

MALTESE SURNAMES: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

A former British colony, Malta obtained its independence in 1964 and became a Republic in 1974. It is now a democratic sovereign state within the European Union and the British Commonwealth. Its national language is Maltese, while English is a second official language. According to the Census 2011, the population stands at 416,055¹. Malta has, by far, the highest density of population among all European Union nations. Malta's contemporary repertoire of surnames, obviously, can only be explained in the light of past conquests and spheres of influence. Despite its small size, the island's colourful and checkered history has always guaranteed a steady flow of foreign family names. Its cognominal pool is truly staggering, perhaps also vindicated by its being markedly overpopulated. A total of 19,104 surnames were in fact recorded in the 2011 census.

The Maltese language is of Arabic extraction with a Romance superstructure, characterized by substantial borrowings from Sicilian and Tuscan Italian. In the second half of the 20th century, subject to the all-conquering influence of English, the local tongue has been embracing new words of mainly English origin². To conform with the evolutionary pattern of the native tongue itself, Maltese surnames may easily be divided into three broad divisions, which are:

- (a) surnames belonging to the Semitic stock;
- (b) surnames belonging to the Romance stock which in turn, are subdivided into two categories, namely:
 - (i) those which originated in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, and
 - (ii) those which emerged since the dawn of modern times; and
- (c) the spate of British and other European family names which accumulated through relatively recent ethnic intermarriages.

¹ The population of Malta in the 2005 census stood at 404,962. Much of the increase was attributed to the arrival of irregular, mostly African, immigrants. Cfr. *Census* (2011: XVII).

² Brincat (2011).

The number of local Semitic surnames is only around fifty, but ironically each one of them is borne by a significant aggregate of families, whereas many of the more modern Romance and European surnames, though far more numerous, are borne each by a smaller number of families, in some cases by just a handful³.

Demographic and linguistic changes in various parts of the world, particularly those which have been colonized, as in Malta, have led to the demise of many names and the birth of others. At all times and in all places the onomasticon has been in a state of flux.

Of the stock of names in use today the oldest ones were generally created during the Middle Ages. By 1300, a certain permanence and stability of local surnames was already established, even though the orthographic standardization of contemporary family names was only realized in the 16th and 17th centuries under the acute pressure of Church clerics and civil notaries⁴. In this regard the great significance of the *Status Animarum* (diocesan census) of Malta carried out in 1687 cannot be underestimated⁵.

During the Middle Ages, the professional ranks, so deeply immersed in continental culture, often Latinized, or better Sicilianized, the Semitic surnames they entered in wills, contracts, parish registers, and other official records. For want of an indigenous orthographic system, they had no other alternative but to compose these names either phonetically or morphologically, according to their idiosyncratic whims. This explains why Maltese surnames (even those of Semitic origin) do not comply with modern orthographic rules⁶. Surnames such as Ebejer, Agius and Cassar, for centuries long, have been standardized and legally entrenched at the expense of *Għebejjer*, *Għaguż* and *Kassar*, even though the latter forms would be the correct renderings according to current spelling rules⁷.

A stratigraphy of Maltese surnames

The cognominal pool of a population informs on the cultural characteristics of that group, on its internal structure, on its degree of isolation or aper-

³ Aquilina (1976: 191). Also Brincat (2008).

⁴ Mercieca (2002: 278).

⁵ Fiorini (1986).

⁶ In this article a distinction is made between surnames that are actually in use (roman type) and those which are now extinct (in italics). The latter include archaic forms of present surnames.

⁷ Admittedly, bureaucratic rigidity has not prevented the survival of doublets such as Sciberas/Xiberras and Scerri/Xerri. In such cases, both forms are perfectly legitimate. The spelling conventions of medieval scribes were either impressionistic or followed Latinate usage. The modern Maltese alphabet and orthographic system was, after all, only codified in 1921 by the *Għaqda tal-Kitieba tal-Malti* ('The Association of Maltese Writers'), and officially recognized by the state in 1934.

ture, on the relations with other populations, on migratory exchanges, and on the reconstruction of its history and its evolution. Maltese onomastics, family names included, is polystratal and polyglot, because surnames have reached the island over many centuries in complicated historical and linguistic conditions, and because Malta has always been a place for coexistence of various ethnic groups and their respective languages. Linguists distinguish the following three major anthroponymic strata on the modern map of Maltese surnames:

- (a) Semitic (Arabic and Hebrew),
- (b) Romance (Italian, Sicilian, Spanish and French), and
- (c) English (as well as Scottish, Irish and Welsh).

Some of the oldest Maltese surnames are Arabic. The local vernacular itself developed from a medieval variety of dialectal Maghrebin Arabic during the Saracen occupation (870-1091). Many Arabic names were already in evidence in Sicily during Norman times, as recorded in Salvatore Cusa's *I diplommi greci ed arabi di Sicilia* (Palermo, I-II, 1868-82). Most of them are the names of Muslim serfs: Buhagiar (1145), *Busalib* (1178, today Saliba), Borg (1178), *Tabuni* (1178, Tabone), Agius (1145), Zammit (1183), Sammut (1145), Galea (1178), Caruana (1178), Xerri (1095), Curmi (1095), *Ghaxxaq* (1095, today Asciak/Axiak/Axiaq), *Ghebejjer* (1145, today Ebejer), Mintoff (1178), and Said (1178)⁸.

