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The Cognitive Landscape of Seventeenth Century Malta:

Communicating Information in a Cosmopolitan Society

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The framework of this study

The cognitive landscape, the proposed framework for this chapter, is built on theories of information and meaning. In essence, the cognitive landscape includes the written word in state and ecclesiastical documents, and the spoken word at all levels of society. It is the language used to communicate information, whether from top to bottom, bottom to top, or laterally, in a diversified cultural-linguistic and religious society. What is presented here, in the context of seventeenth-century Malta, is the word as officially pronounced by the Order of the Knights Hospitaller on land and sea; the language of the Inquisition court officials and witnesses' testimonials; of the clergy in their liturgical ceremonies and pastoral duties; of professionals when drafting contracts; of skilled/unskilled workers; and, importantly, of the common people and the slaves.

Background to the study

The huge number of Muslim slaves captured by the Order had a significant effect on the islands and it is the interaction between Catholic Malta and those Muslim slaves which forms a central focus of this study of the Roman Inquisition in the early seventeenth century, whose mission was to safeguard the Catholic faith on the islands. Any possible adulteration of the church's teachings had to be rigorously policed; hence the tribunal inquisition of Sellem Bin Al-Sheikh Mansur and the

possible effects his performance of magic had on the population, including the knights themselves.

The trial of Sellem (Ar. Sālim) in 1605 brings out different facets of his life: from his beginnings in Cairo as an astrologer;¹ then as a slave rower on the Maltese galleys;² to his being a practitioner of magic and geomancy on land;³ and his life in Malta, mixing with the aristocratic elite, commoners, and slaves. All these things were testified by Sellem himself and witnesses at court. Such testimonials were delivered via the spoken word and documented by the *notarius*, the clerk who was under oath to write in principle every word uttered by the witness and even record any body language expressed.⁴

The inquisitional records and those of the Holy Office are a vital source for our understanding of the lives of the common people, a hidden history, not considered important by the overwhelmingly naval and military historians of the Hospitaller Order,⁵ nor by church historians in Malta who, until recently,⁶ have given little account of the islands' socio-cultural and linguistic communities. The inquisitorial proceedings help to shed light on this shaded history of the common people by providing us with a written record of the words spoken by witnesses who resided on the islands in an environment where different languages were spoken in the cities and harbor areas, and on board the galleys. While Latin was the language of the state, the church and the Inquisition's official business, the seventeenth-century

¹ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 295r, l. 13. From his own statement at court we know that Sellem's father, Al-Sheikh Mansur, was an astrologist (by no means a low profession, even a learned one), and that he claimed he learnt astrology from his father and that he came from a family of astrologers: AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 295v, l. 11. Note that Medieval Muslim scholars 'permitted the study of astrology provided [they] acknowledged that God is the main source of any influence on earthly events'; see Gadelrab, *Medical healers* 385.

² AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 300v, ll. 23, 24-8; fol. 301v, ll. 1-2.

³ *Ibid.* fol. 296r, ll. 10-15; fol. 309v, ll. 3-4.

⁴ This was not always the case, however; for example, two letters from Rome criticized the Inquisition in Malta for its laxity in such matters: AIM Corr. 88, fol. 96r, which is dated from Rome, June 4, 1605; AIM Corr. 2, fol. 150r dated April 22, 1611.

⁵ It needs to be mentioned though that documentation dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the Order's navy, knights, galleys and rowers, though fragmentary, comes from the Order's historians, Giacomo Bosio and Bartolomeo Dal Pozzo. Bosio (d. 1627) wrote the history of the Order up to 1571 while Dal Pozzo (year of death unknown) served as the Order's principal chronicler, collating information up to 1688; he is credited with recording at some length the chronicles of the galleys. Ettore Rossi (d. 1955) in modern times provided a fuller account of this subject.

⁶ Especial mention should be made of Frans Ciappara and Carmel Cassar's ground-breaking works: see Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition*; Cassar, *Society, culture and identity*.

knights spoke French, Spanish, Portuguese and German among other languages; the ecclesiastics spoke European languages but mostly Italian. It is worth noting that the inquisitors came from Italy and were only in Malta for a short time. The professionals and occupational workers spoke several languages, including Italian and regional dialects, of which Sicilian was the most prominent; the ordinary workers spoke Maltese, and slaves spoke Arabic and Turkish.

Although Maltese was the language spoken by the indigenous population in their domestic lives, in the streets, shops and taverns, and overwhelmingly in the countryside, Malta was truly 'one of the most cosmopolitan places' as the traveller, Hieronymus Welsch, observed on his visit to the island in the early seventeenth century.⁷ Its mixed cultural-linguistic environment, as we shall see, gave birth to a *lingua franca* necessary to negotiate effective communication in a pluralistic society where languages worked in 'a wide range of varieties for handling the different kinds and levels of relationship.'⁸ Linguistic plurality was the norm and a common language to facilitate communication was intrinsic at all levels. I am not talking here of the Kahanes' concept of a Mediterranean mixed language, a hybrid Romance pidgin borrowing from a number of languages;⁹ rather I am writing of a vehicular language understood by all. The subject of a *lingua franca* in the Mediterranean context is wide and complex, and over the centuries has had different registers that were used regionally according to their linguistic and cultural needs, as studies by Schuchardt,¹⁰ Wansbrough,¹¹ Borg,¹² Burke,¹³ Cifoletti,¹⁴ Dakhliya,¹⁵ Brosch¹⁶ and Dursteler¹⁷ have shown (*inter alia*).

Multilingualism in the Early Modern Mediterranean was extensive.¹⁸ As evidenced by numerous sources, Italian's popularity as a common medium of

⁷ Friggieri and Freller, *Malta: The bulwark of Europe* 23.

⁸ Crystal, *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language* 42.

⁹ Kahane and Kahane, *Lingua franca* 25-41. See also Kahane et al., *The lingua franca of the Levant*.

¹⁰ Schuchardt, *The lingua franca*.

¹¹ Wansbrough, *Diplomatica siciliana*.

¹² Borg, *Mediterranean influences*.

¹³ Burke, *Languages and communities*.

¹⁴ Cifoletti, *La lingua franca barbaresca*.

¹⁵ Dakhliya, *Lingua franca*.

¹⁶ Brosch, *Conceptual history*.

¹⁷ Dursteler, *Speaking in tongues*.

¹⁸ Wansbrough, *Diplomatica siciliana* 16-18.

communication was well known in several Mediterranean regions.¹⁹ It appears, however, that the use of a common Italian language in Early Modern Malta has not been discussed in *lingua franca* studies. Thus, here we have an interesting scenario of a common Italian language developing in the linguistically mixed zones of a state run by the Order of the Knights Hospitaller.

