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VESTIGES OF ARABIC NOMENCLATURE  
IN MALTESE SURNAMES

*Abstract.* The most tangible living remains of the Arab period in Malta lie in the vernacular. It is now universally accepted by linguists that Maltese is derived from North African dialectal (pre-Hilālian) Arabic. Unsurprisingly, some of the oldest Maltese surnames have Arabic roots, which clearly reflect Arabic naming practices. These surnames, in fact, reveal residues of names which originally, in medieval times, functioned as a *kunyah*, an *ism*, a *nasab*, a *nisba*, a *laqab*, or a *nabaz*. The present paper hence examines the etymology of several extant Maltese surnames, which have survived in Latinized forms, such as Abdilla, Buhagiari, Cassar, Farrugia, Fenech, Micallef, Mifsud, Mintoff, Said, Saliba, Sammut, Scerri, Sultana, Zammit, and Zerafa, within the parameters of Arabic nomenclature.

*The linguistic heritage*

The most tangible living remains of the Arab period in Malta lie in the vernacular. In fact it is now universally accepted by linguists that Maltese is derived from North African dialectal (pre-Hilālian) Arabic.<sup>1</sup> The Arabs brought with them a form of spoken Arabic understandably very close to the one then current in Tunisia and the Maghreb.<sup>2</sup>

In 870, the Aghlabids, who ruled over Barbary, Tripoli, and Tunisia, took Byzantine Malta by storm. Much disruption of normal life must have occurred, but it is impossible to judge its extent. According to the Maghrebīn scholar al-Ḥimyarī, henceforth, the island remained an uninhabited *ḥirba* (ruin).<sup>3</sup> In 910 the Ismaʿilite revolutionary ʿUbayd Allāh Saʿid proclaimed himself caliph and founded the Shīʿite state. By 916 he had raided the Egyptian Delta, Malta, Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearic Islands.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> The Banū Hilāl tribe first appeared in Ifrīqiyah in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, Leiden, E.J. Brill, p. 385.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. AQUILINA, “A Comparative Study of Semitic Maltese”, “Scientia”, IX, (1942), 9, pp. 89-96, 133-144.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Ḥimyarī (d. 1494) wrote his *Kitāb ar-rawd al-miʿtār*, a geographical encyclopedia, in 1461; however, these dates have been disputed. The *Rawd* segment concerning Malta is probably derived from al-Bakrī (1020–1094) and al-Qazwīnī (ca. 1203-83). Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, pp. 675-6.

<sup>4</sup> E. JENKINS, JR., *The Muslim Diaspora: A Comprehensive Reference to the Spread of Islam in*

Kalbites governed Sicily and Malta between 947 and 1050 as subsidiary rulers of the Fātimids. According to al-Ḥimyarī, after the year 1048/49, the Fātimid Muslims reseeded Malta from Sicily, and not directly from North Africa.<sup>5</sup> It would hence be more accurate to state that their language reflected the sort of Maghrebin dialect which had evolved specifically on that island. In fact, the historical and geographical factors now decidedly point to Sicilian Arabic as the basic source of the Maltese language.<sup>6</sup>

Thousands of Maltese lexemes, normally linked to a somewhat primitive and rudimentary way of life, are of Arabic origin. The definite article, broken plurals, the diminutive form, the dual form, the comparative and superlative forms, the verbal forms, the construct state, the agglutinated pronouns, the mimated nouns, and the basic concept of trilateralism are all vestiges of Arabic morphology.

However, following the expulsion of the Muslims in 1224, Malta gradually began to separate itself from the Arabic-speaking world. The replacement of Arabic as a written language first by Latin, then in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Siculo-Italian and from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards by Italian, the close connection with Sicily which continued during the rule of the Knights Hospitallers of St John (1530-1798), and the influx of Romance speakers into Malta, all explain the importance which the Romance, and in particular the Siculo-Italian element, then acquired in Maltese. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, subject to the all-conquering influence of English, the local tongue has been embracing new words of mainly Anglo-Saxon origin. As a result of this linguistic mixing Maltese has evolved into a separate and independent language.<sup>7</sup>

Maltese morphology remains essentially that of dialectal Arabic, somewhat modified and reduced. Foreign loan words from Siculo-Italian which

*Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas*, I, North Carolina & London, McFarland & Co. Inc., 1999, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> It has to be said that the reliability of al-Ḥimyarī's account has been doubted in some quarters. If the facts were to be trusted Arab effective rule in Malta would be reduced to a mere 42 years (1049-1091). Yet, for whole decades, during Norman and Swabian rule, no radical changes in the day-to-day running of affairs seemed to have occurred, as the Arabs were allowed to stay, and the disappearance of Islam from the Maltese islands was surely a long drawn out affair. The Maltese Muslims were finally expelled, probably, in ca. 1224 by emperor Frederick II. However, the decree of expulsion (which has not survived) seems to have applied to Muslims only not to 'Arabs' or 'Moors', to a religious not to an ethnic group. All this largely explains the survival of the Maltese language in the form it had taken during the centuries of Muslim hegemony, in spite of the steady entry into the islands of settlers from Europe.

<sup>6</sup> J. BRINCAT, *Malta 870-1054: Al-Himyarī's Account and Its Linguistic Implications*, Malta, Said International, 1995, p. 27. Cf. also D. AGIUS, *Siculo-Arabic*, London, Kegan Paul, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Maltese, today, is the only Semitic language written in the Latin alphabet. It is also the only European language of Semitic origin which enjoys the status of a national language.

encroached the language later on, merely fitted into the morphological framework already established by Arabic grammatical rules. One can retain that since then the morphology of the language has remained more conservative than the Tunisian dialect itself, but the syntax has continued to change through the influence of Neo-Latin patterns of sentence construction.<sup>8</sup>

### *Arabic nomenclature*

In Arabic-Islamic usage the full name of a person is usually made up of the following elements: *kunyah*, *ism*, *nasab*, and *nisba*. A certain number of persons are also known by a nickname (*laqab*)<sup>9</sup> or a pejorative sobriquet (*nabaz*) which, when the name is stated in full, comes after the *nisba*. From the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the use of an honorific title before or after the *kunyah* became more and more frequent with persons of high rank.

1. The *kunyah* is usually an honorific name compound with 'Abū ('father of') or 'Umm ('mother of'): Abū Dāwūd, 'Abū Laylā, 'Umm Salim, 'Umm al-Hasan.<sup>10</sup> It hence has the character of a teknonym, that is, a name of a human being making reference to that person's child. The *kunyah* may be purely metaphorical and allude to some desired quality, like 'Abū l-Faḍl meaning 'father of merit', or 'Abū 'l-Ḥayr meaning 'father of goodness'. However, the *kunyah*, not infrequently, may have a pejorative sense, as in 'Abū Ḡahl meaning 'father of ignorance' and 'Abū al-'Atahiya meaning 'father of folly', or point to some physical defect, as in 'Abū 'l-Baṣir meaning 'blind person'.

Sometimes the 'Abū loses its original sense completely and becomes a synonym of *dū* meaning 'the man with ...', hence acquiring a descriptive function, e.g. 'Abū Liḥya (*bū laḥya*) means 'bearded person'.<sup>11</sup> By extension 'Abū can also mean 'the master of', 'the holder of', 'the possessor of',

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. CREMONA, "The Survival of Arabic in Malta: The Sicilian Centuries" in *The Changing Voices of Europe in Honour of Professor Glanville Price*, Cardiff, 1994, pp. 281-94.

