

The Renaissance of Hebrew and Maltese

A Reminder of the Authentic Semitic non-Arab Identity of the Ancient Mediterranean World

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (March 2025)



Crossing the Alps to descend on Rome (Heinrich Leutemann, 1866)

(This article was originally published in May, 2007, in New English Review)

In both Malta and the State of Israel, independence was recreated along with a cultural revival in the face of great

odds and massive doubts as to the viability of both states and languages. In both cases, a strongly based naive, ethnic-linguistic nationalism evolved based on the Phoenician-Hebrew and Canaanite speaking city states and colonies that extended from the Levant to Carthage and the Western Mediterranean civilization of the ancient world.

Hebrew and Maltese present a fascinating case of a cultural survival recalling the days of Hannibal and King Solomon. The movements for an independent Malta and Israel both drew in part upon a 'radical' cultural-historical-linguistic thesis linking a Semitic and pre-Christian Phoenician-Punic-Hebrew heritage that was crushed by Rome. The renaissance of the two languages and their reestablishment of political independence is a challenge to the exaggerated historical claims of Pan-Arab nationalists who have convinced a large part of world public opinion that the entire region stretching from the straits of Gibraltar to the Persian Gulf is the indigenous homeland of the Arabs.

Although the Ancient Near East was the scene of a tumultuous history involving the great empires of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia with tiny Israel and Phoenicia at the fulcrum of three continents, two peoples who came on the scene much later—the Turks and the Arabs who have largely written the modern history of the region and ascribed their role as all important. This is due to the rise of Islam, the centuries long conflict following the Crusades pitting the Ottoman Empire against Christendom and the political and economic importance of the so-called oil wealthy Arab World.

In Israel, a radical form of Hebrew nationalism rejected the leadership of the Zionist movement as too timid, and urged resistance to the British mandate, as in Malta. Both these movements have draw upon what is the authentic pre-Islamic and pre-Christian, pre-Roman and pre-Arab, pre-Islamic character of the Mediterranean world of the 11th to 5th centuries B.C.

The Heritage of Phoenicia-Carthage and Ancient Israel

At its height in the 7th century BC, (a thousand and three hundred years before the advent of Islam and the expansion of the Arabs out of the Arabian peninsula), a vast overseas Semitic civilization was established by the Phoenician states of Tyre and Sidon in alliance with ancient Israel. All the petty states mentioned in the Bible—the Canaanite tribes, Tyre and Sidon (the Phoenician homeland), Moab, Edom, Ammon, Israel and Judea shared a common Semitic language and related alphabets that were later borrowed by the Greeks and Romans. At this time, the Arab people, their language and pre-Islamic and non-literate culture were relegated to the Arabian peninsular, a cultural backwater.

In the radical Canaanite-Hebrew nationalist view, the ancient prophets of Israel formed a traditional-agrarian reaction to the maritime and imperialist orientation of the Phoenician-Canaanite civilization (which included the alliance mentioned in the Bible between King Hiram of Tyre and King Solomon). Phoenician merchants and seamen paved a path across the Mediterranean and established colonies and various enterprises, mainly in mining, fishing and agriculture. Their major new center in Carthage eventually became the greatest power in the Western Mediterranean and challenged Rome for supremacy. The language spoken in Carthage became known as Punic, a derivative of the earlier Canaanite-Hebrew speech. Eventually Rome faced Carthage in the Punic Wars and until victory was assured, its greatest orator Cato found it necessary to end every speech in the Senate with the call "*Carthago dilenda est*" (Carthage must be destroyed). This goal was finally achieved with the total destruction of Carthage in 146 BC ending the Third Punic War.