In this chapter I will discuss the linguistic mosaic, both written and spoken, that early modern Malta experienced; the interlocutors' perceptions of language and power; and the way languages were communicated, 'not distinguishing or differentiating, among peoples.'²⁰ An attempt to study in this period the orality and literacy of the Maltese in the cities and countryside was pioneered by the historian, C. Cassar, in the 1990s, drawing on examples from different sources and providing insightful comments on the use of a common Italian language from the mid-sixteenth century to the eighteenth century;²¹ while the Italianist and linguist, J. Brincat, examined the common use of Tuscan Italian during the Order of St John's presence on the islands.²² These studies are the beginning of a diachronic approach to the study of language contact and development on the Maltese Islands, but the present study takes a different approach as it synchronically examines the complex linguistic and cultural scenario of a mixed society, looking at examples from different contemporary sources and the inquisitional document of 1605 which is the focal point of this volume. I will look at how the languages were used and their relationships to cultural behaviors, and how these can be interpreted in the light of a cognitive landscape theory for early seventeenth-century Malta.

The linguistic scenario in an elite community:

The written and spoken word

Any official statement by the state, the church and the papal Inquisition was in Latin, but edicts issued by the Holy Office were sometimes in Italian. These were to be

¹⁹ Dursteler, *Speaking in tongues* 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 54.

²¹ Cassar, *Society, culture and identity* 155-98.

²² Brincat, *Maltese and other languages* 145-82, 190-224.

hung on church doors and also had to be translated for Maltese congregations during or after church services as many were illiterate.²³ At the inquisitional court, while questions, statements and sentences were pronounced by an inquisitor in Latin, witnesses' testimonials were recorded by a *notarius*, commonly in Tuscan or Venetian Italian due to these officials' training in regions where those registers were spoken. The *notarii* were also usually conversant in Maltese and a linguistic variation of Italian. The process of minuting, interpreting and translating statements verbally uttered by the inquisitional officers in Latin or Italian and those of witnesses in Italian or Maltese must have been laborious. This was a daily routine and from the cases I have seen none of the *notarii* commented on the linguistic complexity of the process. We have in Sellem's court, master notary Luca Gauci²⁴, the same person appointed for Georgio Scala's hearing. Monica Borg credits him for '[his] skills without which, considering the multi-lingual and multi-cultural scenario in Malta, the smooth functioning of the tribunal would have been seriously jeopardized.'²⁵ Similar words can be expressed for his competence in this composite case of Sellem.

If a different language was used by the witness, then an interpreter was appointed to translate from the written/spoken source to the target language, i.e. Italian. We find in Sellem's case that no interpreter was needed thus suggesting that he spoke Maltese or, possibly, Italian, as we learn from his testimonial that the 'flasks' used in connection with magic were seen by him in Naples.²⁶ However, Master Giovanni de Cuisa was appointed by the Inquisition to translate the written Arabic on magic cards and scraps of paper,²⁷ but, to the disappointment of the inquisitor and officials, he was not competent to translate the unconnected Arabic letters containing a magic message. This would have required a skilled translator familiar with all sorts of magic formulae.

The elite community, the knights, clergy, and professionals were mostly monolingual in a European language, as noted earlier; a number of them were

²³ See Agius, An introduction 25; Brincat, *Maltese and other languages* 198.

²⁴ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 294r, l. 16.

²⁵ Borg, The case of Georgio Scala 202.

²⁶ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 321v, l. 19.

²⁷ Ibid. fol. 308v, l. 29.

bilingual with Italian as a common language, and a smaller number were trilingual, conversing in Maltese.

That a few knights learnt Maltese, as the historian Agius De Soldanis (d. 1770) noted, is of interest to this study, although he was referring to a later period. They learnt it not through a prescribed grammar text but by mixing with the locals, thus showing a linguistic curiosity among the knights to learn the indigenous language²⁸ even though, as one visitor to Malta, J.F. Breithaupt, in 1632 remarked: ‘foreigners find [Maltese] hard to speak.’²⁹ Also of interest, contemporary to the year of Sellem’s court proceedings, is the compilation of a word/phrase-list in Maltese by the Swabian, Hieronymus Megiser (d. 1618), parts of which were published in 1603 and 1606 consecutively.³⁰ The point here is that Megiser provided the earliest record we have of a vocabulary-list in a travelogue, and so a linguistic glimpse of the Maltese spoken at the time.³¹ There is a medieval Maltese (fifteenth-century) poem recorded by a *notarius*, Don Brandan de Caxaro, who was possibly of Maltese origin.³² This, however, is to be treated as a one-off ‘literary’ specimen written in a flowery poetic style and should not be considered a true representation of a day-to-day working language.

Most common people outside of the cities could not read or write,³³ nor did they understand Latin or even Italian. The people of the maritime cities would have had some knowledge of Italian. Everyone, however, would have attended liturgy in Latin in the Roman Catholic Church and in Greek in the Byzantine Church,³⁴ but sermons in the Catholic Latin rite tradition were, it seems, delivered in a common Italian language in the maritime cities because most clerics were Italian speakers. That Italian had a hold on the church in Malta for a long time is noted by Aquilina, who

²⁸ He mentions five knights at his time who spoke Maltese fluently to such an extent that ‘a foreigner could not distinguish them from the true nationals’; Agius de Soldanis, *Della lingua* 62-3.

²⁹ Freller and Scalpello, *Malta: Island of Christian heroes* 78.

³⁰ See Friggieri and Freller, *Malta: The bulwark of Europe*.

³¹ Cowan, An early Maltese word-list 217-25; Cassola, Un’ edizione diversa 72-86; cited in Freller and Scalpello, *Malta: Island of Christian heroes* 28.

³² See Wettinger and Fsadni, *Peter Caxaro’s Cantilena* 12-13, 17, 36-7.

³³ The subject of literacy and illiteracy in early modern Malta is covered by Cassar in *Society, culture and identity* 159-76. I have followed some of the points he raised by examining them through a cognitive landscape framework as defined above.

³⁴ See Agius, A man and his times 428-9.

comments that ‘the last pastoral in Italian’ was delivered in May 1947;³⁵ after that, bishops issued pastorals in Maltese. As for knowing Latin, it needs to be said that a diocese report by an apostolic investigator, Pietro Duzzina in 1575 states that ‘only one out of every four priests examined had a working knowledge of Latin.’³⁶ This was a serious lack, as Latin was ‘a “pre-requisite” for ecclesiastics.’³⁷

Even confessions were noted to be heard in Italian as many priests and friars were foreign (mainly Italian and Sicilian);³⁸ some though must have learnt enough Maltese to communicate in a general way with the penitent.³⁹ Others were Maltese, educated in Italian, and could communicate fluently in both languages. In Sellem’s hearing, Berto Briffa, an illiterate Maltese of Qormi village in the middle of the island,⁴⁰ went to Don Mario Mallia so that his confession could be heard in Maltese.⁴¹ There is evidence that the Mdina nobles spoke to their domestics and farmers in Maltese while they communicated with each other in Italian.⁴² Maltese, as a monolingual community, was concentrated in rural villages, urban areas where it was used in shops and taverns, and among those with occupational work and laborers in harbor areas. The language itself was described by two visitors to Malta, Michael Heberer von Bretten and Johannes Quintinus, as an African language (i.e. ‘Arabic’) sometime before 1588;⁴³ while the German Jesuit, Athanasius Kirsher (d. 1680), judged it to be a ‘pure Arabic’ language⁴⁴ uninfluenced by either Italian, Sicilian or any other European language. Later foreign lexical influence was labelled by the purist linguist, Mikiel Anton Vassalli (d. 1829), in the nineteenth century as ‘barbarism’.⁴⁵

Maghribī Arabic, which was spoken alongside Maltese, played a different role. It was indeed the spoken language of hundreds of slaves on land and at sea and, being

³⁵ Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese linguistics* 59, n. 3.