<sup>9</sup> The Maltese word for nickname is incidentally *laqam*.

<sup>10</sup> The *kunyah* is usually bestowed on the eldest son of the family, but this is not a hard and fast rule. Married ladies are, as a general rule, simply called after the name of their first son, e.g. 'Umm Aḥmad. However, *kunyahs* were often conventionalized. Cf. P. ROOCHNIK & S. AHMED, "Arabic and Muslim Family Names" in *Dictionary of American Family Names*, ed. P. Hanks, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. c.

<sup>11</sup> Sicilian surname Buscemi derives < *kunyah* 'Abū Ṣāmah meaning 'the man with a birth-mark'.

'the foremost of', 'the leader of', 'the first of', etc. Hence, 'Abū (or Dū) 'l-Yaminayn means 'the possessor of two right hands', 'the ambidextrous'. In other instances it denotes proliferation, especially obvious in the dialects, as in the North African appellative *bū ḥamsa* ('five').

The *kunyab* is often applied to certain animals, e.g. 'Abū Faris ('lion'), 'Abū Sulaymān ('cock'), 'Umm 'Āmir ('hyena'); to certain plants, e.g. 'Abū Farwa ('chestnut'); or even to all sorts of things which are in some degree personified, e.g. 'Abū Kubays, an oronym.<sup>12</sup>

2. The *'ism*, also called *'alam* or *'ism 'alam*, is the individual's personal or given name. It can be of several types. Some are ancient Arab names, mostly of pre-Islamic origin, and in form of adjectives (e.g. al-Ḥasān, 'good', 'handsome'), elatives (e.g. Aḥmad, 'the most praised'), substantives (e.g. 'Asad, 'lion'), participles (e.g. Muḥammad, 'praiseworthy'), or verbs of uncompleted action (e.g. Yazīd, 'he increases'). Some are used with the article (e.g. al-'Abbās, 'stern', 'austere'), but normally they are not (e.g. 'Abbās). In general, only the names of the Prophet (Muḥammad, al-Muṣṭafa, etc.) or some of the figures of the early Islamic period ('Umar, 'Alī, 'Uṭmān, etc.) have survived from among these ancient names.

Others, such as Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Ishāq (Isaac), Mūsā (Moses), Yūsuf (Joseph), and Ismā'īl (Ishmael), are biblical names in their Quranic forms. Then there are compound names in two main patterns: (a) 'Abd ('slave [of]') followed by Allāh or one of the divine names;<sup>13</sup> (b) Allāh preceded by a construct substantive (e.g. Hibat Allāh, 'gift of God').

Some names are drawn from old Persian history and legend (e.g. Ḥusraw, Ġāmšīd, Rustam), as well as from other sources, especially Berber (e.g. Yīdder). Finally there are names based on abstract nouns, sometimes with the suffix -ī (e.g. Tawfīk, Ḥikmet, Fikrī).<sup>14</sup>

3. The *nasab* is a lineage or pedigree name, comprising a list of ancestors, each name being introduced by the patronymic element *ibn* ('son of'), e.g. ibn 'Umar.<sup>15</sup> Arab historians quote as many generations as they feel to be necessary and sometimes go back a very long way when dealing with an eminent person or in order to avoid confusion, but the usual practice

<sup>12</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, V, p. 396.

<sup>13</sup> The ancient theophoric names made up of 'Abd and the name of a pagan divinity (e.g. 'Abd Manat) have disappeared with Islam. Cp. Mal. surname **Abdilla** (*infra*).

<sup>14</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, p. 179.

<sup>15</sup> The second name of the series is preceded by *bint*, 'daughter of', if the f.n. is that of a woman, e.g. Fātima bint 'Abbās. The *nasab* is always a patronymic; the only notable exception to this, a matronymic, was a special case: 'Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus the son of Mary).

is to limit the *nasab* to one or two ancestors. The Arabic *ibn* (also known as *ma'rifa*) can sometimes refer to an ancestor rather than a parent, and be used as a kind of a surname, as is the case with the famous Ibn Khaldūn.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, a person's *nasab* expresses relationship with the mother, especially if the woman concerned was in some way remarkable (e.g. Ibn Fātima). Generally, the reference of the *nasab* is to the father's *ism*, but sometimes it may be to his *kunyab* (e.g. 'Alī ibn Abū 'l-Fazl) or to his *laqab* (e.g. Iqbāl ibn al-Aswad, Jamīla bint al-Nāsif).<sup>17</sup>

4. The *nisba* is an adjective ending in *-ī*, formed originally from (a) the name of the individual's tribe, clan, sect, dynasty, school of law, or eponymous ancestor (e.g. al-Qurašī, 'of the Kurashi tribe'; al-'Abbāsī, 'the Abaside'; al-Ḥusaynī, 'the descendant of a Ḥusayn', etc.); (b) the place of birth, origin, or residence (e.g. al-Mālīṭī, 'the Maltese';<sup>18</sup> al-Izmirī, 'the Smyrniot'; al-Maṣrī, 'the Egyptian'; etc.);<sup>19</sup> and occasionally from (c) a trade or profession (e.g. al-Ṣayrafī, 'the money-changer'; al-Ḥarīrī, 'the silk weaver'; al-Ṭahḥān, 'the miller', etc.). A man may thus have several *nisbas* which are normally given progressing from the general to the particular and in chronological order of residence. The specialty is often indicated at the end without the suffix *-ī* (e.g. al-Ḥāfiẓ, al-Mawṣil). In Arabic the *nisba* is always preceded by the definite article *al-*.<sup>20</sup>

5. The *laqab* can be an honorific title or a distinctive epithet (e.g. al-Rašīd, 'the rightly ruler'; al-Mutawakkil 'ala 'llāh, 'he who entrusts himself to God'), usually placed after the *nisba*. But in its simplest form the *laqab* is a descriptive nickname with neutral connotations, usually referring to a physical characteristic (e.g. al-Ṭawīl, 'the tall [one]'; al-Atraš, 'the deaf [one]'; al-Ḥamrānī, 'the [deep] red one'; etc.),<sup>21</sup> which follows the *ism*. These nicknames are felt to be less pejorative than the sobriquets (*nabaz*) such as al-Ḥimar ('the ass') and al-Abtar ('the childless one').<sup>22</sup> Names of

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, pp. 179-80; *ibid.*, VII, pp. 967-8.

<sup>17</sup> ROOCHNIK & AHMED, *op. cit.*, p. c.

<sup>18</sup> S. CUSA, in his *I diplomati greci ed arabi di Sicilia* (Parte I, 1868, II, 1882), for example, mentions: 'Abū Bakr al-Mālīṭī, 'Isa al-Mālīṭī, 'Omor bin al-Mālīṭī and his brother 'Uṣmān, Awlād ('sons of') al-Mālīṭī, Mefriḡ al-Mālīṭī, Ni'ma al-Ġawdišī and his brother 'Alī. These names attest for the complete Arabization of the Maltese islands.

<sup>19</sup> Such *nisbas* do not necessarily denote ethnicity; they might simply refer to a returning immigrant. Hence al-Hindī might have referred to a local who had just made his way back from India. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VIII, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, p. 179; *ibid.*, VIII, pp. 53-6.