Had Hannibal succeeded in crossing the Alps to attack Rome, all of the Mediterranean would have inherited a Semitic

tradition having nothing to do with the Arabs and the desert. Greece or Rome might have ended up speaking dialects of Phoenician-Hebrew rather than Latin! Of course, subsequent historiography with its Hellenic and Roman biases, as well as traditional Jewish and Christian theology sought to minimize the achievements of this earlier Hebrew speaking civilization (later to include the closely related Punic of Carthage and Aramaic) that embraced a Diaspora around the shores of the Mediterranean extending to Carthage, Malta, Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily, the Balearic Islands and as far west as Cadiz in southern Spain.

Israel's Hebrew Identity

The noted Israeli author Amos Kenan, whose very name is the original designation of *Canaan*, the land that inherited a Hebrew identity and boasted of its own folklore, mythology, religion and literature one thousand and seven hundred years before the arrival of an Arab or the hint of Arabic speech outside of Arabia, had this to say of the close connection between the land and its indigenous pre-Arabic culture and expressed the clear link between ancient Israel and Carthage—Rome's most bitter opponents. In an article entitled "Envy Tyre," he wrote:

I always had an attraction to this wonderful phenomenon called Tyre and Sidon, and as one who was born on the sands of Tel Aviv on the coastal lowland, I feel a closeness to all that was, is and will be, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean which I am a part of, and which is a part of me. The Hebrew language, which is my language today, was 4,000 and 3,000 and 2,500 years ago the language spoken in Jerusalem and Tyre, in Shechem and Sidon, in Jaꞗa and Ugarit ... and in Carthage. Tyre and Sidon and Jerusalem were

two axes of one culture ... the spiritual one of Jerusalem and the material one of Carthage. In the days when the prophets of Israel tried to create a universal code of morality, the seamen of Tyre established their colonies ... Why shouldn't we feel a sense of pride in our proximity to that ancient contemporary of ours who stamped his image on the area, gave to the world writing, and once sent his elephants across the Alps under Hannibal's leadership and momentarily brought mighty Rome itself in danger of destruction? (Yediot Ahronot; June 18, 1982)

The modern renaissance of Hebrew carried out in the face of ultra-orthodox religious opposition created a national modern form of song, dance, literature and other elements of popular culture drawing upon the ancient past that still bear a radical secular and nationalist overtones. Needless to say, opponents of this Canaanite-Carthaginian-Hebrew synthesis mock these ideas as fanciful flights from reality and a pagan affront to the heritage and sensitivities of Judaism and Christianity. For the Arabs and Islam, they are an even greater abomination. No matter how long the Arabization of the Near and Middle East has had time to perpetrate the eradication of the authentic original cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Lebanon-Phoenicia, Israel, Malta and the Berber speaking peoples of North Africa, it is evident that roots of these cultures, languages and nations endure.

In addition to their "strange" religion, the Jews and their Hebrew language recalled the ancient Punic-speaking Carthaginian foe of Rome. It is no wonder that the Romans, who willingly acknowledged their cultural debt to Greece, were loath to grant any credit to the vanquished Jews, Phoenicians and Carthaginians. In contrast to so many other subject peoples under Roman rule, these Semitic peoples put up stubborn resistance and even claimed the superiority of monotheism (first Judaism and then Christianity), and were

proud of their alphabet which was borrowed first by the Greeks and later by the Romans themselves. Our alphabet is a direct descendant and still bears the names of the first two letters of the early Phoenician-Hebrew alphabet (*alef* and *bet*).

The expansion of the Phoenicians westward across the Mediterranean involved the collaboration of the Hebrews (and eventually Jewish), proselytizing followed to the new North African colonies established by the Phoenicians. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (vol. 5, p.215. Jerusalem, 1971) also suggests that the acceptance of Judaism was a means of preserving the original Semitic-Phoenician identity of the settlers in Carthage and North Africa after the Roman conquest. In this way, they hoped to avoid assimilation to the Roman culture they so hated.