After the Norman invasion, the indigenous Muslim population, although subjected to Christian rule, still maintained its cultural and linguistic heritage. The expulsion of the Muslims in the 13th century, and that of the Jews in the 15th century, however, brought about the final rupture of the powerful cultural ties which had bound Malta to the North African Arabo-Berber world. Since then, barring latter-day English influence, the dominant cultural driving force in Malta has come from Italy, particularly Sicily, and other European, mainly Mediterranean, countries.

The Norman Conquest surely introduced a trickle of family names as they are envisaged today. The Normans (House of Hauteville, 1091-1194) and, subsequently, the Swabians (House of Hohenstaufen, 1194-1266) introduced a number of continental names, as these new lords, together with their relatives and entourages, created their own local communities and started mingling with the indigenous arabophone community. Romance surnames were progressively added by the Angevins (House of Anjou, 1266-83), the Aragonese (1283-1410), and the Castilians (1410-1530)⁹.

⁸ Wettinger (1983: 61). The inclusion of Caruana, Galea, and Curmi is problematic as they can be explained as non-Semitic surnames via different criteria.

⁹ Some Spanish and Catalan surnames (e.g. Gusman, Cardona, Inguanez, etc.) surely drifted into the island before the coming of the Knights Hospitallers. Some of Malta's oldest surnames are listed further down the present paper.

Early in Angevin times, government officials were repeatedly instructed to keep personal records in the form of names and surnames. By way of example, in 1271 the *magister* and castellan of Malta was directed to document the names and surnames of those responsible for the transportation of falcons to the royal court from the island, as well as of the serfs performing duties towards the royal estates. However, the oldest surviving record shedding light on local medieval nomenclature is a 1277 official and authenticated copy of the list of 38 names and surnames of persons pertaining to the wealthy elite (e.g. Leo Caleya and Nicolaus Grecus)¹⁰.

Other short inventories of names and surnames survive in a 1299 Gozitan manuscript, which includes the surname Attard, and a 1324 notarial document, which includes the surnames Cuschieri and Sciriha¹¹. These sources, together with other random 14th century manuscript literature, admittedly provide some useful information on toponyms, nicknames, and family names, but the data is necessarily cumbersome and fragmentary.

By far, the first sizeable and systematic lists of Maltese surnames date back to the Late Middle Ages; the most essential being undoubtedly the Militia Roll of c. 1419/20 and the *Angara* Roster of the 1480s. The former contains 1,870 names, of which 57 belonged to the Jewish community of Malta, while the latter contains 1,466 Christian names and 52 Jewish ones. Some surnames like *Cagege*, *Capo*, *Ponzo*, *Rifacano*, *Sardo*, and *Vaccaro*, have since become extinct¹².

However, it is immediately obvious that, by then, the majority of typical Maltese surnames were already well established – not only such obviously Semitic ones like Abdilla, Agius, Ascjak, Bajada, Bugeja, Buhagiar, Borg, Busuttil, Buttigieg, Cassar, Chetcuti, Ebejer, Farrugia, Fenech, Micallef, Mifsud, Saliba, Zerafa, and Zammit, but many others which are clearly of European extraction (mainly Italian, Spanish, and Greek) like Aquilina, Azzopardi, Balzacchino, Bonnici, Brincat, Cachia, Cardona, Cilia, Dalli, Darmanin, Debono, Falzon, Formosa, Gatt, Grima, Mallia, Pace, Portelli, and Vella. Strangely enough, other common local surnames such as Abela, Apap, Cini, Mamo, Mercieca, Sultana, Tanti, and Theuma do not occur at all in either list¹³. It is

¹⁰ Wettinger (1999: 333-335). Other intriguing entries in this list include: Michael de Assante (Sant?), Jacobus and Andreas de Messena (Messina?), Nicolaus Cubu (Cumbo?), Robertus Yella (Vella?), Benedictus and Girardus Machalephus (Micallef?).

¹¹ Wettinger (1999: 336-337). Dauzat describes *Cosquer* as a topographic name (e.g. the name of hamlets in Finistère and Morbihan) and *Cousquer* as a nickname for a 'sleeper'. Cfr. Dauzat (1951: 149, 158). Both family names are Breton. *Xirica* (Sciriha) is already attested among the Aragonese soldiers who garrisoned Malta under Ruggiero di Lauria in 1283.

¹² Wettinger (1968: 25). Analyzing these lists, Brincat (2008: 379) counts 389 different surnames of which only 135 survive, and of the 254 extinct surnames 101 were of Arabic origin and 119 of Romance origin. One must also remark that most of the lost surnames appearing in these lists (e.g. *Ponzo*, *Sardo*, *Vaccaro*, *Capo*, etc.) are still to be found in modern-day Sicily. Cfr. Caracausi (1993).

¹³ Wettinger (1968: 26).

therefore assumed that these family names were imported at a later stage, probably during the period of the Knights.

Another intriguing observation is that men bearing a non-Semitic surname, by this time, already amply outnumber the ones with a Semitic name. This does not necessarily imply that these men were of European stock. Godfrey Wettinger argues that there was a sustained effort during the Late Middle Ages to move away from the more obvious Arabic and Muslim names. Some surnames, such as *Harabi*, *Razul*, *Xara*, *Hakem*, *Maxta*, and *Buras* vanished almost completely by the time the Knights appropriated the Maltese Islands. Others, so to speak, survived in disguised forms. For instance, family names like *Farrugia* (< *Farruġ*) and *Saliba* (< *Salib*) could have acquired the final *-a* to comply with Romance morphological patterns. *Pullicino* may be an approximate translation of *Chetcuti* ‘chicken’; similarly, *Magro* may be an Italian calque of *Deyf* (albeit by mistake) and *Pellegrino/i* may be a rough equivalent of Arabic name *Ḥaġi* (performer of the *ḥaġ*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca)¹⁴. However, Wettinger’s hypothesis that there was a systematic drive to convert Muslim names into Romance ones has its shortcomings. *Farrugia* (< Arabic *farrūġ*, ‘chicken’), *Xuereb* (< Arabic *šawārib*, ‘moustache’, ‘whiskers’), and *Agius* (< Arabic ‘*aġūz*, ‘old woman’) survived even though they could have easily been rendered as *Pulcino/Pullicino*, *Mustacchio*, and (*La*) *Vecchia*, which have exactly the same meaning and effectively exist in Sicily. However, no degree of Latinization could have disguised the manifest Muslim import of *Abdilla* (< Arabic ‘*abd allāh*, ‘servant of God’).

