
Observations on the linguistic epigraphic choice in late antique inscriptions from Malta

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The aim of this paper is to reconsider the Maltese epigraphic material from a linguistic point of view, with an attempt to point out what the specific linguistic choice means within the epigraphic context. Analysing the epigraphic data, it is possible to suppose that in late antiquity the Greek-speaking community in Malta was linked to a Jewish community maybe coming from abroad. Furthermore, a parallel can be established with the south-eastern area in Sicily, where there is evidence for the presence of Jewish burial places in Christian necropoleis, with the preponderance of Greek used as epigraphic language. The choice of Greek for the funerary inscriptions from Malta does not tend to be arbitrary, and might indicate the persistent use of the original language of an immigrant community.

Early Imperial Inscriptions

What language did the Maltese speak in late antiquity? The answer to this question is not simple. The presence of Neo-Punic funerary inscriptions dated to the second century BC and the first century AD in Tač-Ċagħqi (Buhagiar 2007, 39, nos 26-27) and in Birżebbuġa, Ħal Far Tomb 3 (Buhagiar 2007, 39 no. 32) testifies that the archipelago maintained a cultural Semitic background into Roman times (Brincat 2008, 237), as can also be proved by the Punic burial places which remained in use until the second century AD (Buhagiar 2007, 11). But since the island was annexed to the Sicilian province as a result of the Roman conquest in 218 BC, as reported in Livy (*Ab urbe condita* 21.51; Dorey 1971, 50-51), the official language was obviously Latin. All the honorary inscriptions were written in Latin, apart from a few exceptions: a funerary inscription refers to Lucius Kastrius Prudens, a knight, called πρώτος Μελιταίων ‘the first of the Maltese’ and πάτρων ‘patronus’, dated to the first century AD (IG XIV 601); a fragment of marble slab with an inscription that makes possible reference to an archon (IG XIV 602); and a funerary inscription found in the Tač-Ċagħqi area (Rabat) (Fig. 1), that commemorated the actor Πόπλιος Αἴλιος Ἐρμόλαος, coming from Pergamon and probably a Greek native speaker

(Cassia 2008, 165-66). The choice of Greek, in this last instance, could be related to the desire to affirm the cultural origin of the deceased; alternatively, it could be a manifestation of cultural affinity, because Greek enjoyed prestige and was the high language used at the time.

What follows is a transcription of these three inscriptions.

(IG XIV 601)

Λούκιος Κα[στρί]κιος Κυρ(ίτες)
Προύδηνς ἰππεύς Ῥωμαίων πρώτος
Μελιταίων καὶ πάτρων ἄρξας καὶ
ἀμφιπολεύσας
θεῶ Ἀύγουστῶ
[---]ΕΣΧ[-]Ν[---]Ε[-]ΙΝΕ

(IG XIV 602)

ΒΕΛΛ[.]Ἑρμης (sic)
τῶ αρχ[---]

(Cassia 2008, 165-66)

χαῖρε
Π(όπλιος) Αἴλιος Ἐρμόλαος
Περγαμηνός κωμωδός
καὶ λυριστής, ἐβίωσεν
ἔτη κε' ὑγίαινε.



Figure 1. Inscription of the actor *P. Aelius Hermolaos* (photograph by Vittorio G. Rizzone)

On the other hand, the greater part of the epigraphic heritage of the archipelago in Roman Imperial times was written in Latin. Also the rare epitaphs are in Latin: an inscription discovered in the Jesuits Hill area, Marsa, seems to refer to a non-Christian burial dated to the third century AD, on the strength of the invocation to the *Manes* (CIL X 8319 add. = Buhagiar 2007, 40, no. 34):

D(is) M(anibus)
[F]lavius Titus
vixit annos
LV cives be-
nemerenti
fecerunt

Besides, a fragment of a slab with a Latin funerary inscription discovered in 1760 by Agius de Soldanis in St. George's Church, Rabat (Gozo), published by Caruana (1882, 143), could refer to a Roman burial of the Imperial era:

[---]Aur[e]ll[ia]
qua v[ix]i[t] annos
[quinqua]ginta gi[---]
[---]calend[as]

Nevertheless, both cases mentioned above are decontextualized and it would not be correct to speculate upon them.

Late antique Inscriptions

Coming to late antiquity, as Buhagiar states, 'the inscriptions from the Maltese catacombs are disappointingly few and often uninformative' (Buhagiar 2007, 32), but not from a linguistic point of view. The 39 late antique inscriptions that have so far been noted (Buhagiar 2007, 36-40) are epitaphs from funerary contexts. To these we must add two inscriptions recently discovered in St Agatha's rock-cut church, Rabat (Rizzone 2009, 203-205).