<sup>21</sup> The termination *-ānī* is often used in an intensive or elative sense. Harmless signification of this sort was traditionally meant to avert the evil eye or the unwanted attention of jinns (genies) and other evil spirits.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, pp. 180-1; *ibid.*, V, pp. 618-31.

animals and birds of prey are also common as *laqabs* (e.g. al-Fahd, ‘the cheetah’; al-‘Uqāb, ‘the eagle’).

Hence, full Arabic names run like: ‘Abū ‘l-Faḍl Muṣṭāfa Ibn Ḥālīd al-Baġdādī, or ‘Abū Zayd ‘Umar Ibn Salem al-Ṣayrafī, or ‘Umm al-Ḥasan Aḥmed Ibn Asad al-Rašīd. None of these components strictly speaking amounts to a surname, though as in the case of the *ma‘rifa*, even the *laqab* and the *nisba* are sometimes used to this effect.

### Kunyah surnames

*Kunyah* nomenclature in Maltese onomastics has survived both in place-names and family names. Toponyms like Buġibba (< \*‘Abū Ġibba), Bubaqra (< ‘Abū Bakr), and Buleben (< ‘Abū Laban) are evident examples.

Surname **Buhagiar** derives from ‘Abūhaġar; Haġar, meaning ‘stones’, ‘rocks’, is an Ar. given name.<sup>23</sup> If in this case ‘*Abū*’ stands for ‘holder’, ‘possessor’, then the composite term might refer to a thriving landlord, or to a proprietor of a stone-quarry. **Psaila** is probably Siculo-Arabic; either (a) < Ar. ‘Abū Sala, whence contemporary Sic. top. Busala and medieval top. Rachalbusal (in which the second element is actually a Heb. given name);<sup>24</sup> or else (b) < Ar. Abū Sayāl. The latter’s second element might be related either to *sayāla* meaning ‘a milky thornplant’, or to *sayyāla* meaning ‘flowing water’, ‘mountain current’.<sup>25</sup> **Saliba** is an apocopated form of medieval Mal. surname Busalib(e), often linked with Abū ‘l-Ṣalībī, meaning ‘crusader’, < *ṣalīb* meaning ‘cross’, ‘inter-section’, ‘cross-roads’.<sup>26</sup> Alternatively the term could have simply referred to a Christian living in a Muslim community, the cross being the emblem of his religion. The final *-a* reflects the influence of Romance morphology.<sup>27</sup> Otherwise it is a continuation of

<sup>23</sup> G. CARACAUSI, *Dizionario onomastico della Sicilia: Repertorio storico-etimologico di nomi di famiglia e di luogo*, I-II, Palermo, Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, L’Epos Società Editrice, 1993, sub ‘Buhagiar’. Cp. Ibn Haġar al-‘Askalānī, Egyptian *hadīth* scholar, judge, and historian (1372-1449), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, p. 776. *Haġar* is a cognate of the Ethiopic *baġar* meaning ‘town’. It is still in use today as an element in the place-names given to ruins of pre-Islamic town sites in southern Arabia. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, sub ‘Busala’.

<sup>25</sup> A Romance derivation is also possible, if one considers the surname to be a corrupt form of f.n. Basilia (masculine Basilio), < Lat. Basilius, ultimately < Gk. Basileios, < *basileus* meaning ‘king’, ‘royal’. Cf. G. WETTINGER, *Non Arabo-Berber Influences on Malta’s Medieval Nomenclature in Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Studies on Cultures of the Western Mediterranean*, Algiers, S.N.E.D, 1978, p. 205.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. S. FIORINI, “Sicilian Connexions of Some Medieval Maltese Surnames”, *Journal of Maltese Studies*, (1987-88), 17-18, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Another pointer might be top. Salibi, < Sic. *salibba*, < Ar. *saliba(b)* meaning ‘water track

Aramaic suffix *ā* which stands for the definite article; in that case **Saliba** merely means ‘the cross’.

Surnames related to *kunyah* names with zoological connotations include: **Buttigieg** (< ‘Abū l-Dağāğ(ī), comprising *dağāğ* [or *diğāğ*, *duğāğ*] meaning ‘chickens’, ‘domestic fowls’, hence referring to a thriving poulterer); and **Ebejer** (< ‘Abū l-‘Abā’ir, comprising the pl. form of ‘*abūra* meaning ‘a one-year old goat or sheep’, possibly suggesting a goatherd).<sup>28</sup>

*Kunyah* surnames denoting proliferation include **Busuttil** and **Busietta**. **Busuttīl**, in all probability, is a contemporary form of medieval Mal. surname *Busittin*, < Ar. \*‘Abūsittīn meaning ‘a master (or owner) of sixty (men)’.<sup>29</sup> **Busietta** is perhaps a Sicilianized form of \*‘Abūsitta meaning ‘a master (or owner) of six (men)’.<sup>30</sup> Otherwise the family name is perhaps an epenthetic form of Sic. surname *Busetta*, itself a form of Ar. ‘Abū l-Sayyid,<sup>31</sup> in which case it is related to Sem. surname **Said** (*infra*).

A *kunyah* surname which has the status of a *dū* is **Xuereb**, <Ar. ‘Abū šawārib, signifying ‘a man with a moustache’, as *šārib* means ‘moustache’.<sup>32</sup>

### Ism surnames

The most obvious *’ism* surname in Malta is **Abdilla**, which relates to Siculo Arabic *Abdella* and Gk. *Abdellas*. All forms are derived from Ar. theophoric f.n. ‘*Abdallāh*, composed of the elements ‘*abd* meaning

crossing the fields’. G. B. PELLEGRINI, *Gli Arabismi nelle Lingue Neolatine*, I-II, Brescia, Paideia Editrice, 1972, pp. 152, 271. The surname **Saliba** is still extant among the Christian communities of Lebanon and Syria.

<sup>28</sup> J. AQUILINA, “A Comparative Study in Lexical Material Relating to Nicknames and Surnames”, *Journal of Maltese Studies*, (1964), 2, p. 154-5; A. DE SIMONE, “Per un lessico dell’arabo di Sicilia” in *Languages of the Mediterranean: Sub Strata – The Islands – Malta*, ed. J.M. Brincat, Malta, The Institute of Linguistics, 1994, p. 108. Cp. Mal. *ghabura* (pl. *ghebejjer*).

<sup>29</sup> AQUILINA, *op.cit.* (1964), p. 154. *Busittin* could have been the leader of 60 militiamen assigned to guard the local coasts against piratical attacks. The derivation is supported by the occurrence of the surname *Butlētīn* (‘master of thirty men’) among the Muslim serfs of 12<sup>th</sup> century Sicily, then under Norman rule. FIORINI, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>30</sup> Cp. Mal. nickname *Buħames* meaning ‘father of five’. J. CASSAR PULLICINO, “Social Aspects of Maltese Nicknames”, *Scientia*, XXII, (1956), 2, p. 78.

<sup>31</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, sub ‘*Busetta*’; DE SIMONE, *op. cit.*, p. 81. Cp. Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (d. 1334), biographer of the Prophet. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, p. 932.

<sup>32</sup> C.L. DESSOULAVY, “Quelques Noms Propres Maltais”, *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, I, (1957), 1, p. 47; AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 156. Cp. Ibn Abī l-Šawārib, name of the members of a family, the Banū Abī l-Šawārib, which played an important role during the 9<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and provided the Muslim empire with a succession of traditionalists, jurists, and qadis. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, p. 691. The al-Šawāribī were a family of Kalyūb, lower Egypt. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 514. DESSOULAVY, *op. cit.*, p. 47, also suggests another derivation: < Ar. *šārib*, *šuraba* meaning ‘great drinker’, possibly referring to a drunkard.

