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THE ENIGMA OF “MALTI”

AL-JISR BAINA L-ISLĀM WAL-MASĪHIYYAH⁵

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of the study of the Maltese language and the extent of the Arabic influence on the Maltese Language. The factors of the vitality of the Arabic source-code in modern Maltese are analyzed.

The study was performed through analysis of the language material collected in the period from 2012 to 2017 in Malta, including written sources of the modern Maltese language, related to different functional styles, as well as the audio recordings of native speakers.

Novelty of the research is in applying the language material as evidence that the time of the Arabic staying in Malta was substantially longer and the degree and nature of influence of the Arab civilization on the development of the language and culture of the population of Malta were more decisive than it is commonly believed. To use the language material as an argument is important, considering the fact that written documents of the period are almost nonexistent, and facts of material culture are scarce. The study of the evolution of Maltese from a dialect of Arabic to the state language of Malta (non-Arabic Catholic country) is a contribution to development of the typology of Arabic dialects which helps to understand the possible path of their development.

Keywords: *Maltese, Arabic influence, Arabic source-code, Arabic dialects, development of Maltese*

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INTRODUCTION

Today Malta is considered to be a new Europe Arabic connection: as of May 2004, when Malta joined the European Union, the Maltese language (Malti) became the

⁵ [A bridge between Islam and Christianity], Arabic.

EU's only official language of Semitic origin (Camilleri, 1997: xi). In this paper we discuss the extent of Arabic influence on Malti and its roots.

The aim of the study which is based on the analysis of the language material, is to enter into scientific discourse an argument that the depth and the degree of impact of Arabic on the modern Maltese language (in conditions of almost Millennium (Dalli, 2006) development of the latter apart from the mother tongue) indicates substantially longer and more significant than it is commonly acknowledged today⁶, influence of the Arabic culture and language of the Arabs on the development of Malta. This influence appears to play important role in the period of formation of the language and culture of the population of Malta.

Novelty of research consists in using the language material (the facts of the modern Maltese language) as evidence (Borg, 1997; Bugeja, 1998; Camilleri, 1997: vi – vii; Chuprygina, 2013, 2016) that the period of stay of the Arabs in Malta was longer and the degree and nature of influence of the Arab civilization was more decisive than it is commonly believed (Brincat, 1991, 2001). To use the language material as an argument is important considering the fact that written documents of the period are almost nonexistent, and facts of material culture are scarce, and those recently excavated not have yet received their scientific evaluation (Molinary & Cutajar, 1999). We argue that actualization of historical period of Arab settlement on the archipelago is crucial because of the uniqueness of the position of Malta as the only country in Europe with Semitic language which is geographically and historically prepositioned as the cultural civilizational bridge between Euro-Christian and Muslim legacies. The objective of the study is also to illustrate, on the example of the evolution of the Maltese language from one of the Arabic spoken dialects into the national language of a European country, possible ways of development of other modern Arabic dialects, i. e. Modern Arabic Colloquial Idioms, MACI (Mishkurov, 1985: 10). This question has been the subject of constant discussion in Arabic linguistics started by the Academy of Arabic Languages of Cairo more than half a century ago (Teymur, 1954) and is still very relevant today⁷.

Without any doubt, Malti is a unique precedence. Let us, for the sake of argument, put aside any discussion about the Maltese language in its contemporary shape being a dialect of Arabic or a stand-alone language, from the point of view of Comparative

⁶ The approach, mainly based on the only source on post-870 Malta: al-Himyari's text indicating that "after (255) the island of Malta remained an uninhabited ruin" (Dalli, 2006: 57). This version has been maintained by a number of historians (Brincat, 2008).

⁷ In fact, there are substantial differences between dialects of Arabic language, i.e. Modern Arabic Colloquial Idioms, MACI, and Maltese language (Malti).

