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Richard S. Tomback

AN UNRECOGNIZED MALTESE WEST-SEMITIC ISOGLOSS

The problem of the origins of the Maltese language has occupied the attention of scholars since the late eighteenth century. The first scholar to write a grammar and dictionary of Maltese was M.A. Vassalli, who held that, "Maltese is derived from Phoenician, was deeply influenced by Punic and later by Arabic, but is by no means an Arabic Dialect".¹ Although Vassalli shared the prejudice of his age concerning the linguistic background of the Maltese people, he pointed out the right direction for future scholars by emphasizing the necessity of the study of Arabic for the study of Maltese. Recent scholarly work has pointed out that while it is extremely difficult to discover the pre-Arabic Semitic stratum in Maltese, it seems that there are traces of at least two Arabic strata in Maltese: the upper and the younger one of a North African origin formed after the expulsion of the Arabs from the island in 1090; the other formed during the Arab domination from 870-1090. Most scholars are inclined to view the upper Arabic strata in Maltese as of Syro-Arabic origin with Maghrabinic influences.

Likewise the question of the ancestry of the present day Maltese people have been the subject of much research and scholarly investigation. In 1900, the Maltese folklorist Fr. E. Magri wrote: "When you consider how many words, sayings, tales, and customs survive from the religion of the Phoenicians, when you keep in mind that the majority of people in Malta and Gozo pronounce their vowels like the people of Syria; and it is only recently that people from our villages began to pronounce them like those from the cities you cannot but conclude that we are descendants from the Phoenicians".²

Fr. Magri further sought to trace a Phoenician, pre-Arabic origin for the Maltese language in the names of villages, fields, hills and families. He also endeavored to establish a direct link between the folktales that survived to his time and the island in Punic times.

Leaving aside the problems of the origin of the Maltese people and their literature, the opinion widely held today by most scholars in the field of Semitic Languages is that Maltese is a mixed language with a mixed vocabulary and a mixed grammar. This language spoken by Christian people about halfway, between North Africa and Sicily, has in the course of centu-

¹ See M.A. Vassalli, *Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum* (Rome, 1796). Also, *Maltese Arabic Studies*, P.P. Saydon, pp. 89-100, for a summary of the various and often conflicting views concerning the origin of the Maltese language. Published as part of *Arabic Dialect Studies*, H. Sobelman, ed. (Washington, DC, 1962).

² Cited in, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, Joseph Cassar-Pulliciro (Malta, 1976).

ries in contact with the varied linguistic and culture groups developed phonetic, phonological, morphological and syntactical characteristics of its own – some of them completely Indo-European, others half-way between Semitic and Indo-European. Essentially, Maltese is “simply an Arabic dialect with neo-Latin accessions, as English is a Saxon language with innumerable Norman or French loan-words”.³

That Phoenician possessed a subordinating conjunction *Im*, “lest” has long been recognized.⁴ The famous Eshmunazer inscription from Sidon, line twenty one reads as follows: *w'l y'r 'lty w'l y'msn bmskb z w'l ys' yt hlt mskby lm ysgrnm 'lmn hqdsm 'l*, “... let none such uncover (what is) over me or carry me away from this resting place; lest these holy gods deliver them up”.⁵

The possibility of the existence of this particle in Biblical Hebrew has also long been recognized. The Septuagint translates *lāmā* (originally “why”?) in Gen 27:45 and Exod 22:12 as *mēpote*, “that at no time, lest ever” or *ina mē* “that not, lest”. In the Middle Ages the Hebrew grammarian Abu l-Walid Marwan ibn Janah in his dictionary *Kitab 'al-'usūl*, “The book of Hebrew Roots”, remarked under the entry *mā*, “*wa takūnlāmā bimā aniy ka'ila* (“lest”) *ma-tal* Gen 27:45, *lāmā 'aškal*, “lest I be bereaved of. . .” and Gen 47:19, *lāmā nāmūt*, “lest we die” instead of the usual *lāmā*, “why”?⁶ This use of *lāmā* is not restricted to Phoenician and Biblical Hebrew but is also documented in Biblical Aramaic, as in Ezra 4:22 *ūzehīrīn hewō šalū lem' ebad 'al denā lemā yišgi' habalā' lehanzaqat mālķīn*, “Beware of committing negligence concerning this (matter); lest the damage increase injury to the kings”.⁷