³⁶ Montalto, *The nobles of Malta* 293.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 293.

³⁸ Koster, *The knights’ state* 307.

³⁹ Not in the case of Georgio Scala though, since it is stated the confessor ‘spoke Italian and not Maltese’; see AIM Proc. Crim. 16A, fol. 112r.

⁴⁰ He signed with a cross: AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 267v, l. 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* fol. 266r, ll. 16-21.

⁴² Montalto, *The nobles of Malta* 296.

⁴³ Freller, *Life and adventures* 115; Cassola, *Malta: People* 115.

⁴⁴ See Ciantar, *A Benedictine’s notes* 101.

⁴⁵ Vassalli, *Ktyb yl Klym Malti* xvi; Sammut, *Lexicon ta’ Mikiel* 80.

akin to Maltese, served as a very important vehicle of communication between the slaves and the native Maltese at different societal levels, as the testimonials show in Sellem's court proceedings and in a previous study on Georgio Scala.⁴⁶ The majority of shore and galley slaves were from North Africa and therefore spoke a Maghribī dialect. Compared to Arabic, Maltese is in many respects, morphologically, syntactically, and lexically, close to the Maghribī variety. It would not have been difficult for a North African speaker to learn Maltese and, even if he had not mastered it, still be able to communicate with the Maltese on some level. Likewise, a monolingual Maltese would have spoken a linguistically pure dialect that was therefore not far removed from Maghribī. A smaller number of slaves came from the Levant, then Syria, which on today's political map includes Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, and thus spoke a Levantine dialect of Arabic; or from Egypt and thus used the Egyptian dialect, like Sellem. These dialects, though differing in some respects, were mutually comprehensible to speakers of the Maghribī dialects and Maltese.⁴⁷

But Arabic as a written language had a significant cultural and religious effect on the people; it impacted their lives as they seem to have believed that words written in Arabic had the power to heal or to somehow invoke magical intervention as the trial of Sellem demonstrates.

The power of written Arabic:

The Inquisition and the language of healing

A central part of the practice of magic by Sellem was Arabic scribbled on paper or cards containing magic formulas;⁴⁸ these were designed by Moorish slaves with the intention of protecting the bearer against evil acts or healing somebody from illness. They ordinarily consisted of unconnected letters, though some contained words or phrases. The Inquisition's authorities were alarmed by this use of written Arabic,

⁴⁶ See Agius (ed.), *Georgio Scala*.

⁴⁷ But writing in an Arabic dialect is a different story: A recent study on private letters written in the Tunisian Sfaxi language has demonstrated how difficult it is to read dialectal Arabic unless the interpreter's competence is close to that of a native speaker; see Zammit and Lahlali, *Letters of the Moorish slaves* 283-324.

⁴⁸ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 309v, ll. 16-20; fol. 318v, ll. 3-4.

fearing that it might contain the names of demons which would harm the mind and soul of its instigator and recipient. Sellem reassured the inquisitor who interrogated him about his motive for writing magic formulas, saying: 'By God, I swear that they [the cards] contain nothing else apart from words and letters from the Qur'ān to relieve headaches and various other illnesses from people.'⁴⁹ Writing Qur'ānic verses in the Muslim world was, citing E. W. Lane, 'the most approved mode of charming away sickness or disease',⁵⁰ such as one verse that relates directly to God's goodness and compassion: 'We send down in the Qur-ān that which is a healing and a mercy to those who believe.'⁵¹ Of course this is directed to Muslim believers and Lane was writing about Egyptian practices in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the delivery of healing remedies via verses from the Qur'ān, called *āyāt al-shifā'*, is a very old Islamic practice.⁵² Such verses were believed to heal not only the body, but also the mind;⁵³ indeed, they expressed the sentiment that 'God is the best to take care (of him) and He is the most merciful.'⁵⁴ Although the message of this language of love and mercy is Islamic, it can also be Christian; however, the inquisitor, as an Early Modern Catholic theologian, would have been worried about the use of unknown words in charms that did not have a clear meaning to him, and which, he suspected, may contain the names of demons, as noted earlier. So Sellem's defence is specifically refuting that concern,⁵⁵ emphasizing that the spells contain only comprehensible words.

This underground register of Islamic magic spells was accessed not only by the common people, but by the educated elite as well, the knights. In Sellem's case we know of four knights who saw Arabic as being magical: Vittorio Cassar, Torre, Pietro La Re and Corbat;⁵⁶ for them, what mattered was not the source or content of such charms, but instead their magical powers which they hoped would help them to win

⁴⁹ Ibid. fol. 311r, ll. 25-8.

⁵⁰ See for example see Lane, *An account*, vol. 1, 397.

⁵¹ Sūrat Isrā'īl (Children of Israel), Q 17: 82.

⁵² Sūrat al-Tawba (Repentance), Q 9:14; Sūrat Yūnus (On Jonah), Q 10:57; Sūrat al-Nahl (The Bee), Q 16:69; Sūrat Isrā'īl (Children of Israel), Q 17:82; Sūrat al-Shu'arā' (The Poets), Q 26:80; Sūrat Hā-Mīm (The Letters Hā-Mīm), Q 41:44.

⁵³ Lane, *An account*, vol. 1, 398.

⁵⁴ Sūrat Yūsuf (On Joseph), Q 12: 64.

⁵⁵ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 322r, ll. 14-16.

⁵⁶ Ibid. fol. 272r, l. 6; fol. 292, l. 14; fol. 312r, ll. 5, 10.

in fights and gambling, and to gain the affections of women.⁵⁷ For both the elite and the commoners, Arabic was ‘the other’, a language full of mystery in which healing and protection could be found. Written Arabic was seen as a source of mystical power. In this, there are similarities to Latin, which was also the language of power; a conduit to the divine, conveying a sense of mystery and awe to the Catholic faithful who were largely unable to understand it.

The inquisitorial records of trials of practitioners demonstrate that Arabic,⁵⁸ as conveyed through the medium of Moorish slaves, was thought of as a language of spells that allowed for communication with the ‘spirits’ in order to cure the sick or help the lovelorn. Such creatures included demons, as Dionisio Cardona, a carpenter from the harbor city of Senglea (I-Isla), told the court: ‘I believed that these Moors could make these remedies work through magic, using the power of a demon.’⁵⁹ One magic spell was a demon captured in a ‘glass flask’,⁶⁰ that when ‘smash[ed] against the door of the house of the woman’ would make her, the client expected, ‘fall in love [with him].’⁶¹ But demons were associated with evil acts so that when the inquisitor interrogating Sellem about invoking spirits encased in a ring asserted that this showed ‘familiarity and a deep friendship between him and the demon’,⁶² Sellem categorically denied having anything to do with such demons: ‘I did not know nor do I know how to call up or to bind demons.’⁶³ For a Muslim, a demon is a *shayṭān*, an evil spirit who, among his/her features, has ‘the ability to cause fear’ and ‘precipitate enmity and hatred.’⁶⁴ The context does not suggest that this was the case.