Philology, based on the level of similarities/differences between the two idioms. It immediately becomes clear, that in the collective language consciousness of the people of Malta and Maltese diaspora all over the world⁸ their language (*Malti* – in Maltese language) is an accomplished national language and in this role determines cultural code of Maltese nation and its ethnic identity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study seeks to analyze factors underlying profound influence demonstrated by Arabic as the source of Maltese language on the latter, as well as a fascinating and surprising level of vitality of Arabic source-code in *Malti* – national language of people of Malta, where, after ousting of Muslims in approximately mid-thirteenth century, during hundreds and hundreds of years there has been European Catholic cultural dominance with the prevalence of allegedly superior European languages: Arabic as a written language was first replaced by Latin, then, consequentially, by Italian and French in the 16th century and through the period of rule of the Knights of the Order of St. John, and, eventually, there came English⁹ (Cassar, 2000 and Brincat, 2004). *Malti* after the thirteenth century was effectively cut off from not only the Arabic language of the Book but from the mainstream of spoken Arabic as well (Borg, 1996). And yet all the basic words, dealing with day-to-day human activity and, even more important, words determining psychological and spiritual symbols such as God (ALLAH), Holy Mother (UMM), etc., are of Arabic origin¹⁰. And this is in a deeply religious Catholic European country¹¹.

We argue that possible reason for survival of Arabic in the language conscience of Maltese and its crucial role in formation of modern Maltese identity was the fact that the Arabs were continuously present in Malta and in the second biggest island of the archipelago Gozo, starting from the Muslim conquest of Malta in 869–870 (Al-

⁸ In addition to over 431,000 speakers of Maltese, residing in Malta and Gozo, the Maltese emigrants, mainly in Australia, also speak the language, 2018: World Population Review <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/malta-population/>, 19, January, 2018; 21:35

⁹ Compared to Sicily, where, unlike in Malta, the Arabic language (Siculo-Arabic) spoken by the populace during Muslim period has been totally replaced by the Sicilian dialect of the Italian language, with no traces of Arabic (Agius, 1996).

¹⁰ As an example, attached is the photo (Annex I) of a plaque on the wall of the Church of St Paul in Rabat inscribed in Maltese with highlighted expression “By the Graciousness of God” (transl. from Maltese).

¹¹ Constitution of Malta states that the religion of Malta is the “Roman Catholic apostolic religion”, that the authorities of the Catholic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and wrong and that religious teaching of the Catholic apostolic faith shall be provided in all state schools as part of compulsory education. According to World Population Review, Catholicism is the state religion in Malta with a Catholic population of 98%. There is one church for every 1,000 residents. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/malta-population/>, 22, January, 2018; 19:40.

Himyari's account) until mid-thirteenth century, i.e. for nearly 400 years, and not only during the period of 200 years (1048 – mid-thirteenth century), as being reported by very few and dubious sources: Ibn Hawqal's¹² late tenth-century description of Malita (there is a well-founded suspicion that the author meant not Melita but Galita (Dalli, 2006: 14), a small island off the North African coast), al-Qazwīni's thirteenth-century description of mid-eleventh century Christian attack against Muslim-held Malta and Geoffrey Malaterra's book on deeds of Count Roger and the Norman conquest of Malta and Gozo in 1091. Al-Hymiari's description of post-870 Malta as "uninhabited ruin" has influenced heavily the studies of the history of Malta. No written sources survived from the ninth century, that is why al-Himyari's fourteenth-century version (based on al-Bakri's eleventh-century account) of post-870 Malta, is considered the main source of information on the period: "no documents come in sight for the period following the Muslim conquest of Malta in 870 before late references to eleventh-century events on the island" (Dalli, 2006: 14).

One of the reasons of the "introverted" point of view on Maltese history lies exactly in the scant availability of historical documentation pertaining to Maltese early Middle Ages. Malta is described (or even a better word: mentioned) in the medieval chronicles of Arab, Byzantium and European (mainly Spanish, read Moorish) origin either in passing or from secondary sources. More or less comprehensive documentation of Maltese history starts with the arrival of Knights of the Order of St. John (Cassar, 2000).

Subsequent period, starting from the study "*Della Descrizione di Malta isola nel Mare Siciliano: con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie*" [Description of Malta, an island in Sicilian Sea with its antiquities and other information]¹³ of the "father of Maltese historiography" (Bonanno, 2005), a vice-chancellor of the Order of St. John Giovanni Francesco Abela (1582–1655), could be characterized as years of establishing of Euro-Christian mentality in the Islands and distancing from the cultural relation with Muslim Arabs.