Modern Maltese

The precarious position of the Maltese demonstrates the dangers of rival foreign political and cultural influences on one of the smallest states in Europe to have its own language (only Iceland with its less than 300,000 speakers can be compared to Malta). These influences have already profoundly shaped the spoken vernacular and the written language. Maltese, like Hebrew, is a small insular remnant language spoken only in the homeland and a far flung Diaspora. Both languages are living testimony to the pre-Christian and pre-Roman identity of the ancient world.

Both Maltese and modern Israeli Hebrew face the danger of being swamped by 'high status' rivals, most notably English. Devotees of the Hebrew and Maltese revivals are afraid that their languages may eventually be reduced to the status of low-caste languages resigned to the home or workshop while a 'high-caste' language such as English will be used for all public functions, education, science, the arts, the press,

parliament, etc. This danger is much more apparent in the case of Maltese which had reached this level of *diglossia* vis-a-vis Italian by the beginning of the 20th century. The influence of Italian was manifest for centuries and is still very apparent in both the spoken vernacular and in the role it has played in the development of the arts, law and education in Malta. One prominent Maltese nationalist leader just before World War I, who believed that Italian was the only possible choice for affairs of state, referred to the spoken vernacular of the uneducated people as “the curse of the country,” “fit only for the kitchen,” and a “dark reminder” of the period of Arab rule in the Middle Ages.



Short-lived 1933-34 Latinized Hebrew newspaper edited by Itamar Ben-Avi, the son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the principal pioneer in the movement to create Hebrew as a national vernacular.

Maltese is also the only Semitic language to have made the transition to full fledged use of a Romanized script with vowels. This was also proposed many times for Hebrew by reform-minded Hebrew linguists and even by Zev Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionist-Zionist movement—the spiritual founder of the modern Herut-Likud Party). Guttural sounds are represented by individual superscript letters. This feature of the language is of particular interest to Semitic scholars who have debated the pros and cons of Romanization for Hebrew and Arabic.

The Maltese people are renowned for their continued devotion to the Catholic church, yet they share a linguistic kinship with the Arab world and feel no conflict in calling God the Father, 'Allah' —an example which substantiates the old saying that the Maltese vernacular is 'Semitic material in a Roman mouth.' As late as the year 60 C.E., St. Paul was shipwrecked on Malta and could make himself understood by the loyal inhabitants by speaking Hebrew/Aramaic. Many Maltese continue to bear names derived from the Old Testament (Bin-il-yamin, Ra-iben, Mistura and Mnissi—the equivalents of Benjamin, Ruben, Esther and Menashe, etc.).

The Origins and Renaissance of Maltese

But how was Maltese preserved and elevated, and what was Hebrew's role in the matter? In the late 1870s, a handful of local scholars believing that Maltese descended from the dialect spoken in Carthage and originally brought there by the Phoenicians and later known as Punic deserved to be respected rather than be held in contempt. They argued that, as a language closely related to the Hebrew and Aramaic spoken by Jesus and the disciples, Maltese had a noble affiliation to them both. How could such a language be fit only for the market or the fisherman's wharf and boat? Why should it be denied as the language of instruction in the schools, the courts and capable

of producing a great literature?

Only in the mid 19th century did scholars finally adapt Maltese to a written standard using Latin letters and thereby greatly increased literacy. This success brought immense new prestige to the language that was the spoken vernacular of more than 95% of the island's population. The 1880 publication of a book in Italian, *Saggio intorno alla lingua Maltese come e[ra]ne all'Ebraico*, enabled the cause of Maltese to finally make headway among many of the island's Italian speaking intellectuals who had previously spurned the language. The author of the book, Annibale Preca, argued for the close association of Hebrew and Arabic with Maltese.

The old debate on the origin of Maltese has largely been largely decided by modern scholarship against the theory of a strong Punic-Phoenician element but it is undeniable that Malta was ruled from Carthage at its height in the 3rd century B.C. and that Punic was in use for many centuries before being superseded by Arabic. Modern scholarship affirms that Maltese derives primarily from a North African Arabic dialect introduced sometime during the period of Arab rule 870-1090 A.D.