⁵⁷ Ibid. fol. 273r, l. 24; fol. 273v, l. 12; fol. 313r, l. 16; fol. 313v, ll. 19, 22; fol. 314r, l. 3; fol. 314v, l. 5; fol. 317v, ll. 19; fol. 318r, l. 9; fol. 320r, l. 18; fol. 321v, ll. 27-8.

⁵⁸ See Cassar, *Witchcraft, sorcery and the Inquisition*; for a contemporary work on European cases see Scarre and Callow, *Witchcraft and magic*.

⁵⁹ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 303r, ll. 8-12.

⁶⁰ Ibid. fol. 317v, ll. 6-7.

⁶¹ Ibid. fol. 315r, ll. 1-4.

⁶² Ibid. fol. 322r, ll. 10-13.

⁶³ Ibid. fol. 322r, ll. 14-16.

⁶⁴ Sūrat Āl-ʿImrān (The Family of ʿImrān), Q 3:175 and Sūrat al-Māʿida (The Table Spread), Q 5:91; see Rippon, *Shayṭān: In the Qurʾān* 408.

It must be said that belief in spirits is common in Islam;⁶⁵ they often occur as fire spirits that are free of smoke.⁶⁶ They are noted in pre-Islamic Arabia;⁶⁷ these are the *jinn*s sanctioned by the Qur'ān.⁶⁸ They may take the form of a human, animal or other thing and they may be good or evil. Good *jinn*s perform magic as spirits encased in lamps, flasks or rings, as reported in Sellem's hearing.⁶⁹ The name *jinn* does not appear in the proceedings, presumably because the Moorish slaves were aware that this spirit was not part of the Christian repertoire and would be confused with demons. However, it was not just the language pertaining to spirits that the papal inquisitor was worried about; it was also the practice of magic through the Arabic script on cards or scraps of paper or the possession of books of the Islamic faith and, of course, the wearing of charms written in Arabic around the necks of Christians, even though the intention of the Muslim provider was to protect 'the wearer from the devil and all evil *genii*.'⁷⁰

Knowledge of writing was limited to a few literate Muslim slaves on the island at that time, among whom were: the *qāḍī*, the magistrate of Islamic *sharī'a* law and the spokesman for the slaves; the *imām*, or religious leader; the *kuttāb* (s. *kātib*), scribes who wrote letters on behalf of their fellow slaves;⁷¹ and literate persons like Sellem, who was by profession an astrologer.⁷² Arabic was not only confined to the slaves, but also learnt by a few Maltese: for example, the knight, Vittorio Cassar, was taught by Sellem so that he could practice geomancy⁷³ and learn how to do magic by employing Arabic script. A second, totally different reason, was to spread the Christian faith among the Muslim communities on the Maltese islands and, as will be discussed below, on board the galleys and to reach out with missionary zeal to the Islamic lands. The Jesuit fathers and Franciscan friars organized lessons to teach

⁶⁵ See for example Gadallah's fieldwork study on popular beliefs in spirits in Egypt and Morocco, al-Al-Muṭaqaḍāt al-shaḥbiyya wa l-kā'ināt al-rūḥiyya 125-36.

⁶⁶ Sūrat Al-Raḥmān (God, Most Gracious), Q 55: 15; 'Free of smoke', the Qur'ānic commentator, Yusuf Ali, explains as being 'subtle like a flame of fire': see *The Holy Qur-an* 1474, n. 5182.

⁶⁷ Macdonald [H. Masse], *Djinn* 547; see also Fahd, *Shayṭān: In pre-Islamic Arabia* 406-7.

⁶⁸ Sūrat al-Jinn ([Chapter on] jinn), Q 72:1-28.

⁶⁹ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 312v, l. 29; fol. 313v, ll. 8-11; fol. 317, ll. 6-7; fol. 322, ll. 10-13.

⁷⁰ Lane, *An account*, vol. 1, 377.

⁷¹ See Zammit and Lahlali, *Letters of the Moorish slaves* 283-324.

⁷² AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 295v, ll. 8-11.

⁷³ *Ibid.* fol. 272v, l. 22.

Arabic, mainly classical Arabic, to fellow members of the congregations. The need to be competent in the language of the Qur'ān was critically important in order, of course, to convert Muslims. Worthy of note is that Arabic grammars started to appear in early seventeenth-century Europe; one such written by the Dutchman, Thomas Erpenius (d. 1624), with a Latin commentary was published in 1613 in Leiden. Almost contemporaneous with our study is an Arabic grammar published in 1592 which was modelled on the *Ājurrūmiyya* written by the Moroccan, Ibn Ājurrūm (d. 1323). A Moorish slave by the name of 'Alī b. Yaḥyā l-Zawāwī was employed by the Franciscan friars in Valletta to copy a number of Arabic hand-written books which they obtained from the Levant: one or two Arabic grammars and Christian biblical texts in Arabic with grammatical commentaries.⁷⁴ One final important point is that these books survived but,⁷⁵ of course, the prohibited books like the Qur'ān and prayer books, brought as inspection material to the inquisitional court, were burnt at the end of the trial.⁷⁶ Interestingly, magic papers or amulets were not burnt.⁷⁷ Any other prohibited written works in Latin, Italian and other languages from Protestant Europe and other illicit works were confiscated;⁷⁸ in Sellem's case, three hand-written books which dealt with forms of magic were destroyed sometime before the court proceedings.⁷⁹

Ethno-cultural mix in a workers' community

The coming of the Knights Hospitaller and their entourage to Malta must have led to a drastic change in the way of life of the locals as they saw major alterations to the infrastructure of the islands. The Grand Harbor, known in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as Marsa il-Kbir, was surrounded by several inlets with boat building sites, boat houses, and small houses where shipping, storage and customs were operated. The knights, who were given the islands of Malta in 1530 by Charles V (r. 1516-

⁷⁴ Agius, *The Study of Arabic in Malta* 26, 34-6.

⁷⁵ See a list of Arabic manuscripts in the Franciscan Provincial Library in Valletta; Agius, *The Study of Arabic in Malta* 34-6.

⁷⁶ AIM Proc. Crim. 16 A, fol. 123v, ll. 22-3

⁷⁷ For further information the reader is referred to AIM Corr. 88, fols. 60v-61r.

⁷⁸ The Council of Trent's *Index librorum prohibitorum* of 1559 listed thousands of prohibited titles of a heretical nature, including works concerning occult sciences and divination.

⁷⁹ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 273v, ll. 4-10; fol. 294r, ll. 11-13.