The small medieval Jewish community of Malta was expelled from the islands in 1492, but a minority of Jews avoided the common fate by converting to Catholicism and thereafter merged with the rest of the population. It is important to recall that while the Jews of Malta, like those of Sicily, naturally practiced Judaism, they actually spoke Arabic. In this manner, the naming patterns of this community must surely have left, although marginally, some impact on local onomastics. Some local Semitic names might have therefore originated from Jewish sources. This could be the case of *Ellul*, if it derived from *Elul*, the 12th month of the Jewish ecclesiastical year (covering mid-August to mid-September in the Roman calendar). However, Arabic (Syrian, Lebanese, Iranian, Jordanian) ‘*aylūl*’ also means ‘September’. Otherwise, the surname might be related to Arabic *Allūl*, ‘well-off’, ‘affluent’, or Jewish name *Allul* ‘white’¹⁵.

After being expelled from Rhodes in 1522 by the Ottoman Turks, the Knights Hospitallers moved to Malta and settled at the *borgo* behind the

¹⁴ Wettinger (1968: 27).

¹⁵ Bresc (2001: 308, nota 155).

Castello a Mare in 1530¹⁶. A good number of Rhodiots, by some accounts five to six hundred, followed them to the island, where they settled and intermarried¹⁷. This might explain the existence of old Greek surnames in Malta like *Piscopo*, *Anastasi*, *Callus*, and possibly the more common *Grech*, from *Greco* 'Greek'. Many of these Rhodiots did not have surnames as such. Most of them adopted provenance epithets which eventually evolved into fully-fledged surnames of the toponymic type: *Cipriotto* (cfr. *Cipriott*), *Zante*, *Del Rodo*, *Calamatta*, *Sciotto*, *De Candia*, *Santorino*. Non-toponymic Hellenic surnames include *Perdicomati*, *Paleologo*, *Fardella* (cf. *Fardell*), *Roncali*. Other Greeks bore the Italian surname of their Venetian, Genoese or Amalfitan ancestors (*De Bono*, *Speranza*, *Maldoantao*, *Grandanigo*), while a few family names were of Albanian origin (occurring also among the southern Italian and Sicilian diaspora); these include *Depiro* (< *D'Epiro*), *Crispo* and *Caliva*. In 1687 practically all of these surnames belonged to the Three Cities (Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea) and to a lesser extent Valletta¹⁸. Though the Maltese of Greek descent may have come directly from their homeland, one must bear in mind that Hellenes had for long been present in Sicily and southern Italy, especially the *Magna Graecia*, whence many immigrants settled in Malta for good. For instance, when Valletta was being built, the Knights secured large importations of labourers from Sicily and Calabria to help in the works¹⁹.

An even more substantial, if less frequently mentioned element, is that of the Moslem slaves living in the islands in the Late Medieval and Hospitaller periods. Their conversions and intermarriages were common enough occurrences, especially during the rule of the Order when Malta was one of the biggest keepers of slaves in the Christian Mediterranean. There are in fact abundant records of household slaves of Maltese families turning Christian. The converts, representing a wide range of ethnic backgrounds (Djerban, Turkish, Albanian, Slavic, Arab, Persian, Berber, black African) assumed the surnames of their masters (eg. *De Cassar*, *De Calleja*, *De Micallef*), or of their godparents in baptism, and are no doubt responsible for the racial throwbacks featuring occasionally among the population, encountered in the endogamous villages²⁰.

However, the prolonged stay of the Knights of John (1530-1798) produced, in a more pronounced manner, an influx of Neo-Latin and continental surnames. In Malta baptism, marriage and death records are generally extant

¹⁶ The small city of Birgu was given the formal title *Città Vittoriosa* after the Great Siege of 1565. Valletta officially replaced Vittoriosa as the new capital of Malta in 1570.

¹⁷ Fiorini (1994: 183-241).

¹⁸ Hull (1993: 330).

¹⁹ Aquilina (1988: 179).

²⁰ Hull (1993: 331).

for every town and village from as far back as the late 16th century. Many parishes kept records long before this date, at least from the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1565). The stabilization of surnames due to the obligation of parish priests to register such data hence coincided with the period of the Knights in Malta, whence the reliability of onomastic data from the late 16th century onwards.

The Order employed many foreigners in all its spheres of activity, including a lot of artisans, skilled labourers, servicemen, and professional mariners, as well as legal, financial, administrative, clerical, and medical personnel. Many of them settled in Malta and subsequently intermarried with the locals. This alien flood can be amply proved by the following two samples. Between 1587 and 1635, exactly 859 marriages were registered in Cospicua. Of these 301 (a staggering 35%) were contracted with foreign grooms who hailed mainly from France, Italy (particularly Sicily and Calabria), Spain, Candia, and Flanders. In the years 1627-1650, out of a total of 1,131 marriages registered in the parish of Porto Salvo, Valletta, 365 (just over 32%) were contracted with foreigners, most of whom appear to have been sailors, merchants, and petty traders²¹.