‘servant, (mainly male) slave’<sup>33</sup> + *Allāh* (< *al-a‘lā*) meaning ‘God (the Almighty)’.<sup>34</sup> This sobriquet is compatible with the Islamic doctrine of total submission to God.<sup>35</sup> The name is one of the many attributive titles of Muḥammad himself. This fact surely augmented the popularity of the given name within the Muslim world, already attested in pre-Islamic Arabia.

**Sammut** derives < Ar. f.n. *Samīt* meaning ‘tacit’, < *samt* meaning ‘silence’. Among several extremist Shi‘ite groups, *al-samīt* is the designation of a messenger of God who does not reveal a new law, as opposed to *al-natik*, a speaking prophet.<sup>36</sup> **Zammit** derives < Ar. f.n. *Zamīt* meaning ‘stern’, ‘grave’, ‘dignified’.<sup>37</sup> In some quarters, the surname **Mamo** has been tentatively explained as a shortened and Latinized form of Ar. f.n. Muḥammad (or possibly Maḥmud), which survived as a surname in Malta only until the later 15<sup>th</sup> century. The transformation can be easily explained by the taboo on Muslim names prevailing in medieval Christian Malta.<sup>38</sup> **Hili** could be traced to Ar. f.n. *al-Hilī* meaning ‘able’, ‘skilful’, ‘valorous’, ‘courageous’, < Ar. (and Mal.) *hila* meaning ‘ability’, ‘strength’.<sup>39</sup> **Bigeni** is a Sic. surname < top. Bigeni, a commune in the province of Syracuse, and various other localities in Sicily, such as Bigini; Torre Biggini, commune in the province of Trapani; and Bigene, a former feudal domain (a.k.a. Casale Bigens). All names derive < Ar. f.n. *Biḡanu* meaning ‘withered’, ‘gaunt’.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Other Ar. names comprising the term ‘*abd*’ include ‘Abd al-Rašīd, ‘Abd al-Salām, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, and ‘Abd al-Raḥīm.

<sup>34</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, sub ‘Badali’; AGIUS, *op. cit.*, pp. 403, 421. For legal purposes, converts whose natural fathers had not embraced Islam were conventionally given, especially in the Ottoman period, the *nasab* (pedigree name) Ibn ‘Abd Allāh. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, pp. 179-80. Another Mal. surname related to the same Ar. ‘*ism*’, albeit in a somewhat cryptic fashion, is **Vadalà** (< Badalà).

<sup>35</sup> The same notion features in other religions as well. As a matter of fact, It. (hence Christian) surname Servadio, Heb. (hence Judaic) Ovadya, and Indian (hence Hindu) name Devdas have exactly equivalent meanings.

<sup>36</sup> Cp. al-Samīt. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VIII, p. 1046. PELLEGRINI, *op. cit.*, p. 235, links it with surname Zambuto, itself a hypercorrect variant of Zammuto, < Ar. *samūt* meaning ‘silent’.

<sup>37</sup> G. WETTINGER, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, Malta, PEG Ltd., 2000, sub ‘Ta’ Zammit’. Zammit is the fifth commonest surname in Malta [Census 2005].

<sup>38</sup> G. WETTINGER, “The Origin of the ‘Maltese’ Surnames”, *Melita Historica*, XII, (1999), 4, 1999, p. 343; WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (2000), sub ‘Ta’ Mamo’. Mamou is the name of a nomadic tribe of Oujda, E. Morocco; the surname could hence have originated from a tribal *nisba*. WETTINGER has also detected Mamou as a Jewish surname in Tunisia. Otherwise it can be an It. occupational family name, < Neo-Gk. *mámos*, *mámmos* meaning ‘obstetrician’, < feminine form *mammí* meaning ‘midwife’. CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, sub ‘Mammo’. Locally the surname originated in Gozo.

<sup>39</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 155; J. AQUILINA, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, I-II, Malta, Midsea Books Ltd., 1987-90, sub ‘hila’.

<sup>40</sup> Cp. Aḥmed Biḡan, Turkish mystic writer and educator who flourished in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He led a very ascetic life and became so emaciated that he called himself Bīdjān meaning ‘the lifeless’. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, p. 1202.

Surnames derived from Biblical names also prevail. **Asciak/q** must be the remnant form of Ar. f.n. Ishāq (Gk. Isaak, Eng. Isaac), < Heb. Yitschak (Yishaq), a derivation of *tsachak* (*sbahaq*) meaning 'to laugh'.<sup>41</sup> **Musù** (or **Mousù**) is sometimes linked with Ar. *ism* Mūsā (Eng. Moses), in which case it is related to Sem. surname **Muxi** (also extant in Malta), < Biblical Heb. f.n. Mushi, an alternative form of Moshe, itself of Egyptian origin.<sup>42</sup>

Feminine names can also be traced in the surnames **Sultana**, **Manara**, and **Zahra**. **Sultana** (as the Neo-Gk. Soultána) derives < Ar. fem. f.n. Sulṭānah meaning 'queen', 'sultan's consort'.<sup>43</sup> Alternatively it derives directly < Ar. f.n. Sulṭān, < *sulṭān* meaning 'king', 'sovereign', 'royal power'; the final *-a* reflecting the influence of Romance morphology.<sup>44</sup> **Manara** is an Ar. fem. given name meaning 'guiding light', evidently related to *manāra* meaning 'lighthouse', 'minaret'.<sup>45</sup> **Zahra**, on the other hand, is Ar. fem. f.n. Zah(i)ra, either (a) < *zabra* meaning '(orange) blossom', 'blooming flower', and by metaphorical extension 'beautiful (girl)', or else (b) < *zabraa*, < *azbar* meaning 'bright', 'radiant'.<sup>46</sup>

### Nasab surnames

No overt trace of *nasab* nomenclature can be detected in Maltese family names. The words *bin* and *bint* were systematically proscribed from all surnames, probably because the locals considered necessary to distance them-

<sup>41</sup> The medieval reference to Presbitero Bartholomeo de Aschac or de Ysac (1372) seems to confirm this interpretation. S. FIORINI, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, Part II: Documents in the State Archives, Palermo, No. 1 – Cancelleria Regia 1259-1400*, Malta, Malta University Press, 1999, pp. 46, 136. However, AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 154, and DESSOULAVY, *op. cit.*, p. 44, suggest another meaning: < Ar. *ʿashik* meaning 'lover', 'paramour', 'sweetheart'. The term *ʿashik* originally applied to popular mystical poets of dervish orders. It was later taken over by wandering poets and minstrels. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Glossary & Index of Terms to Vol. I-IX*, p. 27. Cp. ʿAshik Pasha, Turkish poet and mystic (1272-1333). *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, p. 698.

<sup>42</sup> Cp. ʿAbd Allāh b. Mūsā, the conqueror of the Maghreb and Spain, executed in 720. *Ibid.*, I, p. 50. Otherwise **Muxi** may be a medieval rendering ( $x = sc$ ) of It. surname Musci, (a) < Neapolitan and Apulian *muscio* meaning 'flaccid, flabby'; or (b) < Sic. *musciu* meaning 'lethargic, slow-moving, lazy'; or (c) < Calabrian *musci* meaning 'rat'; or (d) < Salentine *musci*, *musciu* (Calabrian and Neapolitan *muscia*) meaning 'cat'.