These scholarly investigations and political disputes are however, of little consequence in today's language debate. The Labor Party which returned to power in 1970 favored close relations with the Eastern Bloc and especially with Libya that included making Arabic a compulsory subject in state secondary schools. The end result, however, was a colossal failure due to the unfamiliarity with the Arabic alphabet and the cultural incompatibility between the devoutly Catholic Maltese and Qadaffi's radical Islamic Libya.

Malta, like Ireland, was formerly allowed to use English lyrics for the songs entered in the Eurovision contest in the 1960-1995 period when only songs in the "national language" were nominally permitted. This was an admission that the

'naive' languages were hardly more than a legal fiction. Like the Irish, almost the entire Maltese population understands and is capable of using English for everyday purposes.

Even an introductory phrase book in Maltese for English residents, written by the wife of a former prime minister of Malta (Mrs. Moyna Minto), admits that "English people can literally spend a lifetime in Malta without finding it necessary to speak in the language of the people to whom God has given this tiny group of islands."

It has been estimated that the proportion of Semitic to Romance entries in a Maltese dictionary is 65 per cent to 35 percent but the Romance/ English proportion rises considerably and exceeds 80 per cent of the concepts relating to modern technology, abstractions, legal terms and parliamentary affairs.

Arabic speakers who have some knowledge of Italian or French are able to understand some Maltese but the average Maltese speaker is disadvantaged by inability to read Arabic or recognize common Semitic equivalents for many words which have been replaced by wholesale borrowing from Italian and English. The vocabulary of Maltese is riddled with loan formations that derive from Italian.

The last Moslems were expelled in 1249. The Maltese vernacular then became subject to Sicilian influences and later to the standard literary Tuscan/Florentine Italian as a result of its official use by the ruling Crusader Order, the Knights of Saint John who held sway until 1798.

Malta's Heritage of Three Official Language Languages

Unlike in other areas of Italy and Sicily, educated Maltese did not evolve a specific regional dialect but spoke the standard 'National' language of Italy which had been learned

by instruction in private classes. These linguistic influences have been variously interpreted by rival social forces who used them to advance arguments on behalf of cultural and political orientations. These assumed major dimensions in the late 19th century and culminated in the replacement of Italian by both English and Maltese as official languages in 1936 as a direct rebuff to Fascist claims.

A complex three-way struggle emerged between supporters of Maltese as a viable national language, and those who looked to English, or to Italian as the most suitable vehicle for national life and a continuation of the Catholic-Latin-Mediterranean heritage. Ironically, the 'Nationalist' political movement embraced Italian as the 'authentic' expression of Maltese history and culture and viewed the vernacular as an embarrassing poor relative of Arabic—tainted with the stain of Black Africa and Islam.

This is particularly ironic since Christianity evolved in the Near East. The Aramaic language of Christ and the apostles was brought to Malta where it was immediately understood without the necessity of translation into Greek and Latin, stamping Malta as one of the first Christian strongholds outside the Levant (L'vant itself is the Maltese term for East).

The other great political movement in Malta is the Labour/Socialist party which took a negative stance towards Italian as the language of the upper classes who had traditionally been linked to the church hierarchy and the high regard for Latin and Italian. The Labour Party's stand on the language question in the 1930s was that Maltese was worth preserving as "perhaps the sole linguistic vestige of a world far older than Rome" (apparently unaware or willfully ignorant regarding the already successful revival of Hebrew). British rule, dating from the end of a brief Napoleonic rule initially looked with favor on maintaining the stability of the Catholic church and the ruling establishment with its alliance to the Italian language as the vehicle of instruction, the law and

administration.

The Struggle for Maltese Cultural Identity

Malta's strategic importance to Britain increased following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and led to a gradual reduction in the privileged position of Italian. The English language came to be seen by many anti-establishment Maltese as a passport to fuller economic, social and cultural participation in local affairs and in the power of the far flung British Empire.