The greatest number of the late antique sample, 33 inscriptions in total, comes from the suburban catacombs of Rabat. One was found in Marsascala, three in the Marsa catacombs and two come from rural sites (Buhagiar 2007, 32).

From a linguistic point of view, 18 texts are in Greek, 16 in Latin. Although one inscription has been published as a Greek text (Buhagiar 2007, 37 no. 16), it was actually written in the Neo-Punic alphabet as confirmed to me by Prof. Felle and Prof. Lacerenza who were shown a photograph of the inscription. The presence in a funerary context of three Neo-Punic inscriptions, although illegible because of their poor state of preservation, testifies to seemingly widespread evidence of the cultural Semitic substratum, that appeared in inscriptions carved on plaster near the graves in several hypogea in Rabat (Buhagiar 2007, 36, no. 5; 37, nos 9 and 16). One can point out the

significant slight predominance of Greek, which was linked with the intellectual climate of Roman Malta, very close to the Greek tradition (Buhagiar and Fiorini 1996, 19). Without doubt one cannot notice in the epigraphic finds of the Maltese catacombs the great preponderance of inscriptions in Greek highlighted in the material from the late-antique catacombs of Syracuse (Korhonen 2002, 70-74). In fact, Mariarita Sgarlata pointed out that, in the middle of the fifth century AD, the epigraphic finds from the catacombs of Syracuse and the countryside show that the dominant language was Greek, probably linked with the presence of a strong ethnic Greek substratum (Sgarlata 1999, 491-92; 2003, 111).

Instead, and even though language choice is a result of family conventions consonant with the belonging to a specific social group, it is possible that linguistic choice was not necessarily connected with family use, above all in a situation of clear bilingualism. To this end, the presence of a bilingual inscription seems remarkable: it was recently discovered in Rabat and published by Rizzone (2009, 204-205). The inscription shows both a Greek and a Latin text: this could reveal a situation of real bilingualism on the island. The person who commissioned the inscription could be a Latin speaker, unwilling to move away from the traditional epigraphic usage, which seems to choose Greek as the 'official' language. The inscription is painted on the right wall of the entrance of St Agatha's rock-cut Church, in a *tabula* 36 cm x 44 cm, with letters 3 cm high (Rizzone 2009, 204-205):

[*Hic requiescit*] *Basileus senior e*
[vita exiens vixi]t an<n>os LXXVI,
[mense]s [---]et [die]s XVI.
 [Ἐξεθών ἐκ] τοῦ βίου Βασιλεύς
 [---]δοῦλος (?) Θεοῦ ἤχησεν
 [ἔτη ος', μῆνας ..., ἡμ]έρα[ς] ις'
 [---]
 [---]

Antonio Felle analysed the bilingual epitaphs of Rome, pointing out that the recurrence of the phenomenon is meaningful in both Christian and Jewish inscriptions, and it is particularly widespread in Rome in the sixth century AD (Felle 1999, 669-72).

The late antique inscriptions found in the catacombs and burial places relate to a narrow section of Maltese society. Even if the sample is small and unbalanced, and probably suffered from deterioration

and other damage, it seems that suddenly the epigraphy rediscovered the use of Greek as official language. But what is the reason for this language choice? It is possible, as held by Brincat (2008, 238), that Greek replaced Latin in Malta in the Byzantine period, but the Maltese inscriptions are not different, from an epigraphic point of view, from the Roman and Sicilian material dating to the middle fourth and the fifth century AD, thus predating the Byzantine period. As to the epigraphic formula, in fact, wording like *in hoc loco iacet/ἐνθάδε κείται* ('here lies') is predominant in the Maltese inscriptions. It is very widespread in Roman epigraphy of the fourth and fifth century AD (Carletti 1997, 160; 2008, 118-20), and is considered peculiar to the Christian funerary epigraphy of Syracuse (Korhonen 2002, 74). One can find it in five inscriptions (Buhagiar 2007, 36, no. 3, 37 nos 15 and 17, 38, nos 20-21). According to Rizzone (2009, 206-207; 2011, 119), this phrase was written at the beginning of another two fragmentary epitaphs. Wording like *situs est* (Buhagiar 2007, 36 no. 4, integrated by Antonio Ferrua's drawing), and τόπος with the name of the deceased in the genitive form (Buhagiar 2007, 37 no. 10) are also to be found. This formula is often found in the Roman material, as Carletti claimed (Carletti 1997, 160; 2008, 119). The whole wording reflects the convention of the funerary epigraphy in the west Mediterranean area between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century AD (Buhagiar 2007, 32; Carletti 2008, 118-23).