This period had been kept in the dark on behalf of the mainstream Maltese science with encouragement from the country's subsequent authorities, leading to a strange situation, whereas the official history of Malta led to believe, that social and

¹² Ibn Hawqal: the tenth-century traveller from Baghdad, the author of geographical writings (Luttrell, 1987); al-Qazwīni: in the thirteenth century described a mid-eleventh-century attack on a Muslim-held Malta; al-Bakri, an Andalusian Arab historian and a great *geographer* of the Muslim West, whose fragmentated eleventh-century description of the Muslim attack against Byzantine of 869–870 was retold by al-Hymiari in fourteenth century; Geoffrey Malaterra: a historian at Count Roger court who described the Norman conquest of Malta and Gozo in 1091 (Dalli, 2006).

¹³ First edited in 1647.

economic development of the islands began with the arrival of the Knights of St. John. While reconstructing the Maltese “Middle Ages”, Abela effectively “created” a past for his native community along Cristian European lines. As for the period between the alleged shipwreck of St. Paul in the first Century A.D. and the settlement of the Order of St. John (1535), including “the occupation of Saracens, or the Arabs”¹⁴, – it was, according to Abela, an insignificant episode in otherwise neat chain of Christianity on the Maltese islands. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Abela’s concept stayed as a foundation for studies in Maltese history as long as up to the beginning of the last century. Even the Semitic character of the Maltese language was being explained by its Punic roots¹⁵, and not by its Arabic origin¹⁶ (though this theory ran counter al-Himyari’s description of post-870 Arab attack Malta as “uninhabited ruin”: if the islands were really left uninhabited after the Byzantines expulsion in 870 for more than a century – than how could the Punic survive? This inconsistency is important, as al-Himyari’s version of Malta (considered a main historical document on Malta of the discussed period) being uninhabited in the last three decades of ninth and in tenth centuries came into line with Abela’s concept of ever-Christian Malta).

Malta's Middle Ages with its mixture of Eastern and Western influences – is it an insular affair of strictly national interest, or is it a significant part of a broader European context? This is the question put forward by Maltese researches A. Molinari and N. Cutajar in 1999 in a short piece in Malta Archeological Review named "Of Greeks and Arabs and of Feudal Knights" (Molinary & Cutajar 1999).

As no written document comes in sight for the period following Muslim conquest of Malta in 870 and up to the Byzantine attack on the Muslim-held Malta (placed by al-Qazwini to 1049), another route of knowledge acquires grave importance – search for and study of specimens of material culture left over from that period. Meanwhile, there have been practically no archeological excavations in Malta on sites of after-conquest presence of Muslim settlers (the vicinity of Mdina and Rabat in Malta and

¹⁴ The period of Muslim rule in Malta is covered in Abela’s “*Della Descrittione...*”, Book 2, Chapter 9: “Malta occupati da Saraceni; o vogliame dire Arabi” (“Malta occupied by Saracenes; or [by this] I mean Arabs” (p.251 – 9).

¹⁵ Lord Strickland, Malta’s Prime Minister (1927–1932) stressed Punic origin of the Maltese language as a connection with the glorious Phoenician civilization (Brincat 2001, 2004, 2008).

¹⁶ Wettinger points out that Maltese historians in attempt to minimize the impact of Arabic on the Maltese language “insisted in effect that the Muslim Arab rulers and their Christian Maltese subjects could have had nothing in common except presumably a fierce hatred of each other” (1986:87).

Rabat in Gozo), except those conducted by Sir Themistocles Zammit¹⁷. During excavations on the site of Villa Romana (1920–1925) in the outskirts of Mdina he discovered Muslim cemetery and “Saracenic Tombstones”.