Maltese like Phoenician, Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic employs the subordinating conjunction *lāmā* (written *li mā*), “lest”, translating Hebrew *lō'* or *pen* as in 1 Kings 18:5, *u Ahab qal lil Ghabdija: ghaddi mill-pajjiz lejn kull ghain ta l-ilma, u lejn kull wied: ghanda mnejn insibu l-haxix biex inżommu hajjin iż-zwiemel u l-bghula, li ma nitilfux il-bhjem kollha* “and Ahab said to Obadiah, “Let us go through the land, both of us, to every spring and gully; if we can find enough grass we may keep the horses and

³ *op. cit.*, Saydon, p. 92. Also see the exhaustive study of the morphology and syntax of Maltese, *The Structure of Maltese*, J. Aquilina, (Malta, 1973).

⁴ For a complete discussion of the form *Im* in Phoenician and related dialects, see H.L. Ginsberg, “Ugaritic-Phoenicia”, *JANES* 5 (1973), 138-39.

⁵ The complete text is reproduced with commentary in J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, Vol. 3, 106-08, with commentary.

⁶ *The Book of Hebrew Roots (Kitāb 'al-'usūl)* by Abu l-Walid Marwan ibn Janah, edited by Wilhelm Bacher, col. 365 (Amsterdam, 1968).

⁷ For a discussion of the syntactical development of the Aramaic forms *lemā* and *dilmā* and their relationship to the Biblical Hebrew *šalāmā*, found in Ct 1:7, see the following: *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, Franz Rosenthal, 38 (Wiesbaden, 1963), *op. cit.*, Ginsberg, 138, note 33 and *Song of Songs*, AB 7, Marvin Pope, 330.

mules alive, lest we lose all our cattle". This same form is found in Gen 3:3, *izda mill -frott tas-sigra, li hemm f'nofs-il-ġnien, Alla qal: la tiklux minnu lanqas timissuh, li ma tmutux* "but from the fruit in the middle of the garden; God has said, 'do not eat of it or even touch it, lest you die'".⁸

At this point the following observation is in order: Though no claim is being made for Maltese being other than an Arabic dialect with specific and perhaps unique internal developments peculiar unto itself. To date, no thorough and systematic investigation of the Western Semitic (Phoenician, Punic, Hebrew and Aramaic) strata in Maltese has yet been undertaken.

The presence of the particle *li ma* in Maltese having an argumentative or suasive function as in Phoenician, Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic would constitute one important indication of the tenacity of archaic forms to persist in "dialects" or vulgar levels of an otherwise classical language, standard literary Arabic.⁹ What makes all the aforementioned relevant here is the possibility that within the lexical resources of the Maltese language, there exists other forms which are neither Arabic or neo-Latin but Phoenician or Hebrew, thereby confirming the traditions maintained by Fr. Magri concerning the Phoenician-Punic background of Malta and her literature.¹⁰

⁸ Translations based upon *Il-Bibbja Mqaddsa*, "The Holy Bible (in Maltese)", published by the Trinitarian Bible Society, London, England, n.d.

⁹ Note the inter-dialectal Arabic distribution of the term "lest":

Classical Arabic – *Kailā, lailā, mahafatā an* and *hatta lā*.

Eastern Arabic – *lē'* and *hatte mā* (or *hatte lā*).

Western Arabic – *liallā, lāhsan* and *hofan min* and *liān lā*.

¹⁰ On the subject of archaic survivals in a "spoken" rather than "classical" dialect see the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Baruch A. Levine, *Survival of Ancient Canaanite in the Mishnah*, Brandeis University, 1962.