An examination of the distinctive surnames of Valletta and especially the Three Cities makes it clear that their first bearers were, like other maritime peoples, individuals connected with the sea-trade and hailing from the main Mediterranean ports with which Malta had commercial dealings between the 16th and the 19th centuries, namely Syracuse, Catania, Messina, Naples, Leghorn, Trieste, Genoa, Marseilles, and Barcelona²². Often foreign mercenaries serving in the army of the Order chose to settle and marry in the islands. In the Harbour area, relations between the locals and foreign residents were always close, and, to put it mildly, the consequences were not simply linguistic²³.

These foreigners were not just sailors or merchants who came to sell their wares and then departed. There are numerous attested cases of foreign parents whose children were born in Malta. But there were also young Sicilians, Neapolitans, Venetians, Frenchmen, Dutchmen, and Greeks, who as expected sought the companions of their lives among Maltese girls. During the Hospitaller era prostitution and illegitimacy were perennial problems in the Three Cities, and after the building of Valletta it was common for philandering knights to seek their pleasures in the poorer towns across the Grand Harbour. The frequent cases of Knights of the Order standing over the font of Senglean and Vittoriosan children, a practice which the local clergy seemed particularly anxious to promote, makes one suspect that at least in certain cas-

²¹ Cassar (2000: 138-140). Also Brincat (1991: 91-110, Tabella n. 3, p. 102).

²² Brincat (2001: 220-224).

²³ Hull (1993: 331).

es the godchildren in question were the illegitimate offspring of members of the Order. Such a state of affairs could hardly fail to alter the ethnic and psychological make up of the city folk.

Many recent additions from Sicily and southern Italy, mainly confined to the capital city, date from the time of the Italian Risorgimento (1830-70) and later between 1903 and 1906, when the breakwater in the Grand Harbour was being constructed by workmen brought over from Italy and Spain, some of whom married local women and settled in Albert Town, in the limits of Marsa and Paola²⁴.

Up till the early 20th century, social intercourse between the British and the Maltese was minimal, but the two world wars brought the two peoples in closer contact, and since then there has been a considerable number of mixed marriages. This explains the present abundance of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish surnames; to-day the Kitchers, the Rutters, the Howards, and the Becks have conspicuously infiltrated local anthroponomy. According to Census 2005, the ten commonest surnames in Malta originating from the British Isles are Jones, Mackay/Mckay, Smith, Martin, Turner, Brown, James, Roberts, Taylor, and Bray²⁵.

Otherwise, one meets surnames from other sources, mainly German (e.g. Schranz, Brockdorff, Conrad, Schmidt, Wirth, Wismayer), Indian (e.g. Mohnani, Balani, Tarachand, Kiomall, Bharwani), Slavonic (e.g. Antoncich, Bogdanovich, Elich, Domancich, Nikolic), Chinese (e.g. Li, Wang, Zhang), Jewish (e.g. Cohen, Ohayon, Tayar), and recent Muslim additions from Turkey and North Africa (e.g. Abbas, Khan, Kasap, Tahir, Alakkad, Ahmad, Aslan, Mohamed).

A trickle of Bulgarian and black African surnames have recently permeated the island through the engagement by local clubs of foreign footballers, some of whom have settled permanently and even married local girls. The local cognominal pool is bound to increase further due to the eventual naturalization of several irregular immigrants who have been arriving on our shores, fleeing misery or political trouble in their homelands. However, many of the 5,000 or so Africans in Malta today would eventually leave the island either through repatriation or resettlement programmes, or simply by removing themselves due to local racist hostility or lack of opportunities. In 2009 some 8,100 non-EU nationals held a permit to reside in Malta. Many students, temporary workers, and transitory visitors are destined to move back to their country of origin, but some others will surely take up residence in Malta for good²⁶.

²⁴ Aquilina (1988: 179).

²⁵ The ranking order was drawn up by the present author. Other surnames which occur in significant numbers include: Williams, Lewis, White, Edwards, and Carter.

²⁶ *The Sunday Times [of Malta]*, 29/05/2009.

The oldest known surnames in Malta

In France, Italy and England, surnames were introduced by the Normans; Malta must have followed suit, but unfortunately, there are no local records dating back to Norman times (1091-1194). In c. 1240, a report by Frederick II's agent Giliberto Abbate put the number of families living in the Islands of Malta and Gozo at 1,119²⁷. To date, this is the earliest known population count ever conducted in the Maltese islands.

Probably, the oldest documented surnames in Malta are *Cafario*, Grech, Calleja, Falzon, Attard, and Lentini. *Cafario*, Grech, and Calleja go back to Angevin times (1266-1283) – Roberto Cafario (a.k.a. Robberti de Caffuro de Malta)²⁸ and Nicolaus Grecus²⁹ are respectively recorded in 1273 and 1277. *Cafario* is sometimes recognized as an old form of present-day Gafà, but direct genealogical lineage is improbable³⁰. Calleja has often been described as a Spanish surname, but the names Martinus and Leo Calleya appear locally in 1277, before the commencement of Aragonese rule (1283-1530)³¹. A Greek derivation, supported even by Gian Francesco Abela, is consequently more plausible³².