Nevertheless, in 1998 the Archeological Museum has decided to organize several displays dedicated to Medieval Malta, including its "Arabic Period". There are several Saracen Tombstones with Kufic texts on display in Villa Romana in Rabat as well as the famous Majmuna Stone¹⁸ in Gozo Museum. The Museum has in its possession over 100 other stones and artefacts, excavated by T. Zammit in the Islamic cemetery in Rabat, which have Kufic inscriptions. As the main aim of Zammit’s excavations was initially the Roman site, the discovery of Saracenic cemetery was a surprise and was, evidently, considered insignificant at the time (1920–1925). Fortunately, Dr. Zammit meticulously made notes of every find and now the artefacts which have never been properly attributed, catalogued and of course displayed to public, wait in storage (with the exception of randomly chosen several tombstones displayed in Villa Romana near Mdina as a tribute to their discoverer). Significant part of those artifacts has been lost and can be seen only in hand-drawn pictures in Dr. Zammit’s notebooks, authored by him during excavations, with copied inscriptions in Kufic characters, which are waiting for their scientific evaluation.

New archaeological evidence on late tenth-century Mdina (fragments of bowls and jars, an amphora with a filter – typical of the Muslim period) have also been displayed¹⁹. Even these scant discoveries point to the fact that Malta was the site of energetic activities through the period of ninth-tenth centuries, fully integrated in the life network of Arab Golden Age and Central Mediterranean, contrary to the evidence left by al-Himyari, who’s work “*Ar-Rawd al Mi’tar fi Khabar Al-Aqtar*” [The Perfumed Garden in the News of Nations], compiled several centuries later than the described events, has been for a long period the basis for all research published on the issue. In need to explain the presence of the Muslims in Malta in 1053, and not just the presence, but also their ability to defeat the Byzantines, as was documented by al-Qazwini, who described the unsuccessful invasion of the *Rūm* into Muslim-held Malta in 1049 (al-Himyari dates this event to 1053–54, al-Himyari wrote that ‘after

¹⁷ Dr. Zammit’s notebooks have been kindly provided by Dr. Sharon Sultana, Senior Curator of the National Museum of Archaeology, from the National Collection of Heritage Malta (archival material from Temi Zammit notebooks), during preliminary field studies conducted in Malta and Gozo (2013-2017).

¹⁸ “Maimuna’s tombstone”, with Kufic Arabic inscription, is a 12th-century tombstone said to have been discovered in Gozo.

¹⁹ Ceramics pertaining to the Late tenth and to the eleventh centuries have been identified as Islamic at Mdina, Cittadella (Gozo), Tas-Silg and at San Cir (Molinary & Cutajar 1999).

440' (or 1048–49) the Muslims peopled the island and they built its city, and then it became a finer place than it was before (Dalli, 2006).

But the main proof to the profound and decisive role played by the Arabs in Maltese islands lies, in our view, in the field of linguistics: it is the Maltese language.

Though the discussion of the origin of the Maltese language is not over, it is at present almost universally admitted that it is derived from Arabic and not from Punic the other language of Semitic origin once claimed to be the source of the language spoken in Malta: 'there is no longer any doubt that the Maltese derives from Arabic introduced in Malta and Gozo between 870 and 1090 AD' (Hull, 1993:297). A form of the spoken language brought by the Arabs from Sicily – Siculo-Arabic (Agius, 1996) was very close to the language spoken then in nearby Tunisia and quite different from Classical Arabic in its grammar structure and phonetics as the case with other dialects of Arabic was.

We argue that it is quite possible that the depth of influence of Arabic on the Maltese language could be ascribed to the fact that Arabs settled and were active in Malta starting from 870 and not from their supposed return to the island in 1049, and the Arabic language found "fruitful soil" here: indeed, during a certain period, Malta being part of the Carthaginian empire in the years of the Punic Wars (264–146 B.C.), Punic had been a spoken language of the local population (Brincat, 2008), though it has to be mentioned that all Punic inscriptions in Malta stopped in the first century A.D. (Bonnano, 2005) and thus provided right conditions for establishing the other Semitic language (spoken language of the Arabs) as the language of the inhabitants of Malta, playing the role of a fertilizer for the growth of Arabic influence. And now the most evident living remains of the Arab period in Malta we find in the vernacular. A survey showed that 40% of chosen 1,820 Quranic Arabic roots were found in Maltese, against 58% in Moroccan Arabic, and 72% in Lebanese Arabic (Zammit, 2000). Thousands of Maltese lexemes are of Arabic origin and most of them nominate the basic concepts and/or linked to a somewhat rudimentary way of life (Brincat, 2008; Chuprygina, 2013, 2016).