<sup>43</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, sub 'Sultana'. Cp. It. surname Soldano.

<sup>44</sup> WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (2000), sub 'Ta' Sultan'. Cp. Salīma Sulṭāna Mughal, a poetess, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VI, p. 488; Sulṭāna bint Aḥmad al-Sudayri, *ibid.*, supplement, p. 305. Locally the surname **Sultana** surely originated in Gozo.

<sup>45</sup> Otherwise a Romance origin is equally logical: < It. *mannara*, dialectal form of *mannaia*, < Late Lat. *manuaria* meaning 'axe', 'hatchet', (a) a metonym for a user, maker, or seller of such tools, or (b) a byname for a menacing, sinister person.

<sup>46</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 156. Zahra was the nickname of Fāṭima, Muḥammad's daughter.

selves from the widespread Arabic use of such words in personal nomenclature, during the re-Christianization period.<sup>47</sup> The Arabic terms seem to have been at first replaced by the Latin *de* or Italian *di* and eventually dropped altogether. This means that ‘Maltese’ Semitic surnames do not have the equivalent of Jackson, O’Neil, Fitzpatrick, or Degiorgio, for that matter.

However the surname **Agius** needs particular attention. Ibn al-‘Ağūz, meaning ‘son of the old woman’, is actually the epithet applied by the Arabs to the biblical prophet Ezekiel (Ar. *Alīsa‘*, *Alyasa‘*), due to his parentage.<sup>48</sup> Admittedly, another sound conjecture, equally pointing to an Ar. origin, can be ventured. The term can be a syncopated form of surname Agegius, a Gk. form of medieval Siculo-Arabic surnames Caggegi, Chagegi, < Ar. surname Ḥaġi, < Ar. *ḥaġġaġ* meaning ‘a frequent performer of the *ḥaġ* or pilgrimage to Mecca and of the religious rites and ceremonies ordained for the occasion’.<sup>49</sup>

Otherwise *nasab* names have survived in local toponymy, as exemplified by Bin Ġhisa (< ‘Īsā), Bin Ġhali (< ‘Alī), and Bingemma (< Gemma, a non-Sem. name).

### Nisba surnames

No *nisba* surnames related to clan, tribe, or sect affiliation can be verified, barring the possible case of **Mamo** (*supra*). Otherwise provenance and occupational *nisbas* are quite copious. The commonest surname in Malta is **Borg**. It has been identified with Ar. *al-burġi*,<sup>50</sup> < Ar. *burġ* meaning ‘cairn’, ‘a pile of stones heaped up as a memorial tomb, or land mark’, and by extension ‘bastion’, ‘tower’, ‘fortified country house’,<sup>51</sup> in which case the term refers to someone who hailed from a borgo or a walled town.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (1999), p. 338.

<sup>48</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), pp. 151-2; *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, p. 404; FIORINI, *op. cit.* (1987-88), p. 113. In Islamic countries bordering on or near the Mediterranean, certain days of recurrent bad weather, generally towards the end of winter, are called *Ayyām al-‘Ağūz*, ‘the days of the old woman’. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, p. 792. Cp. Mal. *ghaġuża* meaning ‘haġ’.

<sup>49</sup> AGIUS, *op. cit.*, p. 262. Cp. Romanian *bugiu* meaning ‘pilgrim’. PELLEGRINI, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>50</sup> Medieval nickname (and surname) *il Burgi* (documented in a Militia List of 1419) confirms this derivation.

<sup>51</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, p. 1315; AGIUS, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

<sup>52</sup> The term occurs in many European languages, albeit carrying different shades of meaning. Gk. *purgos*, Lat. *burgos*, and It. *borgo* denote a walled town; Old High German *burg* refers to a fortification, while Old Eng. *burc* specifically indicates the site of a prehistoric hill fort. Hence the similarity of the local surname with North European forms (e.g. Scandinavian Borg, Berg) is not merely coincidental. Cp. Eng. surnames Burke and Burgh, Fr. surname Bourg, It. surname Borghi, and Sp. surname Burgos.

Common surname **Caruana** is usually meant to be a Latinized form of *al-karawānī* meaning 'a native of or an immigrant originating from Qayrawān'.<sup>53</sup> Qayrawān is the Moslem sacred city south of Tunis, today known as Qairwan or Kairouan.<sup>54</sup> The final *-a* reflects again the influence of Romance morphology. Alternatively the family name can be associated with an occupational *nisba*, as Siculo-Arabic *caruana* (also *caruvana*, *cara-vana*) meaning 'a multitude of people or workers, especially of dockers or lightermen', derives < Ar. *harwā* meaning 'cortege', 'gathering (of people)', probably added to the Berber suffix *-ana*,<sup>55</sup> or directly < *kārwan* meaning 'a caravan, composed of horses, mules, donkeys, and especially camels', or < *qayrawān* meaning 'caravan', 'train of people traveling together', ultimately < Persian *kārawān*.<sup>56</sup> Hence the term probably refers to a caravan man.<sup>57</sup>

**Barbara** is presumably derived from Ar. *nisba al-barbarī* meaning 'Berber', 'an aboriginal inhabitant of Barbary, N. Africa', in which case it is related to medieval Mal. surname **Berberi**.<sup>58</sup> **Curmi** might be related to Ar. *al-kurmī*, < *Kirim* (Crimea), hence denoting a native of or an immigrant originating from the Crimea'.<sup>59</sup> However one cannot ignore the possible link with Ar. *karmī* meaning 'generous', 'noble',<sup>60</sup> or Ar. *qurmiyeh* meaning 'tree trunk'.<sup>61</sup> **Cutajar** is usually linked with Sic. top. Cutaia, itself < Ar. *quttayab*, a diminutive form of *qatat*, *qitāt* meaning 'hill top', 'crest'. Ar.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Kayrawānī was the sobriquet of a famous Ar. grammarian of the 5<sup>th</sup> century of the He-gira. AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 151.

<sup>54</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1987-90), *sub* 'karwān'. The city, founded in 670 A.D., owes its name to the Berber tribe Takarwān. The Aghlabid governor established his authority there in 800 A.D.

<sup>55</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* 'Caruana'.

<sup>56</sup> AGIUS, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

<sup>57</sup> Kārwan is ostensibly a word of Iranian origin, later Arabicized, whence Eng. *caravan*. Its early form *kārbān*, meaning 'supervising work', probably evolved in the Pahlavi period, but the more widespread meaning dates from the early Islamic period. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, p. 676. A third derivation has been suggested: < Sic. *caruana*, *carvana* meaning 'castor-oil plant', < Ar. *ḥarwā*. CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* 'Caruana'; PELLEGRINI, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>58</sup> AGIUS, *op. cit.*, p. 80. Ar. *barbarī* means 'Nubian-speaking Muslim inhabiting the Nile Banks between the First and Third Cataracts'. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, p. 1028. Otherwise **Barbara** is an It. surname, < Imperial Lat. f.n. *Barbaras*, < medieval Gk. *Barbāra*, < *bárbaros* meaning (a) 'stammerer', or (b) 'stranger (who speaks in a foreign tongue)'. E. DE FELICE, *Dizionario dei Cognomi Italiani*, Milano, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1978, *sub* 'Bàrbaro'. The term was originally an onomatopoeic word formed in imitation of the unintelligible babbling of non-Greeks.