The other three family names (Falzon, Attard and Lentini) are first recorded in 1299 when Malta was under Aragonese rule - a Gozitan will refers to an African slave belonging to Phylippo Falzono of Malta³³; Tristanus de Actardo was a witness³⁴; whereas Nicolai de Lentini was a notary³⁵. Another witness, Arnaten Pousalè, signed his name in Greek script. His surname is possibly linked to today's Psaila, for which a totally different derivation has been ad-

²⁷ Cfr. Luttrell (1993).

²⁸ Frankinus Caffarius (Cafor), a *cabelloto* (tax-collector), is recorded in Gozo, 1374. Cfr. Fiorini (1999: 96).

²⁹ Wettinger (1999: 334). Johannes Greco, an emancipated serf, is documented in 1372. Cfr. Fiorini (1999: 52).

³⁰ The Gafà family (bearing older forms of the surname) was established in Malta years before the arrival of the Knights; the Militia List of c. 1419/20 shows that the surname was effectively confined to the village of Siggiewi. In the mid-16th century, a foreign family called *De Caforia* is recorded in Birgu. The surname Gafà achieved its current form only in the 17th century after members of the *Cafor/Gafor* family moved from the rural village of Kirkop to the Cottonera area. Cfr. Mercieca (2002: 279).

³¹ Wettinger (2000: 87, *sub* «Ta' Calleja»).

³² Calleja is probably another form of the occupational surname *Calleia* < Neo-Greek *kalleýias* (*kalleas*) 'farmer'; or another form of the surname *Callea* < Latin *Callias* < Greek *Kalléas* < *kalléas* 'gracious', 'handsome' < *kalos* 'good', 'beautiful' + the personalizing suffix *-eas*. Cfr. Caracausi (1993: 245 *sub* Calè; 249 *sub* Calleà).

³³ Wettinger (2002: 4). Antonio Falsone (or Fauzone) obtained the grant of Deyr Chandul in Malta in 1399 from King Martin of Sicily in reward for having greatly assisted in the recovery of the Maltese islands. Cfr. Abela (1984: 481).

³⁴ Wettinger (1999: 336). *Melite* Francesco Attardo, was created Barone di Ginelfare, Migulup e Saggajja in 1361; he married Zenella di Santa Philippo, with issue. Cfr. maltagenealogy.com.

³⁵ Fiorini (1987: 88-125).

vocated by others³⁶. Grech, Falzon, Attard and Calleja can safely be related with at least some present bearers of the surname³⁷.

Abela speaks of a parchment signed by the very hand of King Alfonso in favour of Bartolomeo Abela; this was undeniably the historian's earliest prized possession among his documents. Dated 15 March 1443 it confirmed the rights and antiquity of the family of *d'Abella* (or *D'Abel*), rightful descendants of a Catalan soldier from the time of the Aragonese conquest of Malta. According to Abela, this ancestor was one member of the supposedly two-hundred-strong garrison positioned in Malta in 1283 under general Ruggiero di Lauria by King Pedro of Aragon and chief among the legendary founders of the Maltese nobility. These Catalans founded a diversity of houses: *Sorribes*, *Rioles*, *Sans*, *Ferriol*, *Begliera*, *Frontine*, and others. Some others are recognizable Maltese surnames, such as *Caldes* (Galdes), *Cardona*, *Xirica* (Xiriha), *Barbara*, *Portella* (Portelli), *Mompalao*, *Pellegrino* (Pellegrini), *Mediona* (Madiona), and *Maimo* (Mamo)³⁸. Treated as Sicilian subjects, they were the founders of the Maltese merchant and landed community; they settled on lands, all carefully listed by Abela, granted to them by their Aragonese overlords. However, it is impossible to determine whether any of the present-day bearers of the above-mentioned surnames are directly descended from these Catalan soldiers, because the systematic recording of names in parish records only began in the 16th century.

Not. Symon de Carlo (De Carlo) of the Maltese Castellania is recorded in 1318³⁹. Graziano de Vassallo established his family in Malta, c. 1320, marrying Costanza d'Aragona with issue⁴⁰. One short inventory of names and surnames survives in a 1324 notarial document, which includes the surnames Salerno (Johannes de Salerno, witness), Cuschieri (Benedictus and Henricus Cuskerius, witnesses), and Sciriha (Simon Siriha, witness)⁴¹.

Family names which feature in local 14th-century documents include: *de Pellegrino* (Pellegrini, 1340s)⁴², *Di Manuele* (Demanuele, 1347), *Peregrino*

³⁶ Wettinger (1999: 336). The link with Maltese *bsajla* (pronounced *psayla*, diminutive form of *basla* 'onion'; Arabic *buṣaylah*) seems to be the product of folk etymology. This derivation was proposed by De Soldanis and Vassalli, and later repeated by Preca, Caruana and Aquilina.

³⁷ Notes on the medieval Falzon family in Malta are provided by Wettinger (2003).

³⁸ Abela (1647: 446; 510, *sub* Mamo).

³⁹ Attard (2004: 1). The surname does not feature in the *Status Animarum* (diocesan census) of 1687; hence, it must have been reintroduced in the Maltese Islands at a later stage - e.g. Giovanni Battista De Carlo married Domitilla Speranza at Senglea in 1750. Cfr. Database of marriage entries for the construction of local genealogical lineages in the Lanfranco Archive. The Lanfranco family runs *Genealogy Services - Malta*, offering genealogical research services to both local and overseas clients.

⁴⁰ Gauci (1992: 325). The surname is recorded in the Militia Roster of c. 1417.

⁴¹ Wettinger (1999: 336-337). Other entries include Caterina Greca (cfr. Grech) and Lucas de Albano (cfr. Albani), judge of Malta.