1556), found the Birgu inlet a convenient site for establishing themselves. The site was transformed into a small town within a number of years as the knights erected buildings to administer their military and naval affairs. These buildings included an arsenal, a school for the training of young naval knights and a galley building site.⁸⁰ This infrastructure demanded a number of artisans and laborers, some of whom were available. These workers were to be the first influx of Maltese to mix with the foreign community in Birgu, which was to become an administrative and commercial centre.

Meanwhile, a second town, around the inlet of I-Isla, Senglea, was gradually developing into a commercial centre, but also contained living quarters for the foreign merchants and traders as well as the local community of Maltese workers at a time when foreigners and visitors to Malta were on the increase during the 1570s and 1580s.⁸¹

After 1565, a new city was planned to house the administration of the military and Knights Hospitaller. This was to be situated on Valletta, a peninsula opposite the two smaller peninsulas of Birgu and I-Isla. To build the city of Valletta, several architects, engineers, sculptors, master masons, artists and artisans were brought mainly from Italy and Sicily, though some also came from other European countries. A number of masons, carpenters and laborers who only spoke Maltese were also brought in from the countryside. It is noted that about 4,000 workers were employed in the building of Valletta.⁸²

One community that distinguished itself from the elite knights were the Greeks who accompanied the knights from Rhodes in 1530. This community was culturally

⁸⁰ Any record of a shipbuilding yard on the islands in the first decades of the 1530s is lacking. Interestingly though, medieval documentation points to the existence of an arsenal in 1374; the register document can be found in Fiorini, *Documentary sources*, doc. 122, Cancelleria 14, fol. 69 [Agrigento], November 11, 1374, 118-19. See also Wettinger, *The Castrum Maris* 31-72; and Muscat who gives detailed descriptions of the arsenal, galley building, works and repairs, the master builders and craftsmen, cordage, weaving, timber and mooring etc., in *The arsenal: 1530-1798*, vol. 1, 259, 261 and 255-325, citing Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione*, vol. 1, 67. Also see Castagna, *Malta bil-gzejjer taghha*, vol. 1, 136; Ferris, *Memorie dell'inclito ordine gerosolimitano*, 228; and Zammit, *Malta: The Maltese islands* 149-50.

⁸¹ Freller, *Life and adventures* 119.

⁸² Abela, *The Maltese islands* 54 and also n. 64.

and religiously separate from the knights in Birgu and Valletta,⁸³ and its members spoke both Greek and a dialectical variant of Italian.⁸⁴ Mention should also be made of a small number of Jews living in Birgu prior to the coming of the knights, who, though conversant in Maltese, used Hebrew in prayers and in a synagogue.⁸⁵

That a mixed language may have already existed in the Marsa il-Kbir area prior to the knights' arrival is not improbable because of the sea trade and human trafficking,⁸⁶ and, furthermore, Sicilian-Italian, and North African Arabic-Berber cultural and linguistic links established in earlier centuries must also have survived to some extent. The instructions of migrant master builders, speaking mainly in dialectal variants of Italian or Sicilian, but also French and Spanish, were interpreted by foreign foremen to the working-class Maltese. Such instructions, it is to be surmised, would have come in one or two-word sentences in order to communicate the information effectively.

Added to this ethno-culturally varied society and linguistic mix were the large number of slaves, mostly Muslims, that were engaged in small trade in the harbor cities. Many were street hawkers selling water, oil and vinegar. Ibrahim, a Moorish slave mentioned in the Inquisition tribunal, sold items in the square, presumably the grand master's square or San Giovanni's church square in Valletta.⁸⁷ The knights employed slaves in various places such as the auberges (monastic inns or hostels), the sacred infirmary, the administration offices, and public buildings: Ali of the Island of Jerba, also mentioned in the proceedings, was working in the Grand Master's palace.⁸⁸ Both Ibrahim and Ali, like other slaves, needed extra money to ransom

⁸³ The Greeks belonged to the Byzantine Catholic Church/Rite in contrast to the majority of the people on the islands who were attached to the Latin Roman Catholic Church/Rite: see Agius, *A man and his times* 426, 428, 430-2. Further details on the religious and cultural relationship between the Greek Orthodox Christians and the Greek Byzantine Catholic Rhodians who migrated to the islands can be found in Fiorini, *The Greek Orthodox Church* 179-81.

⁸⁴ Ciappara, 'The date palm and the olive tree' 251, 256-7; Dalli, *Conniving connectivities* 239-40.

⁸⁵ See the many references to the Mdina and Birgu Jews and the Judaeo-Arabic language, with numerous examples of pre-early modern usage, in Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta*; in particular Appendix 1, 154-89 and 190-204.

⁸⁶ See Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, vol. 2, 870; Earle, *Corsairs of Malta* 168-70.

⁸⁷ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 299r, ll. 14-15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* fol. 299r, ll. 16-17. Interestingly, similar jobs such as weaving, sail-making and carrying water, among others, were performed by Christian slaves in North Africa; see Auchterlonie, *Surviving as a slave* 445-72; and also Davis, *Christian slaves* 69-102.

themselves, so they sought work as performers of magic, as Sellem claims in court,⁸⁹ even though the financial cost of ransom arrangements between agents and the state could become high.⁹⁰ Other work done by slaves included: carrying water ‘from Marsa to Fort St. Angelo’;⁹¹ carrying firewood from the quays to the city; working in granaries; manufacturing tobacco, gun-powder and ropes;⁹² and making sails. Furthermore, many were engaged in the weaving industry:⁹³ for instance, the court proceedings mention a Moorish head of weavers named Hali Eddin [Ar. °Alā’ al-Dīn] and another Moor, Habilgil [Ar. °Abd al-Jalīl], who was skilled in this occupation.⁹⁴ Others worked at the lime-kilns, material from which was used for the building of fortifications and houses.⁹⁵ Some of them worked alongside Christians: In Gregorio Sammut’s court trial in 1606 we hear that he worked with Muslim slaves in the salt pans.⁹⁶ This was considered a ‘low-class’ occupation as no Christian shared work with an infidel unless they were being punished for some crime, usually by being made to work as a galley slave (or in Gregorio’s case working in the salt pans). The slaves of the galley squadron, when on shore in Malta, were employed in maintenance work on the bastions and state buildings, or, commonly, weaving or repairing sails. Some helped the blacksmiths at the galley arsenal to operate the forges or move artillery from one place to another.⁹⁷

The maritime linguistic landscape

The question as to what language was used on board the galleys has not yet been properly addressed, probably due to a lack of documentation on the subject. Yet the

⁸⁹ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 299r, ll. 16-17, 19-20.

⁹⁰ Procedures for ransom and ‘the dues lawfully exacted by the various officials’ were laborious and often complex; details can be found in Wettinger, *Slavery in the islands* 173, 182-89, 189-90. See also Earle, *Corsairs of Malta*, 168-9, 170-5.

⁹¹ That is according to Abela in *Della descrizione di Malta* 93, as cited in Galea, *The seaboard* 36; this would have been before the aqueduct in the years of Grandmaster Wignacourt (r. 1601-1622) was completed, when fresh water was brought from Ġhajn Filep, located in Marsa on the border of the village of Qormi.