RESULTS

This study was performed through analysis of the language material collected in the period from 2012 to 2017 in Malta, including written sources of the modern Maltese language, related to different functional styles, as well as audio recordings of native speakers. As a result of the study, a register of names of Arab origin – toponyms and anthroponyms, functioning in the modern Maltese language, is being compiled. The research results and the list of the relevant toponyms and anthroponyms were

presented in the paper "Peculiarities of Arabic names in the modern Maltese language on the example of KuNYat(un) and 'iSM(un)" (Chuprygina, 2013).

Below there are examples of religious texts in the Maltese language placed at the entrance to one of the local churches in the village of Mellieha (photo of Text 2 is attached: Annex II):

Text 1: *Jien hu l-qawmien u l-Hajja kull min jemmen fiya dan ma imut qatt.*

To compare with Arabic *al-Fusha*²⁰: in 4 *John* 11:25-26 (Arabic-New-Testament-Books):

أَنَا هُوَ الْقِيَامَةُ وَالْحَيَاةُ... وَكُلُّ مَنْ (كَانَ حَيًّا وَ) آمَنَ بِي فَلَنْ يَمُوتَ إِلَى الْأَبَدِ

[*anā huwa l-qiyāmah wal-hayāh... wakull man āmana bī falan yamūt ilal-abad*],

Eng.: "I am the resurrection, and the life... (11:25). And whosoever (liveth and)

believeth in me shall never die" (11:26). <https://st-takla.org/Bibles/Holy-Bible.html>

Text 2: *Min jiekol gismi u jixrub demmi jibqa' fiya u jiena fih.*

To compare with Arabic *al-Fusha*: in 4 *John* 6:56:

مَنْ يَأْكُلُ جَسَدِي وَيَشْرَبُ دَمِي يَثْبُتُ فِيَّ وَأَنَا فِيهِ

[*man ya'kul jasadī wa yashrab damī yaθbut fiyya wa 'anā fih*], *Eng.:* "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him".

We can trace in the Maltese language all grammar features typical for other dialects of Arabic (Belova, 2003), especially those of Maghribi group of dialects, such as the definite article, the nunation of the nouns, the verbal forms, the dual form, the diminutive form, the basic concept of consonant trilateralism and other traits of Arabic morphology (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997; Bugeja, 1999; Camillieri, 1999; Kaye & Rosenhaus, 1997). The morphology remains that of dialectal Arabic and adopts words added from European languages. One can retain that the morphology of Malti has remained even more conservative than the morphology of other Arabic dialects. The study of etymology of Maltese surnames also discovers the parameters of Arabic nomenclature, like *Ism(un)*, *Kunyat(un)*, *Laqab(un)*, etc., though in Latinized forms (the examples in Chuprygina, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Both the recent material findings and the language facts lead us to believe that it is more likely that the Arabs stayed in the archipelago during a much longer period, starting from the year 870 - the expulsion of Byzantines, and onwards. Further research will shed light on the largely unknown period of Arabic influence on Europe. It looks like the "dialogue" between the two largest civilizations has started in the ninth century and continues today. And Malti with its Arabic roots holds a

²⁰ Modern Standard Arabic (Arabic)

distinctly significant position in that respect. We argue here that search for, study of artefacts of material culture pertaining to the period of Arab settlements in Malta and presentation them in Malta museums bears significant importance today, as it becomes obvious that Malta, while being a small island state, holds special importance in the future development of dialogue of civilizations. This role is encoded in the unique geographical position of the archipelago in the center of maritime crossroads between Asia, Africa and Europe as well as Malta being the "speaking example" of inter-civilization coexistence, which resulted in indigenous "Maltese model", where there has been historical coexistence between Islamic and Euro-Christian traditions leading to the unique national code. This particular situation potentially brings an impact on further development of civilizational factors.