⁴² The surname *Pellegrino* already features among the Aragonese soldiers that garrisoned Malta under Ruggiero Lauria in 1283.

(1347), *Axac* (Asciak, c. 1350), *Gatto* (Gatt, 1350), *Maimo* (Mamo, c. 1350)⁴³, *De Trapano* (Trapani, 1351)⁴⁴, *Di Dinkille* (Dingli, c. 1353), Schembri (c. 1355), *Bunnice* (Bonnici, 1356), *De Lia* (Delia, 1360), *Pisano* (Pisani, 1363), *De Bonanno* (Bonanno, 1365), Spiteri (1365), Rapa (1366), *De Licata* (Delicata, 1370), *De Barbara* (Barbara, 1372), *De Episcopo* (Piscopo, 1372), *Melac* (Meilaq, 1372), *Imbruglu* (Imbroll, 1372), Muscat (1372), Rizzo (1372), *Pax* (also *Pache* for Pace, 1372), *De Sillato* (Sillato, 1372), *Barbarie* (Barberi, 1372), *De Lucia* (Lucia, ante 1373), Burlò (1373), *De Sacco* (Sacco, 1374), Mallia (1374), Cardona (1375), Abela (1390), *Pircop* (Chircop, 1397), Calafato (1398)⁴⁵, Grima (1398), *De Navarra* (Navarra, as distinct from Navarro, 1398), *De Saguna* or *De Sagona* (Seguna, Sagona, 1398)⁴⁶, Navarra (1398), Casha (1399), and Lombardo (1399). The indicated dates are the earliest known records of the respective family names; future research may backdate them.

Fifteenth-century registers and the Status Animarum of 1687

The native population of Late Medieval Malta is known to us, at least in its characteristic surnames, from the Militia List of c. 1419/20 and the *Angara* Roll of the 1480s. Well over three quarters of all family names recorded in these lists are demonstrably Sicilian, most of them still occurring in Sicily today. It may be supposed that the 103 surnames with 5 or more occurrences are, as the most prolific in the 15th century, the oldest family names in Malta, and therefore likely to have been current in the island in the 13th century. The Militia List of c. 1419/20, recorded in *Quaderni Diversi*, No. 3 of the Mdina Cathedral Museum, is truly a starting point for the study of Malta's demographic make-up in the Late Middle Ages; however, it is also an indispensable source for the scrutiny of Maltese surnames at that stage in history⁴⁷. A cursory review

⁴³ Mamo features among the names of the Aragonese garrison which occupied Malta under Ruggiero Lauria in 1283.

⁴⁴ Otherwise, a 17th-century import is more probable. Speranza Trapani, daughter of Ottavio, was born in 1606. Cfr. Testa / Zammit (1980: part ii, 84). Gio. Batta de Trapani married Ubaldesca Debrincat at Cospicua in 1670. Simon Mercieca of the University of Malta has undertaken the laborious task of reconstructing a large number of Maltese families to compile the «Database for the Construction of the Maltese Population». Data acquired from local parish archives have been inputted in a computer database called CASAUR, based on an advanced program created by the Sorbonne University of Paris.

⁴⁵ The local Calafato family benefited from a money grant of 6 *onze* in 1398. Cfr. Montalto (1980: 10).

⁴⁶ Rogerius de Sagona is documented in 1398; he was canon of the Cathedral in 1410. Cfr. Borg (2009: 77).

⁴⁷ The full name of the document reads: *Quaternu factu et ordinatu per li nobili capitaneo et Jurati [et or di lu] consiglu per la guardia de la bisula de Mauta anni XIII Indicionus*. It was published by Wettinger (1969). An analysis of the said Militia list indicates a total of 1,667 adult males in Mal-

of the Militia List of c. 1419/1420 shows that then, at least according to the restricted data available, the commonest surnames in Malta were probably⁴⁸:

1. Vella (47)	11. Asciaq (21)
2. Zammit (32)	12. Mangion (21)
3. Farrugia (30)	13. Bonnici (20)
4. Schembri (29)	14. Curmi (20)
5. Micallef (27)	15. Grech (19)
6. Borg (25)	16. Pace (18)
7. Calleja (25)	17. Camilleri (17)
8. Cassar (24)	18. Falzon (16)
9. Azzopardi (23)	19. Bugeja (16)
10. Bartolo (23)	20. Gauci (16)

Note: Figures in brackets show the number of able-bodied men (between 16 and 60 years) who were bound to render militia service.

Four out of five of today's top ranking surnames (Borg, Vella, Farrugia, and Zammit) were already strongly established in the Late Middle Ages. The absence of Camilleri among the top ten is somewhat baffling. Otherwise, Calleja, Bartolo, and Asciaq have since dropped significantly down the scale; today, they do not even feature among the top twenty. Only Vella, Azzopardi, and Bartolo are unmistakably Italian. The rest are either of Semitic etymology (Zammit, Farrugia, Micallef, Borg, Cassar, Asciaq), or of distinct etymology (Schembri, Calleja)⁴⁹.

Of the commonest thirty surnames the ratio of Arabic to non-Arabic forms is 14:16 (granted that Galea and Calleja are not Semitic surnames as suggested by Hull and some others). Of these only Micallef and Mifsud seem to be local formations. Since the other 28 family names (93.33%) have, or have had (like Asciaq, in 1095; Curmi, in 1095; and Buhagiar, in 1145) some known counterpart in Sicily, it might be argued that the bulk of Maltese Semitic appellatives are, if not actually of Sicilian provenance, then at least common to the two regions. *Galata* and *Xara* are today extinct in Malta.