<sup>59</sup> FIORINI, *op. cit.* (1987-88), pp. 111-2. Kurmi (or Kormi) was actually an ancient city of Ly-cia, Turkey; the name, of uncertain termination. Otherwise **Curmi** is an It. surname < top. Curma, a locality Zaffarena; the name itself probably < a dialectal form (involving rhotacism) of It. *colma* meaning 'high water (spring)', < Lat. *culmen* meaning 'summit'. CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* 'Curmi'.

<sup>60</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* 'Curmo'; DESSOULAVY, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

*rahl quttayah* actually means ‘village on a hilltop’.<sup>62</sup> **Saydon** has been tentatively linked to top. Saida (or Sayda), the city and port in S.W. Lebanon, once the commercial capital centre of ancient Phoenicia,<sup>63</sup> but it might be a Latinized form of Ar. name Zaydūn.<sup>64</sup> **Bugeja** is supposedly derived < top. Bougie (It. Bougia), city and port of N.W. Algeria, now called Bejaia.<sup>65</sup> **Zarb** is an apocopated form of Sic. surname Zarbo, < *zzarbu* meaning ‘barrier’, ‘boundary wall’, ultimately < Ar. *zarb* meaning (a) ‘cattle pen’, or (b) ‘hunter’s booth’, or (c) ‘hedge’, ‘thicket’, ‘enclosure’.<sup>66</sup> In its present state it is unclear whether the original term indicated a specific location or a mere nickname.

The most conspicuous provenance *nisba* surname in Malta is undoubtedly **Gauci**. It clearly derives from *al-Ġawdišī* meaning ‘Gozitan’, ‘a native of Gozo’;<sup>67</sup> it is hence a medieval Latinized transcription of Mal. *Għawdxi*.

Occupational *nisba* surnames are also quite common. **Farrugia** relates to *al-farrūġ* meaning ‘poultry man’, ‘chicken keeper’, < Ar. *farrūġ* meaning ‘chicken’, ‘hen’.<sup>68</sup> The final *-a*, again, reflects the influence of Romance morphology.<sup>69</sup> **Calafato** is actually an It. surname, which is itself an offshoot

<sup>62</sup> The excrescent final *-r* in the present-day form of the surname is an epithesis that does not antedate the 17<sup>th</sup> century and begins to appear only in documents from Valletta and the Three Cities. FIORINI, *op. cit.* (1987-88), p. 112. The suggestion that the surname **Cutajar** derives < obsolete Sem. Mal. *ketajjar* meaning ‘slightly numerous’, ‘quite abundant’, itself < *kattar* meaning ‘to multiply’, cannot be dismissed, either. Al-Kuṭayyir was a famous poet of the Omayyad period; his name is linked to Ar. *kaṭīr* meaning ‘numerous’, ‘plentiful’. Cp. Ibn Kuṭayyir al-Ahwāzī. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VI, p. 351.

<sup>63</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 155. The present designation is not regarded as a direct continuation of the ancient city of Sidon, but a development of post-Crusader times. Some have suggested that the name of the city means ‘fishery’. Others contend that it is related to *saidān* meaning ‘copper’, ‘gold’. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IX, p. 100. If there is a connection with Saidan, then it is related to **Said** (*infra*).

<sup>64</sup> Cp. Abū ’l-Walid Ibn Zaydūn (1003-1070), famous Andalusian poet. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, p. 591; *ibid.*, III, p. 973. Ar. f.n. **Zayd** means ‘increase, growth’. Second element might be: (a) Ar. elative suffix *-ūn*; (b) Heb. dim. or patronymic suffix *-ōn*; or (c) Romance augmentative suffix *-un* (*-one*).

<sup>65</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 154. The city has long been celebrated for the manufacture of bougies (wax candles); whence It. *bugia* meaning ‘candlestick with a saucer-like base’. J. AQUILINA, “Linguistic Poutpourri”, *The Sunday Times [of Malta]*, 31 August 1986. There are, at least, two alternative derivations: (a) < Sic. surname Bug(g)ea, possibly < Gk. *\*boukéas*, probably < *boukaíos* meaning ‘cowherd’, ‘herdsman’, or (b) < Sic. surname Buggia, < Salentine and Sic. *bbuggia* meaning ‘poacher’s bag’, a metonym for a maker of hunting bags. CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Bugea’ and ‘Buggia’. Otherwise the element *Bu-* (< *Abū*) might suggest a *kunyah*, but no conjecture to this effect has been put forward until now.

<sup>66</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.*, (1964), p. 156; CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Zarbu’.

<sup>67</sup> AGIUS, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>68</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 155; CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Farrūġa’.

<sup>69</sup> **Farrugia** is the third commonest surname in Malta. *Farrūġ* is a robe similar to the *kabā’*, but short in the back, worn in the Prophet’s time; its application as a name element has not been,

of medieval Gk. *kalaphátis*; however, it ultimately derives < Ar. *al-qalfāt* meaning ‘ship-caulker’.<sup>70</sup> **Camillieri**, the second commonest surname in Malta, is linked with It. *cammelliere*, < medieval Lat. *camelarius* or medieval Gk. *kamelaríos*, ultimately < Ar. *qamillārī* meaning ‘camel driver’.<sup>71</sup> **Seychell** has been linked with Ar. *al-sayqal*,<sup>72</sup> probably < *sayqāl* (pl. *sayāqil*) meaning ‘furbisher’, ‘polisher’.<sup>73</sup> **Bajada** (or **Bajjada**) has been linked with either Ar. *bayyād* meaning ‘whitewasher’, or else *bayyāda* meaning ‘washer-woman’, or perhaps ‘cleaner of copper items’.<sup>74</sup>

**Cassar** is surely another occupational *nisba*, but various meanings have been proposed. The standard etymology of *al-qaṣṣār* suggests ‘a fuller or a bleacher; one who cleans, shrinks and thickens, or dyes cloth or newly shorn wool’.<sup>75</sup> Other possible denotations are ‘stone-cutter’, ‘nattier’, ‘mat-maker’ (if derived < *al-ḥaṣṣār*),<sup>76</sup> and ‘a washer of clothes and also of the dead’ (if derived < *ḡassāl*).<sup>77</sup>

maybe justifiably, pondered. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Glossary & Index of Terms to Vol. I-IX*, p. 104. Otherwise **Farrugia** may be another form of Calabrian and Sic. surname *Farruggia*, (a) < dialectal *ferruggia* meaning ‘staff’, ‘rod’, ‘bishop’s crosier’; or (b) < It. *farro*, < Lat. *far*, Medieval Lat. *farru(m)*, a rarely cultivated kind of wheat. In the latter sense it is hence related to southern It. surname *Farrusi*.

<sup>70</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Calafato’; AGIUS, *op. cit.*, p. 380. Boat and ship-builders used to caulk (fill up) the seams and joints of wooden vessels with oakum and tar to make them watertight.

<sup>71</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Camillieri’. Cp. Sp. *camellero*, ‘camel rider’. Otherwise Sp. *camillero* means ‘stretcher bearer’. The name of the old Mal. hamlet **Hal Milleri**, located between Żurrieq and Mqabba, actually means ‘(Ca)milleri’s farmstead’. WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (2000), p. 284. Hence the surname is not an abbreviation of Ca(sal) Milleri, as has been suggested elsewhere.

<sup>72</sup> WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (2000), *sub* ‘Ta’ Sejkkel’.

<sup>73</sup> Cp. Ibn al-Saykāl (1302), renowned man of letters and philologist. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VIII, p. 805. Another possible derivation might be Ar. *al-Siqillī*, ‘the Sicilian’.