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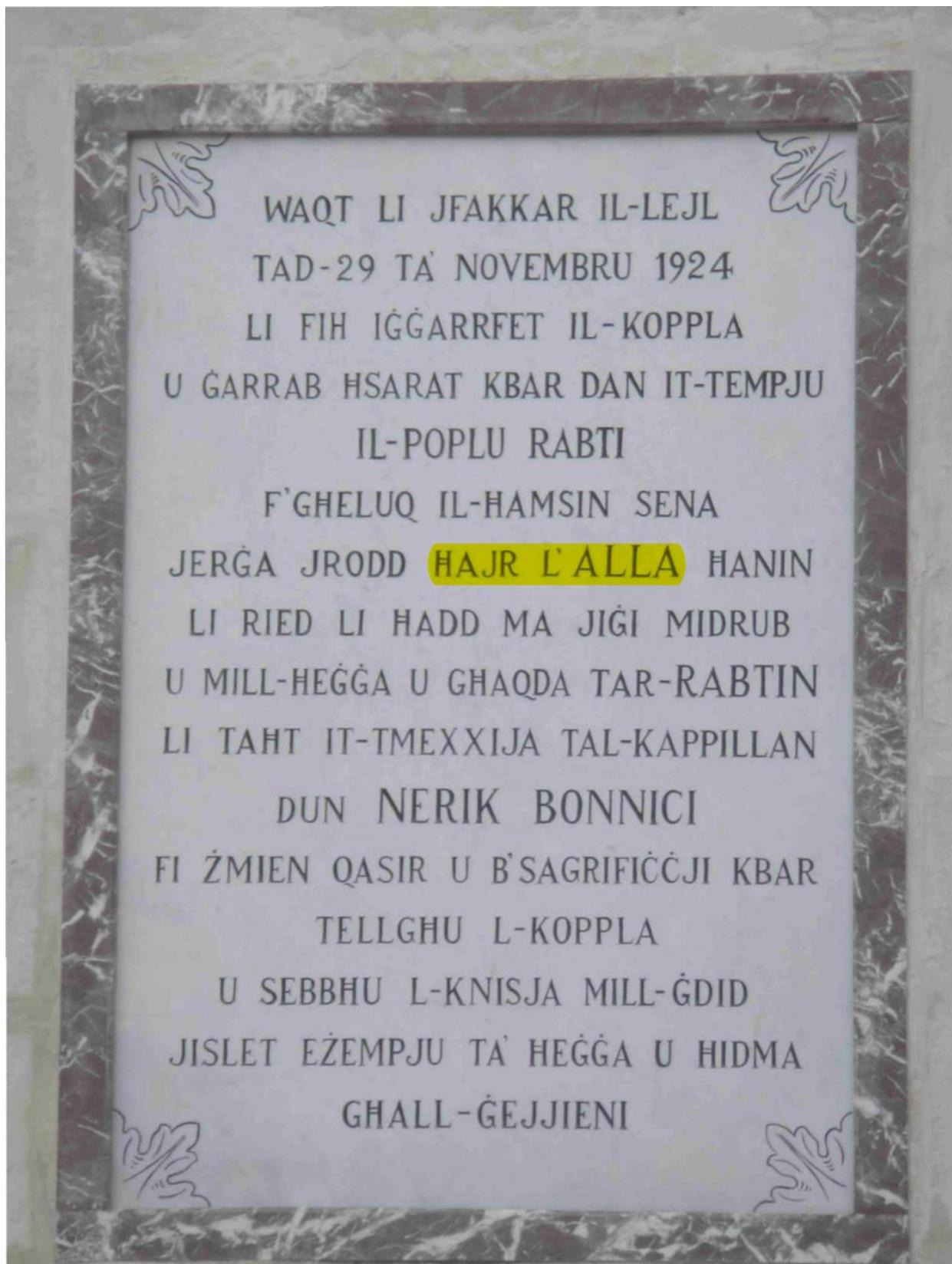
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ANNEX 2