⁹² Wettinger, *Slavery in the islands* 333-6.

⁹³ Muscat and Agius, *Slaves on land and sea* 357.

⁹⁴ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 321r, ll. 24-25.

⁹⁵ Wettinger, *Slavery in the islands* 305.

⁹⁶ This information was passed on to me by Catherine Rider; see AIM Proc. Crim. 25A, fol. 162r.

⁹⁷ NLM-AOM 1759, fols. 475r, 475v (personal written communication with J. Muscat).

military and naval wings of the Order must have played a significant role in the development of a common language. It needs to be reiterated that the knights all spoke one or more European languages, with Italian being their common register.

The Order's strength was in its navy. Their encounters with Ottoman/North African galleys made the knights, in terms of strategy and fighting, the fiercest fighters in the Mediterranean. No doubt discipline and the language used in the line of command contributed to their success; from the general of the galley squadron down to the captains, lieutenants, crews and rowers on board each vessel.⁹⁸ Apart from the knights, each vessel also had a clergyman appointed to look after religious functions and administer to the sick. Among the non-commissioned officers were the pilots,⁹⁹ the *comito* (boatswain), responsible for the sailors, and the *argusin* in charge of the rowers. Others were occupational workers such as caulkers, carpenters and oar-repairers¹⁰⁰ and, of course, the sailors and soldiers. At the bottom of this hierarchy were the rowers. Maltese sailors and infantry were recruited to the Order's navy.¹⁰¹ A Matteo Magro of the village of Żurrieq, in the south-west of Malta, told the court that one of his cousins was, at the time of reporting in the trial against Sellem, 'work[ing] on the galleys of the Order', most probably as a sailor.¹⁰²

In this cosmopolitan environment, a common spoken language was deemed necessary to communicate information. Thus, Italian was adopted for that purpose and all orders were thereby given through the captains and their second and third mates; further, Italian was also the clergy's language of communication. Maltese would have been the main spoken language of the sailors, soldiers and craftsmen

⁹⁸ It was expected that each knight in his two-year noviceship would engage in a maritime or land operation against the Muslims, called a 'caravan'; I am grateful to Joseph Muscat for the data he passed on to me and the discussions we held on galleys, the organization of officers and the rower slaves over the years from 2004 to 2016. The reader is referred to Muscat, *The arsenal: 1530-1798* 255-325; *Il-Flotta ta' l-Ordni ta' San Ġwann*; Muscat and Cuschieri, *Naval activities*; and also Muscat and Agius, *Slaves on land and sea* 345-84.

⁹⁹ Pilots were knowledgeable about the Mediterranean coasts, in particular the creeks and inlets, and, aided by the portulans, were expected to have a good understanding of the winds; see NMM Statuti, fol. 101 (personal written communication with J. Muscat); see also Muscat and Cuschieri, *Naval activities* 119.

¹⁰⁰ Undoubtedly, the oar-repairer was the most important craftsman on board a fighting galley as it was imperative that all oars were in working condition; for details on this craftsmanship see Muscat and Cuschieri, *Naval activities* 31, n. 77.

¹⁰¹ Ryan, *The house* 9-10.

¹⁰² AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 262r, ll. 13-14.

although a number of these were also hired from other European countries. As for the rowers, these were mainly captured Muslim slaves,¹⁰³ although there were also among their number convicts sentenced by civil or religious courts (*forzati*) and debtors, the *buonavoglie*, who opted to row on galleys rather than spending their days in prison.¹⁰⁴ Other Christian rowers were paid sailors. Most of the *forzati* convicts were foreigners: hundreds, apparently, from France, Spain and the Papal States labored on the Order's galleys.¹⁰⁵ Some form of Italian would have been common to many of the Christian rowers; as for the Muslim slaves, the majority spoke dialectal variants of the Maghribī (North African) linguistic group and a smaller number Turkish, although after long service on the galleys some may have picked up a minimal working Italian vocabulary to communicate with the authorities as I will show below. Interestingly, both Chasem (Ar. Qāsim) and Sellem of the court proceedings under study, who had been galley rowers, knew Italian—Chasem, from the episode of the fake spirit under the bed and, as mentioned earlier, Sellem because he had spent some time in Naples.¹⁰⁶

Within this mixed ethnic-linguistic and cultural melting-pot, a common language seems to have covered the needs of all. But our sources are vague about what this language was and we can only surmise as to what linguistic variances the people used to communicate with each other.

¹⁰³ Capturing Muslims to work on the galleys was considered 'the primary purpose' of the knights' forays, as noted by Cassar and Sant Cassia, *Patrolling society's borders* 56. Several of the *corsos*, or offensive operations of the knights against the Muslims at land or sea, took place mainly in the waters of North Africa, from Tunisia eastwards to the Levant, which included Egypt, Syria and Ottoman Greece; see Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione*, vol. 1, 293, 315, 321, 336-7, 352, 370, 381, 383, 432-3, 450, 461; see also Rossi, *Storia della Marina* 56 (personal written communication with J. Muscat).

¹⁰⁴ Castagna notes that there were 175 *forzati* and 387 *buonavoglie* registered in the 1632 census; see his *Lis storja ta Malta bil gzejjer tahha* 38.

¹⁰⁵ Bosio, *Historia della sacra religione*, vol. 3, 449; Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione*, vol. 1, 116, 125; Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione militare*, vol. 2, 521-2; (personal written communication with J. Muscat); see also Wettinger, *The galley-convicts* 29, 31.

¹⁰⁶ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 317r, ll. 22-5; fol. 321v, l. 19.

Communicating in a lingua franca

It appears from the above that Italian was the common language which operated at different levels and developed at different periods in different environments. As a standard written language, it would only have been used by educated people. Yet it was nonetheless a working language that bridged gaps between communities living together both on land and at sea.¹⁰⁷

The ability to speak ‘across linguistic boundaries’,¹⁰⁸ referred to, rather loosely, as a *lingua franca*, has been the subject of several works, notably Dakhlija, each making an argument for the existence of such a language.¹⁰⁹ The Mediterranean *lingua franca*, that historically predates the present period of study, is said to have been a mix of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and French spoken by the Ottoman Turks residing on the North African coast, known as the Barbary regencies. But there were, in fact, different levels of *lingua franca*, built on a mixed morphological and syntactic process as shown by the German philologist, Hugo Schuchardt.¹¹⁰ The linguists, Kahanes and Tietze, pioneered a nautical lexical study of this *lingua franca* which was essentially a trade language spoken by sailors and merchants that appears to have evolved on the North African coast, and had its basis in the Romance languages with a large number of nautical terms borrowed from Italian dialects.¹¹¹ The Italian linguist G. Cifoletti argues that a pidginized form could have existed in the Barbary regencies.¹¹² But, if this is the case as Dakhlija concludes, this register never creolized into a maternal language; it was essentially a ‘utilitarian’ language—a form of register spoken by dockers, sailors, galley officials and rowers. It developed in the taverns and slave prisons and was later adopted by the literate society.¹¹³ Dakhlija’s concluding argument for the existence of a ‘utilitarian’ language in the harbor areas

¹⁰⁷ Written Italian and its development on the islands is studied in detail in Brincat, *Maltese and other languages* 200-11.