<sup>74</sup> E. SERRACINO-INGLOTT, *Il-Miklem Malti*, I, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1975, *sub* ‘bajjada’. Ar. geonym *bayād* means ‘heath’, ‘moor’, ‘wasteland’. This derivation also explains the Sic. surname *Baiada*. CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Baiada’. WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (2000), *sub* ‘Il-Bajjada’, explains *bajjada* as ‘whitish land, referring to the whiteness of the soil or rock’. Cp. Hanafī Kamāl al-Dīn al-Bayādī (d. 1687), Ottoman writer, and al-Bayād, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VI, p. 848.

<sup>75</sup> The Moroccan scholar ‘Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammed al-Kaṣṣār (1531/2-1604) is said to have been called *al-Kassār* (‘the fuller’) because one of his ancestors had had a fuller as his tutor. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, p. 736. The work of the fuller was to scour and thicken the raw cloth by beating and trampling it in water. Cp. Eng. surnames Fuller and Walker.

<sup>76</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Cassar’. It has to be said that another derivation has been proposed – the apocopated form of surname *Cässaro*, < Sic. *cässaru* meaning ‘main road’, ‘way (leading to a castle)’, < Ar. *qaṣr* meaning ‘castle’, ‘fort’, ‘palace’, ultimately from Lat. *castrum*. The accent on the first syllable confirms that, originally, this was a separate surname; it might have eventually merged with the former due to the orthographic similarity. Metonymically, the term might refer to a castellan, or a governor of a castle.

<sup>77</sup> The latter is more known as *ḡbāsīl*. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Glossary & Index of Terms to Vol. I-IX*, p. 115.

### Laqab and nabaz surnames

*Laqab* surnames conveying some sort of honorific title are **Mula**, **Said**, **Chetcuti**, and **Sciberras**. **Mula** might be derived < Ar. *mawla* (*mullāb*) meaning ‘lord’, ‘master’, ‘ruler’, a title of respect given by Mohammedans to religious dignitaries versed in theology and the sacred law.<sup>78</sup> **Said** might be related to Ar. *sayyid* meaning ‘sir’, ‘lord’, ‘master’, ‘esquire’. Originally the term meant ‘chief of an Arabian tribe’; late in Islamic times, it became a title of honour for the descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fātima and his son-in-law ‘Alī.<sup>79</sup> But an *’ism* derivation is also possible, if one considers Ar. f.n. Sa’īd (e.g. one of the most successful military commanders during the early years of Islam) meaning ‘happy’, ‘blissful’, ‘prosperous’. Saidi and Saidani are N. African cognate forms, but the surname was also adopted by Sephardic Jews in the Middle Ages. **Chetcuti** derives perhaps < Ar. *kethuda* (or *kathuda*) meaning ‘master of the house’, ‘head of the family’, ‘headsman’, ‘chieftain’, ‘steward’, ‘tithe-officer in a town’. The term can hence also qualify as an occupational *nisba*.<sup>80</sup> **Sciberras** (or **Sceberras**, **Xiberras**) might be derived < Ar. Šihab er-Rās, wherein the first element is a given name meaning ‘bright star’ and the second element *ras* means ‘chieftain’.<sup>81</sup>

Surnames derived from nicknames are quite plentiful in Malta. **Micallef**, the seventh commonest surname in Malta, can be related to Ar. *mukallaf*, which in Muslim law denotes one who is obliged to fulfill the religious duties of Islam.<sup>82</sup> However, most local scholars argue that the surname is a Sicilianized form of Ar. *muḥallif* meaning ‘judge’, agent derivative

<sup>78</sup> Cp. Mal. *Mulej*, < Ar. *Mawlāy* meaning ‘my Lord’. FIORINI, *op. cit.* (1987-88), p. 106, suggests the term was also used as a given name. The title of function, dignity, profession, or rank is usually followed by another name. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VII, p. 221. Otherwise the surname might be < It. *mula*, < Lat. *mula* meaning ‘she-mule’, or < *mulo*, < Neo-Gk. *moulās*, < Late Gk. *moulos*, < Lat. *mūlus* meaning ‘mule’ + agent suffix *-ās*, referring to a mule driver. CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Mulà’.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. al-Sayyid al-Himyārī, Shī’ite poet (723-789/95). *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IX, p. 115.

<sup>80</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Glossary & Index of Terms to Vol. I-IX*, p. 193. Cp. *Kathudā* Ibrāhīm Pasha (also known as *Kathudā* Pasha), governor of Egypt (active 1078-85). *Ibid.*, I, p. 955. AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1987-90), *sub* ‘ketket’, suggests another, albeit weaker, derivation: < Ar. *katkūt* meaning ‘newly hatched chicken’, perhaps a metonym for a poultterer. Cp. obsolete Mal. *ketkuti* meaning ‘one who calls fowls, or cackles, or laughs up one’s sleeve’.

<sup>81</sup> . Other possible derivations are (a) Ar. *xa’b al-rās* meaning ‘the spur of the headland’ – AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1987-90), *sub* ‘Xiberras’; (b) Ar. *ḥabb al-ra’s*, related to Sic. *cabbarasi*, *cabburasi*, a kind of grass which grows in meadows and other humid places – CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* ‘Sciabar-rà’; and (c) Ar. *ashāb al-ras* meaning ‘the people of the ditch (or well)’, a Quranic term, possibly alluding to infidels. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Glossary & Index of Terms to Vol. I-IX*, p. 26.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II, p. 79. In Egypt the term *mukallafa* was used to designate the land survey registers, which were prepared by a *māsib* and arrayed by villages.

< *alaf* meaning ‘to swear (by God)’, in which case it would qualify as an occupational *nisba*.<sup>83</sup> **Theuma** might be derived < Ar. *al-tawm* meaning ‘twin (brother)’,<sup>84</sup> but Ar. *al-tawmi* also means ‘a grower or vendor of garlic’, < *tūm*, *-a* meaning ‘garlic’,<sup>85</sup> which designates an occupational *nisba*. **Scriha** (or **Scirha**, **Schriha**, **Xriha**) is related either (a) to Ar. *šarik* meaning ‘friend’, ‘colleague’,<sup>86</sup> or else (b) to Ar. *šariq* meaning ‘handsome lad’.<sup>87</sup> **Mintoff** is a relatively recent and learned form of old surname Mintuf; it derives < Ar. *mintūf* meaning ‘plucked (feathers of fowl, hairs of eyebrows, etc.)’, probably referring to someone who had the habit of plucking his beard.<sup>88</sup> If originally the term was preceded by the term ‘*Abū*’, it could have had the status of a *dū* name, meaning ‘the man with the plucked beard.’

**Fenech** is surely related to Ar. *fanak* (< Persian *fanak*) meaning ‘fox’, ‘marten’, ‘furred animal’,<sup>89</sup> whence medieval Lat. *alfanegue*. The *laqab* might refer to a fleet-footed or timid person.<sup>90</sup> **Zerafa**, on the other hand, relates to Ar. *zarāfab* meaning ‘giraffe’, probably referring to a tall (or long-necked) person.<sup>91</sup> If originally these names were preceded by the term ‘*Abū*’, they could be considered as other *kunyabs* with zoological connections.