The most significant fact to emerge from this examination is the equally Sicilian character of so many (in fact the majority) of those Maltese Semitic surnames that used to be considered indigenous. Indeed, since Sicily and Malta formed a single socio-cultural bloc during the Saracen period, there is simply no guarantee that the original bearers of such names as Borg, Zammit,

ta, and includes some 80 Christian names of which the more popular are: *Antoni* (104 examples) *Jobanni* in its various forms (94), *Nicolau* or *Cola* (94), *Gullielmu* (76), *Thumeu* (58), and *Paulu* (58). Cfr. Cassar (2000b: 68).

⁴⁸ The ranking order was drawn up by the present author on the basis of the data provided by Wettinger (1969).

⁴⁹ Schembri is probably an epenthetic form (with excrescent *-r-*) of the surname *Schembi*, itself an adaptation of the Albanian surname *Shkëmbi*.

and Farrugia were natives of pre-Norman Malta; on the contrary, there is every likelihood that they were immigrants to the islands like the original Vella, Pace, and Grech⁵⁰. A further consideration in favour of the Sicilian provenance of many Maltese-Arabic surnames is the fact that the greater island not only shares most of the latter, but also preserves to this day a large store of Arabic anthroponyms apparently never established in Malta, e.g. *Gaito*, *Cangemi*, *Macaluso*, *Taibi*, and *Gueli*. Most Maltese Semitic surnames may thus be derived from a vast Siculo-Arabic pool⁵¹.

After the *Angara* List of the 1480s, which adds only some dozen new Sicilian names, the next most comprehensive extant record of current Maltese surnames is the *Status Animarum* or diocesan census of 1687, now housed in the Curia Archives, Floriana. The census includes the names, surnames, and provenance of 45,288 people and covers all localities except for Naxxar, Gozo, and the Valletta Greek rite parish⁵². *Status Animarum* includes all inhabitants subject to the Bishop, that is, excluding members of the Religious Orders and those under the jurisdiction of the Order of St John and of the Inquisition, which must have numbered a further 5,500 people.

As most of the period 1490-1687 covers the installation and consolidation of the Magistral régime, one may safely assume that the scores of new surnames most of which are typical of Vittoriosa, Senglea, Cospicua, and Valletta did not enter Malta before 1530. At least three-quarters of these new surnames are Italian, and in most cases identifiably eastern Sicilian, which would suggest the arrival of settlers from Syracuse, Catania, Messina, and their hinterlands. The *Status Animarum* of 1687 showed this ranking order⁵³:

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Borg - 1,629 | 11. Muscat - 679 |
| 2. Farrugia - 1,139 | 12. Bonnici - 666 |
| 3. Camilleri - 1,083 | 13. Micallef - 653 |
| 4. Grech - 1,042 | 14. Galea - 642 |
| 5. Vella - 1,034 | 15. Schembri - 593 |
| 6. Zammit - 1,017 | 16. Pace - 592 |
| 7. Agius - 858 | 17. Fenech - 581 |
| 8. Caruana - 778 | 18. Cassar - 551 |
| 9. Mifsud - 756 | 18. Sammut - 551 |
| 10. Azzopardi - 724 | 20. Debono - 505 |
| | 20. Attard - 505 |

⁵⁰ Hull (1993: 319).

⁵¹ Hull (1993: 320).

⁵² A Gozo census list nearest in time to 1687 is the one labelled *Matrice 1678* (also housed in the Curia Archives) which includes 3,045 people. For Naxxar, the *Status Animarum 1688* is still preserved at Naxxar Parish Archives.

⁵³ The *Status Animarum* of 1687 does not cover the whole of Malta; besides, the available numbers are subject to a slight margin of error, cfr. Fiorini (1986). The ranking order was drawn up by the present author on the basis of the data collected by Fiorini.

Compared to today's frequency order, the above list shows a striking similarity. Borg had already taken the lead; Camilleri, which in c. 1419/20 had a relatively low ranking, made a remarkable recovery; so had Galea, Grech, and Attard, all of which are of non-Arabic extraction. Actually, of today's 20 highest ranking surnames, 18 were already conspicuous in 1687. Only Spiteri and Abela are absent from this list. The presence of Italian or Sicilian family names is more pronounced thanks to the introduction of Bonnici, Pace, and Debono.

*Census 2005 and the commonest surnames of Malta*⁵⁴

After a Census Order was issued in 2005, a Census of Population and Housing was undertaken between 21 November and 11 December 2005, with 27 November 2005 being established as Census Day. This was the sixteenth census to be carried out since the first modern one was undertaken in 1842. It presents a snapshot of the socio-demographic profile of our population in the early years of the 21st century. Apart from furnishing the usual data on population figures and a wide array of statistical reports concerning housing, migration, economic activity, and health, the census provides valuable facts on the frequency and distribution of Maltese surnames.

The census of 2005 records 12,310 different surnames, representing an average of 33 persons for every surname⁵⁵. This is obviously just a curiosity as the frequency of the higher-ranking surnames runs into thousands, while some family names in Malta are restricted to just three, two, and even one person. Double surnames and allotropic forms with orthographic differences (such as Sciriha/Xriha, Sciberras/Sceberras, Mugliette/Muliatt, etc.) were treated as separate surnames. The 20 commonest surnames in Malta are:

Surname	Frequency (raw number)	% of total population	Relative value
Borg	13,456 (14,262) ⁵⁶	3.3	100
Camilleri	12,864 (13,033)	3.2	95.6
Vella	11,998 (12,383)	3.0	89.2
Farrugia	11,725 (11,882)	2.9	87.1

⁵⁴ The present author had to rely on data emerging from Census 2005 because that of 2011 is only available in an incomplete form.