¹⁰⁸ See Auchterlonie, *Encountering Islam* 47.

¹⁰⁹ The list is long but one main source to reference here is Dakhlija’s, *Lingua franca*.

¹¹⁰ Schuchardt, *The lingua franca* 65-88.

¹¹¹ See Kahane et al., *The lingua franca of the Levant*. See also Nolan, *Lingua franca* 101.

¹¹² Cifoletti, *La lingua franca* 14, 21-6.

¹¹³ Several historical and linguistic issues are raised in Dakhlija’s study of the *lingua franca* (*Lingua franca: Histoire d’une langue métisse en méditerranée*); see in particular 19, 82-9, 162, 162-9, 194-7, 450. This work provides a window into further research on the subject, but it also lacks information about Malta’s linguistic repertoire from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

seems on the surface to apply to the period under examination; however, Cifoletti's notion of a 'pidginized' form has the attributes of just such a linguistic scenario as occurred in early modern Malta.

In seventeenth-century Malta and later centuries, an Italian common language or *lingua franca* was, as stated earlier, working at different levels: the highest level, or Level 1, was a literary register, written and spoken in a grammatically correct way by the elite—the knights, the clergy and the professionals; a middle level, or Level 2, was also written and spoken, but was linguistically less refined, with a mixed lexical input that reflected the occupational trade of the speaker; and a third lower level, or Level 3, was used by the urban commoners, who conversed in a pidginized form containing a mixed register of Maltese and Italian/Sicilian. Speakers of Level 1 could code-switch to Level 2, but this probably did not work the other way around as Level 2 speakers would not possess an elevated (literary) register to communicate with the educated elite. Code-switching from Level 2 to Level 3 was also possible, but again not the reverse as Level 3 speakers were limited by their knowledge of and ability to express technical terminology. This Level 3 may be the variety that the traveller, Anselmus Pajolus (d. 1711), described as, almost a century later, a mixture of Moorish (i.e. Arabic) and Italian *baragouin* 'gibberish',¹¹⁴ technically an old term for 'pidgin'.

It is this ethno-cultural-linguistic mix that has shaped the islands and created the larger part of the modern-day Maltese language. However, in the seventeenth century this interaction was mainly centred around the harbor cities of Valletta, Birgu and I-Isla, where we witness two registers: the first dominated by Italian and Sicilian which were spoken in a majority of the foreign communities and; second, Maltese/Arabic. Lexical mixing between Italian/Sicilian and Maltese/Arabic, began to take place alongside an increase in the number of occupational workshops run by carpenters, ironsmiths and silversmiths, and shops manned by tailors, barbers, and bakers in the three cities. It is this language contact and mixing at all levels that Chevalier Laurent d'Arvieux (d. 1702) noticed in Valletta, and that he called 'bastard Arabic'. His Arabic was good enough that 'he could make himself understood' and

¹¹⁴ Zammit Ciantar, *A Benedictine's notes* 102.

that, '[being] fluent in Italian', he could converse with the knights.¹¹⁵ The lexical input came from a large corpus of terms derived from Italian/Sicilian material culture that were absorbed by Maltese¹¹⁶ as more Maltese laborers from the countryside moved into and settled in the three cities. While this linguistic mix was taking place in the maritime cities, Maltese as used in the countryside continued to survive in its older and to some extent purer form with almost a hundred percent Arabic base.¹¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, terms of Arabic origin derived from Maltese material culture are still prevalent in the villages today.¹¹⁸

The Italian *lingua franca* at Levels 2 and 3 was no doubt used on board the galleys. It is my contention that the rowers learnt terms and phrases only as far as they needed to understand the orders given to them and to communicate with the *arguzin* and other crew members. Some of the non-commissioned officers, as well as speaking the Italian common language, may have spoken Arabic or an Arabic-Maltese variety to effectively communicate with the Muslim slaves. Given the organization with which the Order ran the galleys, there would have been a word-list conveyed orally or a written record of a vocabulary used by the knights on board to give commands. There is no record of such a naval word-list corresponding to the period under study, but we do find a military word-list of Maltese-Italian compiled by the knight, Thezan, a century later, albeit incomplete.¹¹⁹ More significant though is his seven-page word-list collated at the same time consisting of military instructions from Italian to Maltese titled: 'Ta'lim a' l Soldat' [Teaching the Soldier].¹²⁰ From this dictionary it can be deduced that the Maltese recruited to the army or navy spoke Maltese with some working knowledge of a Level 3 spoken Italian *lingua franca*.

¹¹⁵ Lewis, *Levantine adventurer* 14.

¹¹⁶ The reader is referred to Aquilina's *Papers in Maltese linguistics* 42-62; he pioneered research into Maltese as a mixed language; see also Aquilina, *The structure of Maltese* 116-36; and recently Brincat's exhaustive and insightful study on 'Maltese in the times of the knights' in *Maltese and other languages*, chapter 7.

¹¹⁷ The division of this language into three different registers (the city, harbor and countryside) formed the basis of the linguistic and cultural scenario of Malta, and it continued for centuries afterwards, as noted by Mikiel Anton Vassalli (d. 1829) in his linguistic analysis of harbor registers; see Sammut, *Lexicon ta' Mikiel* 80.

¹¹⁸ See Borg, *Snajja u Xogħol il-Maltin*, vols. 1-2; and Borg, *Nismagħhem jgħidu ...*, vols. 1-2.

¹¹⁹ Cassola, *Il Mezzo vocabolario Maltese-Italiano*; see also Cassola, *Malta: People* 165.

¹²⁰ Cassola, *Regole per la lingua Maltese* 41-54.

On board the galleys the knight chaplain conducted the religious services and administered the sacraments in ecclesiastical Latin, but heard confession in most probably Italian Levels 2 and 3, unless the clergyman was bilingual in both Maltese and Italian. Catechism was taught to the cabin boys aged 8 to 12 years; they accompanied their fathers to be apprenticed to their trade or trained to become sailors.¹²¹ One source mentions Jesuits who came on board the galleys to talk to Muslim slaves about the Christian faith.¹²² The attempt to convert Muslims was probably a lost cause but again documentation of the period under research is wanting.¹²³ These so-called preachers might have spoken to the slaves in Maltese and possibly also Maghribī Arabic. This does not exclude the fact that interpreters (s. *tarjumān*) were used; one such interpreter, a Franciscan monk, Patri Frangisk Flieles, was appointed by the Order¹²⁴ and, like him, there were others; often members of the clergy as in the case of Giorgio Scala's trial who acted as interpreters in the Inquisition court.¹²⁵

Interpreters were used to translate to and from the source language when a galley was captured. As Ottoman or North African merchant ships were often attacked, Arabic and Turkish interpreters were needed. They could be used to reconnoitre landing places or talk to locals about routes and hiding places, and they had to be paid a share of the booty collected from raids. They had, indeed, to be trustworthy as, if caught, they could defect to the enemy.

