nearby Sicily, and by the Order of St John (1530-1798). In this period the ‘Reconquista’ of the Iberian peninsula came to an end and all Spain was conquered and christianized. The 16th century finally witnessed a policy of repression and deterrence which led to the complete expulsion of the christianized descendants from the Arabic occupation. One important attempt to erase the identity of this still suspicious ethnic group was a ‘prematica’ of King Philip II. which prohibited to speak and write their own Arabic language. In connection with this development, also the Maltese language and its history was touched and observed by Hispano-Arabic scholars. As the example of Fray Anselm Turmeda seems to show the interest in Maltese had started already a longer time ago. Up to now about the development of early Maltese as well as about these Hispano-Arabic relations with Malta next to nothing is known. This subject opens up a new field of investigation and furthermore might present precious information about late medieval and early modern Maltese culture and linguistic origins.