Not all nicknames have a harmless signification; some are inversely invested with pejorative connotations. **Mifsud** has been coupled with either (a) Ar. *mafsūd* (p.p. of *fised*) meaning ‘rotten’, ‘spoilt’, ‘corrupt’, referring

<sup>83</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 155. Ar. *muhallaf*, meaning ‘left behind’, should not be ignored, either. Cf. CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, sub ‘Micalēf’. The element *-callef* relates to Old Sic. surnames Callef, Caleffa/i, < Ar. *al-halaf* meaning ‘successor’. Pellegrini, *op. cit.*, p. 386; *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VIII, p. 900.

<sup>84</sup> Cp. Mal. nickname *It-Tewmi* meaning ‘the Twin’. It. surnames Toma, Tomè (diminutive forms of Tommaso), Fr. surname Thomé, and Eng. f.n. (and surname) Thomas, all derive < Aramaic byname *t’ūma*, also meaning ‘twin’. Lat. *Thomae* is the genitive case of Thomas.

<sup>85</sup> AGIUS, *op. cit.*, p. 86. This derivation has been repudiated by WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (1999), p. 329. The surname has also been linked with given names Thomea or Bartholomea. WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (1978), p. 205.

<sup>86</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, sub ‘Scirica’.

<sup>87</sup> Ar. *al-šarqī* meaning ‘the easterner’, rendering a provenance *nisba*, cannot be ignored, either.

<sup>88</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1987-90), sub ‘mintuf’ and ‘nitef’. The traditional Arab writer ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Ayyāh, active in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, was nicknamed al-Mentūf because he had the habit of pulling the ends of his beard while speaking. WETTINGER, *op. cit.* (1999), p. 343-4. Locally the surname **Mintuf** originated in Gozo.

<sup>89</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 155.

<sup>90</sup> The *fennec* or *fennek* is a small, pale orange-brown, desert fox of North Africa and Syria. The term also refers to various animals whose pelt was greatly esteemed in the luxury fur-trade, such as the ermine and sable. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II, p. 775. Mal. *fenek* means ‘rabbit’.

<sup>91</sup> Alternatively, the surname might represent (a) Ar. f.n. Zarīfa meaning ‘pretty’, ‘gracious’, ‘smart’, related to *zarf* meaning ‘courtesy’, ‘elegance’ – *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Glossary & Index of Terms to Vol. I-IX*, p. 424 or (b) a voiced form of Ar. *al-sarrāf* meaning ‘money changer’; the final *-a* reflecting the influence of Romance morphology.

to an obnoxious person,<sup>92</sup> or else (b) Ar. *mafsūd* (p.p. of *fasad*) meaning literally 'bled', figuratively referring to an ill-tempered, outspoken person.<sup>93</sup> In other quarters, the surname has been interpreted as a personal name based on *mafsūd* meaning 'lanced', < *mifsad* meaning 'lance'.<sup>94</sup> **Scerri** (or **Xerri**) is considered to be the pl. form of Sic. surname Scerra, < *sciarra* meaning 'brawl', 'dispute', (a) < Ar. *šarra* meaning 'evil', 'bad', 'wicked',<sup>95</sup> or (b) < Ar. *širri* meaning 'clandestine', or (c) < Ar. *šarri* meaning 'bold', 'impetuous'. All derivations seem to refer to an ill-natured, quarrelsome person. Surname Tabone is usually linked with either (a) Sic. *tabbuni* meaning 'fool', 'dullard', 'blockhead', < Ar. *tabūn* meaning 'vulva', 'female pudenda',<sup>96</sup> or else with (b) Sic. *tabbuna*, < Ar. *al-ṭabūnī*, < *ṭabūn*, *ṭabūna* meaning 'dug-out hearth', 'small jar-shaped oven, (peasant) kiln low on the ground',<sup>97</sup> in which case it would qualify as an occupational *nisba* for a baker of bread, or perhaps for a potter.

### Conclusion

Many names may be correctly interpreted simply by recourse to dictionaries of the older state of the contributory languages, but no proof of the authenticity of these readings is possible without a strand of documentary evidence taking the family name back to the days of surname-naming, and an ample supply of good early spellings that leave the first 'meaning' in doubt. Surnames have been pounded and contorted by generations of mispronunciations, mainly by meddling clerks, scribes, and priests susceptible to their idiosyncrasies.

In spite of my seemingly streamlined typology, it must be emphasized that some surnames can, with equal lucidity, be allotted to a different category. Admittedly, in Arabic nomenclature itself the dividing line between *isms* and *laqabs*, and between *laqabs* and *nisbas* is quite fragile. Besides, as it transpires, some seemingly Semitic surnames, can be easily consigned a

<sup>92</sup> AQUILINA, *op. cit.* (1987-90), *sub* 'mifsud'. Cp. Mal. *mfiſsed* (same root) meaning 'spoil (child)', 'pampered'.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, *sub* 'mifsud'.

<sup>94</sup> Hanks (ed.), *op. cit.*, *sub* 'Mifsud'.

<sup>95</sup> CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* 'Sciarra'.

<sup>96</sup> This transferred meaning is maintained in the Mal. equivalent term *ghoxx* (vulgar). G. ROHLFS, *Soprannomi siciliani*, 'Lessici siciliani' 2, Palermo, Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, 1984, records the nickname *Tabbiuni* (p. 128) in Messina and the nickname *Tabbuna* (p. 129) in Agrigento, both meaning 'simpleton', 'dunce'.

<sup>97</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Glossary & Index of Terms to Vol. I-IX*, pp. 389-90; CARACAUSI, *op. cit.*, *sub* 'Tabbone'.

Romance, Greek, or even Germanic etymology with the same degree of reasonable judgment. This has prompted the author to omit other possible entries. In fact a handful of other surnames, such as Attard, Bencini, Bonaci, Briffa, Casha, Fiteni, Gellel, Mercieca, Muscat, and Musumeci might have a Semitic origin as well, but lack of sufficient philological evidence calls for more prudence than customary.

It could be observed that almost all Maltese surnames cited in this paper are to be detected also in Sicily, which makes perfect sense, as Sicily itself bellies its fair share of Arabisms. In Girolamo Caracausi's *Dizionario Onomastico della Sicilia* (1994) one encounters the vast majority of 'Maltese' surnames, either as they stand or else in some cognate or related form. Local surnames of Arabic stock are actually written in the Latin script; as for whole centuries, Siculo-Italian was the *lingua franca* of the professional ranks in Malta. Notaries, scribes, and priests, for want of an indigenous orthographic system, had no other way but to Sicilianize or Italianize the surnames they entered in wills, contracts, parish registers, and other official records.

Accounts of the origins of many individual surnames, in the present state of our knowledge, contain an element of tentativeness; admittedly, some are more tentative than others. This paper contains a number of entries for which only vague conjectures could be suggested. The possibilities of error in the interpretation of surnames are innumerable, and it is necessary in every instance to trace back the name to the earliest known spellings. Some meanings (and origins) remain elusive, or inadequately explained; these stand as a challenge to future researchers.

### *Symbols & Abbreviations*

*	hypothetical/reconstructed form	Heb.	Hebrew
<	(derived) from	It.	Italian
Ar.	Arabic	Jew.	Jewish
Cf.	Confer	Lat.	Latin
Cp.	Compare	Mal.	Maltese
d.	died	pl.	plural
Eng.	English	p.p.	past participle
f.n.	first name	Sem.	Semitic
Fr.	French	Sic.	Sicilian
Gk.	Greek	Sp.	Spanish
Gmc	Germanic	top.	toponym