The reason for a linguistic choice that seems to prefer Greek for funerary use could be related to a different religious ideology, possibly linked to a group coming from abroad, developed deliberately differently, maintaining the traditional usage. Furthermore, in the matter of personal names, one can notice that the greater part is Greek, sometimes transliterated into Latin.¹ Only three names are certainly Latin.² This could be an indication of the foreign provenance of the family of the deceased. In addition to this, an inscription in St Agatha Catacomb 17 (Buhagiar 2007, 37, no. 10) shows two names (Fig. 2): it might be a sign of the conversion of a woman who chose the traditional name Εἰρήνη when she became Jewish; this name is widespread in Sicily and it is considered as the Greek equivalent of *Salome* (Rizzone and Sammito in press).

The Jewish Maltese community, according to Frey (*CII*, 471 no. 655), was made up of Greek native speakers coming from Alexandria. Becker (2009, 80-81) was of the same opinion. With regard to the epigraphic material, one can assign to a Jewish origin

six Greek inscriptions: two come from St Agatha Catacomb 17 (Buhagiar 2007, 37, nos 10-11), where a *menorah* was carved above the entrance; one, from SS Paul/Agatha 13 (Buhagiar 2007, 37, no 14), mentions a γερουσιαρκής (gerousiarch), a man who filled a very important post in the Jewish community (Noy 1999, 608-609), as well as his wife Eulogia called πρεσβυτήρα, but it is uncertain if this was a honorary epithet or whether the deceased occupied a real official function in the community (Noy 1999, 611; Buhagiar 2011, 83-84). Two signs lead us to affirm that a Jew commissioned it: a *menorah* carved on a doorway of the hypogeum and another one in relief between two headrests in a tomb (Buhagiar 2007, 36, app. 2, no. 5; Noy 1993, 221). Furthermore, two other inscriptions from SS Paul/Agatha 14 (Buhagiar 2007, 37, nos 15-16), despite no express reference to any religious denomination, are considered Jewish because of the seven-branched candlestick carved on the wall of the hypogeum.

What follows is a transcription of the above-mentioned inscriptions:

(Buhagiar 2007, 37, no. 10) (Fig. 2)
τόπος Διονυσίας
ἢ κὲ Εἰρήνας



Figure 2. Inscription of *Dionisia*, also called *Eirene* (photograph by Vittorio G. Rizzone)

((menorah))

(Buhagiar 2007, 37 no. 11)
βωθησον (sic) τοῦ Μαν[---]
ισ[---]ριπε[---]οι [---]κ[-]ιτο

In the first line, βωθησον is the incorrectly rendered transcription of βοήθησον.

(Buhagiar 2007, 37, no. 14, re-read by Rizzone 2011, 119)

[Ἐνθάδε κατάκεινται ?]
γερουσιαρκής φιλεντ[όλιος]
καὶ Ἐυλογία πρεσβυτήρα ἢ αὐτοῦ συμβίος

(Buhagiar 2007, 37 no. 15, Rizzone 2009, 202)

ἐνθάδε [κεῖται---]
[Γ]α[λ]ήνη θυ[γάτηρ ---]
[ἀπ]ώλε[το ---] Ε
[---]ΕΜ[---]
[--- ἐν εἰρή]νῃ
[ἢ κοίμησις αὐτῆς]

In this last case, the use of the wording ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοίμησις αὐτῆς, 'in peace may she rest', according to the integration proposed by Rizzone



Figure 3. Inscription of *Leonias* (photograph by Vittorio G. Rizzone)

(2009, 203), was common in Jewish inscriptions, and recalls the word *κοιμητήριον*, which can be found in an inscription from Marsa, hypogeum I Jesuits Hill (Buhagiar 2007, 39, no. 33). Within this context, it is interesting to highlight the mention of the purchase of the tomb. According to Carletti, this record is common in inscriptions dated from the middle fourth century AD onwards (Carletti 2008, 97-100), and it is observed in the epigraphic material from San Giovanni Catacombs in Syracuse (Felle 2005, 247). In the Maltese inscription, the word *κοιμητήριον* with reference to the burial place could be related to Jewish tradition, since it recalls the wording *ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοίμησίς σου*, widespread in the Roman Jewish epigraphic formulary (Nuzzo 2005, 113-17). Here is the transcription of the text (Buhagiar 2007, 39, no. 33, re-read by Rizzone 2009,

207):

κοιμητήριον
ἡγορασμένον
ἀπὸ Ζωσίμη[ς]
τίνοϋ καὶ ἀνί-
κη.

Furthermore, another Greek inscription (Fig. 3) found in St Agatha Catacomb 2, despite showing neither specific Jewish nor Christian indicators, has a parallel in an epitaph from the Jewish catacomb of Via Appia Pignatelli in Rome, as Becker (2009, 107 and 120-21) noticed. The inscription is painted in white letters 4 cm high on a red background, in a *tabula biansata* 34 cm x 49 cm supported by two *genii*, vandalized in ancient times (Becker 2009, 120-21). Here is the text transcribed, according to Buhagiar

(2007, 36 no. 6):

[---]
πρὸ [--- κα]λαν-
δῶν σεπτέ<μ>-
βριου ἀπόθεσι[ς]
Λεωνίας.