The growing rejection of Italian and the ascendancy of English were promoted hand in hand with a movement on behalf of Maltese which the Nationalists had so slighted. At the turn of the century, the Italian government was at pains to distance itself from a tiny but disruptive minority of Maltese who looked towards incorporation into a united Italy. 'The Maltese want the religion of Rome, the language of Dante and the English pound' was one cynical way of expressing the political, cultural and economic dilemma. After Italy's aggression against Abyssinia in 1936, British-Italian relations were placed under great strain and Malta was added to the list of Mussolini's irredentist demands.

An entire ideological justification (known as 'The Punic Build-up' ; see Eric Bronckman, *Last Bastion, Sketches of the Maltese Islands*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd. pages 207-219) of a glorious Phoenician/Punic past harkening back to Hannibal was utilized in the 1930s to introduce Maltese as the language of instruction at all levels. Appeals to the mass of ordinary people were met by counter attacks to preserve Italian and continental ties which the upper classes considered synonymous with Latin-Catholic-Mediterranean civilization.

Malta's heroic stand against the prolonged Axis blockade and

bombing in World War II and the bestowal by King George VI of the George Cross for bravery to the entire islands' population totally obscured a small number of pro-Italian collaborators and continued tensions over cultural, linguistic and political orientation which re-emerged when hostilities ceased. The post war period has greatly strengthened the position of English over Italian and threatens to reduce the vernacular to a position of permanent inferiority.

Universal literacy in Malta is an achievement due in large measure to a phonetic alphabet and instruction in the naive vernacular in the primary grades. The use of a Romanized script and the enormous impact of two Indo-European languages on Maltese are of interest to students of the other two Semitic languages, Hebrew and Arabic. Problems of literacy and printing have led to many reform proposals for both Hebrew and Arabic which have all been essentially rejected on the basis of practical grounds and religious sentiment.

Almost all Maltese speakers now switch to English to count, use common everyday greetings and interjections (okay, thank you, sorry), and give their children English names. The massive intrusion of English with its real and supposed importance in world trade, diplomacy, science and technology, higher education, tourism, and as a 'passport to a wider cultural world' beyond the tiny areas of the Maltese and Hebrew speaking states, is a cause for concern.

The dangers of a descent into permanent diglossia and loss of a very important historical cultural link are very real. Sensitive, proud and concerned Maltese are aware that they are particularly vulnerable to the partial denationalization that occurred in Ireland with the loss of ancestral Gaelic. Both Hebrew and Maltese nationalists are convinced that the heritage of Solomon and Hannibal and the ancient Hebrew/Punic speaking civilization all deserve to be cultivated and cherished in the face of much later antagonistic historiography of the Latin and Arab peoples and the exclusive

religious claims of Islam and Roman Catholicism.

Author's Note: for a thorough treatment of the History of the Maltese Language, see the following:

Geoffrey Hull, *The Malta Language Question; A Study in Cultural Imperialism*. (1993. Valetta, Malta).

Yonatan Ratosh, *The New Hebrew Nation—the Canaanite Outlook: in Unease in Zion*, Ehud Ben Ezer. (Quadrangle/The New York Times Book. Co. 1974)

Norman Berdichevsky, "Maltese-Cultural Survival Amidst the Dangers of Diglossia," (*Geolinguistics*, vol. 20, 1994. pp. 129-137); "Maltese and Hebrew; Two Cases of Ethno-Linguistic Survival" (*Geolinguistics*, vol. 21, 1995. pp.89-98) and Norman Berdichevsky, "HaMaltit KiIvrit-Parasha shel Hisardut vishel Tchiya Leshonit-Etnit" (Hebrew), (*Ha-Umma*, Summer, 1995. pp. 477-481)

[Table of Contents](#)

Dr Norman Berdichevsky is the author of [*An Introduction to Danish Culture*](#) and [*Modern Hebrew, The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language*](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)