⁵⁵ These figures constituted only an estimated count as in Census 2005 a confounding number of 8,965 people were not assigned a surname. Using different statistical sources (the Maltese I.D. Card Registry of March 2008), Brincat (2008: 378) counted 15,427 different family names.

⁵⁶ The number in brackets indicates the sum total comprising double surnames. Percentages and relative values are however based on the first figure which excludes multiple surnames.

Surname	Frequency (raw number)	% of total population	Relative value
Zammit	9,554 (9,964)	2.4	71.0
Galea	8,666 (8,881)	2.1	64.1
Micallef	8,494 (8,724)	2.1	63.1
Grech	7,958 (8,136)	2.0	59.1
Attard	7,466 (7,791)	1.8	55.5
Spiteri	7,335 (7,587)	1.8	54.5
Azzopardi	7,049 (7,109)	1.7	52.4
Cassar	7,044 (7,298)	1.7	52.3
Mifsud	6,674 (6,883)	1.6	49.6
Caruana	6,562 (6,757)	1.6	48.8
Muscat	6,187 (6,316)	1.5	46.0
Agius	5,911 (6,051)	1.5	44.0
Schembri	4,955 (5,066)	1.2	36.8
Abela	4,948 (5,059)	1.2	36.8
Fenech	4,758 (4,946)	1.2	35.4
Pace	4,502 (4,814)	1.1	33.5

Those bearing the commonest surnames in Malta, when grouped together, make up a staggering proportion of the whole population. Borg, which is the highest ranking family name, already makes 3.3%. In Italy the top-ranking surname, Rossi, comprises just 0.34% of the whole population; in Sicily the top-ranking surname Russo comprises 0.58% of the population; whereas Smith, the commonest surname in England and Wales, roughly covers 1.3% of the population. These statistics only confirm the relative overwhelming strength of Malta's top five surnames (Borg, Camilleri - 3.2%, Vella - 3.0%, Farrugia - 2.9%, and Zammit - 2.4%), which with an aggregate of 59,597 make up 14.8% of the population⁵⁷. The five commonest family names in Italy comprise just 1% of the whole population.

The top ten (adding Galea, Micallef, Grech, Attard, and Spiteri), with an aggregate of 99,516 make up 24.57%⁵⁸. The top 20 (adding Cassar, Azzopardi, Mifsud, Caruana, Muscat, Agius, Schembri, Abela, Fenech, and Pace)

⁵⁷ This percentage would have been slightly higher had double surnames been included.

⁵⁸ The top ten surnames in Italy (from Rossi to Greco) make up just 1.66% of the total population, while the top ten in Denmark (from Jensen to Jørgensen) make up a overwhelming 33% of the total population, cfr. *Il Corriere della sera*, 16/08/2006.

make up 39.04% (158,106 people); the top 25 make up 43.96% (178,018 people); the top 50 make up 61.46% (248,913 people); and finally the top 100 make up 76.02% (307,886 people). This means that almost a quarter of Malta's entire population incredibly shares just ten family names, and that the top 100 surnames comprise more than three quarters of the whole population. The other 23.98% (97,076 people) share the remaining 12,210 surnames⁵⁹.

In Census 2005, only the first four surnames exceed the 10,000 mark, although the fifth (Zammit) is quite close to achieving the same feat. The surname in 13th place (Mifsud) is already half as common as the top one. Hundreds of surnames are only borne by a handful, sometimes by a couple or even by a single person. The census showed 6,233 surnames with a frequency of 1; another 1,947 with a frequency of 2; 984 with a frequency of 3; and 702 with a frequency of 4. These are ephemeral surnames and in a few years time some of them will definitely not figure in the local surnominal pool. Put together, they constituted 9,866 surnames, meaning that only 2,444 surnames (from a total of 12,310) have a frequency of five or more.

Other frequency statistics emerging from the 2005 roll:

Number of surnames	Frequency
1,390	10 or more
834	20 or more
404	50 or more
226	100 or more
167	200 or more
113	500 or more
80	1,000 or more
53	2,000 or more
16	5,000 or more

Within almost 500 years, some surnames have experienced a relative decline in their ranking order. Calleja placed seventh in the Militia List of c. 1419/20; in Census 2005, it occupies position no. 33 (down 26 places), while Curmi fell astonishingly from the 14th to the 76th position (down by 62 places). Other significant losses over the same period of time were incurred by Bartolo

⁵⁹ These statistics are not wholly baffling as they mirror similar situations in other parts of the world. For example, studies conducted by The Institute of Genealogy and History for Latin America in 1987 and 1991 show that 11 surnames accounted for 25% of the population throughout the Americas. As few as 64 surnames were needed to cover 50% of the population and 238 to cover 75%. Cfr. Platt (2006: 12).

(from 10th to 52nd), Mangion (from 12th to 60th), Falzon (from 18th to 30th), and Bonnici (from 13th to 31st). The latter surname was still going strong in 1687; the *Status Animarum* of that year showed it occupied the 12th position in the national ranking order. Its free fall is therefore even more baffling. Since 1687, Agius lost its top-ten ranking, dropping to 16th place in 2005. The relative strength of family names Axisa, Dingli, Mintoff, Seguna, Sapiano, Cumbo, Fiteni, Sciriha, Seisun, Sillato, Manara, Zrinzo, Randon, and Burlo also declined considerably since the time of the Knights.

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