The Jewish community in Malta had reserved burial spaces close to Christian funerary spaces, in a climate of ‘friendship and co-operation between the two religious communities’ (Buhagiar 2007, 55; Becker 2009, 65-66). The presence of burials of persons of different religious faiths is testified in Sicily: e.g. in Lipari in the third and the fourth century AD we find the coexistence of Jewish and Christian tombs in the same area, as we also find in Marsala (Bonacasa Carra 2005, 143-44; 2007, 139-40). The presence of Jewish communities is reported in the Hyblean area, where a few small hypogea were noted with specific signs carved on the walls, like the seven-branched candlestick (Di Stefano 2005, 103-105; Di Stefano *et al.* 2007, 239).

In Sicily, Jewish inscriptions are generally in Greek: as Rutgers (1997, 246) stated, twelve of the thirteen inscriptions from Sicily that are certainly Jewish were carved using Greek. Three of them commemorated *presbyteri*, two from Catania and one from Sofiana (Caltanissetta) (Rizzone 2011, 88-89 and 119-21). In addition to these, we can refer to two inscriptions from Syracuse showing a menorah carved on the slab: one from hypogeum Cappuccini XI (Orsi 1900, 193-94), and the other one of unknown provenance that probably commemorated a *diaconus* (Rizzone 2011, 129 and 139). These inscriptions seem to testify the presence of a well-structured community. As Orsi assumed, the Jewish community in Syracuse was made up of Greek native speakers, with a strong cultural Greek substratum (Orsi 1900, 198).

Furthermore, a Jewish community coexisted with the Christian one in Jerba, where, according to Fentress, the first Jewish community arrived in the fourth century BC with Phoenicians traders and the main group took over the island in the first century AD, after the *diaspora* of AD 70 (Fentress *et al.* 2009, 16).

Conclusion

The Christian community in Malta, as Buhagiar (2007, 55) argued, could have developed from the Jewish pre-existing one, maybe under the influence

of the evangelisation carried out by the Sicilian clergy, maintaining the epigraphic use of Greek as a traditional language, usual in the Jewish inscriptions. Recently, Buhagiar pointed out that ‘the exclusive use of Greek in the surviving Maltese inscriptions seems to suggest an essentially Hellenized colony, possibly with close association to Sicily’ (Buhagiar 2011, 80). The preference of Greek as official language need not reflect a real ‘Hellenization’ of the society of the time, but could represent a symbolic choice linked to a peculiar funerary epigraphic tradition. It could be that the community tried to preserve the traditional language as a result of the control of the assembly that coordinated the activities of the community itself, as has been claimed for the Sicilian evidence (Rizzone and Sammito in press). Then, when the Christian community became larger and more dominant than the Jewish one, Latin was re-established alongside Greek. The bilingual inscription from St Agatha’s rock-cut church would appear to be a compromise between traditional use, which chose Greek, and the current language, which was Latin.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Mario Buhagiar for his great help and his constant support while I was studying the archaeology of the Maltese islands on a grant from the University of Malta for the academic years 2009 and 2010. Acknowledgements are due also to Prof. Anthony Bonanno, Dr Nicholas Vella, and Mr Keith Buhagiar for their kind and prompt suggestions. I am grateful to Prof. Antonio E. Felle (University of Bari “Aldo Moro”) and Prof. Giancarlo Lacerenza (Director of the “Centro di Studi Ebraici”, University of Naples “L’Orientale”). I am greatly indebted to Dr Vittorio G. Rizzone, OSB, for his help and prompt advice. He also very kindly gave me permission to publish his photographs of some inscriptions. I would like to thank also Mr Giovanni Arcoria, Miss Jessica Hill, and Mrs Cinzia Pagliara who revised my English. Finally, I deeply acknowledge the help of Ms Ann Gingell-Littlejohn, Deputy Editor of the *Malta Archaeological Review*, who went through the paper carefully improving the prose and the sense.

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Notes

- 1 As one can extrapolate from the table published by Buhagiar (2007, 32), these names are: Ἐυτυχίον, Λεωνίας, Ἐρένης for Ἰρενέος, Διονυσία called also Εἰρήνα, Εὐλογία, Γαλήνη, Αὐρηλία Ἐορτή, *Basileus*, Δομέστικος, Ἐυτυχιανος, *Dionisia*, Ζωσίμη, *Aurelia*, Κρίσπια.
- 2 *Desiderius, Ascanius, Flavius Titus* (Buhagiar 2007, 32)