Discussion

This kind of study presents a number of challenges: as Emanuel Buttigieg rightly observed, there is an 'unnerving relationship between history, reality and truth.'¹²⁶ I argue that the relatively abundant military and naval history of early modern Malta is

¹²¹ This is guess work although we have a late written record of the teaching of catechism on board the galleys; see AOM 1761, fol. 245 (personal communication with J. Muscat).

¹²² See Mallia, *Il-Ġiżwiti* 44.

¹²³ Instructions were issued to galley chaplains, but no date is mentioned; see Wetzinger, *Slavery in the islands* 463, n. 75.

¹²⁴ NLM MS 1142, 723.

¹²⁵ Agius, *An introduction to the Inquisition of Georgio Scala*, 24.

¹²⁶ Buttigieg, *Everyday life* 170.

only part of that 'reality and truth' as it distanced itself from the everyday life of a cosmopolitan society. This gap in our knowledge, however, has been partly filled by information from the inquisitional court, as the witnesses, one by one, related narratives of daily life activities on the islands at a time when Malta was at the centre of strife between Christendom and Islam.

But it seems that both the Order and the Inquisition had concerns regarding the local population: The traveller, J.P. Breihaupt, after his tour around Malta in 1624, only two decades before Sellem's trial, observed that '[the Maltese] are cunning and sly, certainly no fervent Christians and have to be disciplined and restrained by the Knights so that they would not betray the island to the enemy.'¹²⁷ Perhaps, it is not surprising that the Maltese commoners did not identify strongly with the upper-class European culture of the knights; after all, the Maltese shared a common ancestry with the North Africans, Islamic or not. This could be another reason why the Inquisition authorities felt the need to reinforce the Catholic faith and identity of the people.

We assume the knights would have had a strong intelligence gathering network in this situation, but more than fifty years on since Bernerd Clarke Weber remarked in 1958 that espionage studies in the history of the Order are needed,¹²⁸ we still do not know much about it.

It must be reiterated that there already existed, prior to the coming of the knights, an exchange of people from one coast to another creating a linguistic mix, possibly a *lingua franca*, consisting of Sicilian/Italian with Maltese.¹²⁹ But this hypothesis cannot be verified because of the poor documentation of the period. Within this mix, there must have been some dialectal Maghribī; something forgotten by modern historians and linguists. Therefore, what was properly speaking the *lingua franca* of early modern Malta has yet to be defined. As we have seen, Maltese society at this time comprised an odd mixture of communities with varied cultures and languages: the knights with their different European languages; the professionals, the

¹²⁷ Freller and Scalpello, *Malta: Island of Christian heroes* 77.

¹²⁸ Weber, *The history of Malta* 141-5.

¹²⁹ A discussion on language contact and development in early modern Malta can be found in Brincat's *Maltese and other languages*, chapters 5, 6 and 7.

merchants, traders and artisans conversing in different varieties of Italian or Sicilian or, perhaps some other European language; the Maltese in the countryside and some in the harbor cities using Maltese with the lexical and linguistic regional differences of the islands; and the Muslim slaves, mostly from North African countries speaking different versions of a Maghribī dialect which were akin to a pure version of Maltese.

The written languages divided the islands more profoundly than the spoken word. Ecclesiastical Latin was widely revered (as the language of Christianity), but, as I have argued, it was also part of a power game between the Church and state. Meanwhile, written Arabic, for the local and foreign Christians, both literate and illiterate, had all the mystique of ‘the other’ and was, therefore, perceived to be a powerful tool for magic. However, in that respect Arabic was primarily used as a form of healing, and thus as an alternative medicine to the herbs which presumably local medical doctors prescribed. Berto Briffa, whom we saw earlier making his confession in Maltese, told the inquisitor that ‘[he] had already been to Christian doctors who did not give him any remedies.’¹³⁰ The Inquisition’s attempts to eradicate superstitions about the healing powers of Arabic charms accelerated throughout the seventeenth century as more and more magic cases with Moorish involvement were brought to court. It is also noteworthy that while Latin as pronounced in the courts and churches had an aura of power, spoken Arabic had no such mystique; its similarity to Maltese, the lowest rung on the linguistic ladder, made sure of that.

From the parlance of the elite to the commoners and the slaves, the communities were brought closer together into what appears to be a common language—Italian. However, it was not one common Italian *lingua franca* as has often been claimed: there were, as I have argued, three different levels with a divide of cultural identities.

An Italian *lingua franca*, such as can be found in the case of early modern Malta, was similar in many respects, according to Dakhliā’s argument, to the Italian-based *lingua franca* that developed in earlier centuries in other Mediterranean

¹³⁰ AIM Proc. Crim. 26A, fol. 267r, ll. 24-6.

ports;¹³¹ it was a 'utilitarian' language, labelled here as Level 2, which operated in our case among the elite communities, the skilled/unskilled workers and, in general, the ordinary educated people. But it is important to stress that this *lingua franca* in the three harbor cities did not work for the semi-educated communities engaging with the dockers, porters, street-hawkers, tavern-keepers and slaves; nor did it work on board the galleys for sailors, soldiers and rowers. Instead, a pidginized *lingua franca*, labelled here as Level 3, developed through top-to-bottom and bottom-up interactions between the knights/masters and workers, and the illiterate workers laterally. It contained words borrowed from the material-culture and technical terminology of Italian/Sicilian that were mixed up with Maltese and Arabic, and it creolized into a register that still lurks in the Maltese spoken today in the harbor areas and cities, while a purer Maltese, in general, persevered in the villages.

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that the written history of the Maltese islands has always been dominated by the military and naval works of the Order, while the voices of the common people have largely been ignored. I also argued that this deficiency has been in some way remedied by the witnesses' statements in the inquisitorial proceedings. However, while this is true, it is very important to remember that the Italian of the Inquisition's court is not a true representation of the *lingua franca* at the time because the Italian of some bilingual *notarii*, as Monica Borg has shown in the case of Georgio Scala in 1598, contains Maltesisms and other linguistic stylistic idiosyncrasies which reflect the language as uttered *ad verbatim* by Maltese witnesses; these words were translated by the notarius *ad litteram* into his own Italian. And further, the *notarii* also translated into their own Italian the varied linguistic repertoires of Italian/Sicilian testimonials.¹³² Brincat is right to state that '[t]he use of the *lingua franca* in Malta is another obscure area of Malta's linguistic history'¹³³ because this ill-defined 'common Italian *lingua franca*', loosely applied in research, requires a much more rigorous base for analysis and many examples of written and spoken language in early modern Malta, in order to understand and

¹³¹ Though Malta is not mentioned in his study, probably due to the lack of documentation on the subject as I stated earlier in this chapter.

¹³² See Borg, The case of Georgio Scala 204-11.

¹³³ Brincat, *Maltese and other languages* 262.

interpret the cognitive landscape of a pluralistic society. The present study provides a theoretical base for future research in this field.

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