

## TWO INTERESTING ADDITIONS TO THE FLORA OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

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### ABSTRACT

The occurrence of *Muscari commutatum* Guss. and *Sarcopoterium spinosum* (L.) Spach in the Maltese Islands is reported for the first time. Information on habitat, distribution and status is also given.

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On the 19th March 1983 the author found a small colony of *Muscari commutatum* Guss. - about thirty plants in all - on the rocky upper coralline plateau overlooking the northern slope of Wied Rini (valley), Malta, between a small field and a low rubble wall sheltering an old, solitary *Citrus limon* (L.) Burm.

Although the flora of the Maltese islands has been diligently studied, there is clear indication that this area has never been explored by earlier botanists; and this is the presence of a conspicuous, fairly large population of *Cistus monspeliensis* L., which the author had earlier found in the vicinity, on both sides of the valley, and which had never been recorded previously.

The accompanying flora included *Thymus capitatus* (L.) Hoffmanns. & Link, *Phagnalon* sp., *Sanguisorba minor* Scop., *Fumana thymifolia* (L.) Sprach ex Webb, *Urginea maritima* (L.) Baker, *Asphodelus aestivus* Brot., *Psoralea bituminosa* L., *Dactylis glomerata* L., *Leontodon tuberosus* L., *Arisarum vulgare* Targ.-Tozz., *Euphorbia pinea* L., *Silene vulgaris* (Moench) Garcke, *Lobularia maritima* (L.) Desv. *Reichardia picroides* (L.) Roth, *Tetragonolobus purpureus* Moench, *Foeniculum vulgare* Miller, *Anemone coronaria* L., *Bellis annua* L., *Oxalis pes-caprae* L., a much reduced form of *Plantago lagopus* L., and a single tuft of *Schoenus nigricans* L., which one would expect to find much nearer the coast.

*Muscari commutatum* grows on limestone hills in the eastern Mediterranean from Italy, Sicily and Sardinia to Israel.

So far it is difficult to say whether the plants found in Malta are of native origin. The small size of the colony, the restricted area that it occupies in a common habitat, and its close proximity to the old tree, which was obviously planted there, suggest an accidental introduction.

Another interesting species, *Sarcopoterium spinosum* (L.) Spach, was found by the author on the 10th March 1985. It was a small colony in the middle of a sizeable stretch of karst-land of lower coralline limestone, tilting gently from the former Pembroke Army Camp towards the sea. It is still known as Pembroke Rifle Ranges.

This place was not very accessible to nineteenth century botanists in whose time good roads leading to it were not yet built. In fact the earliest botanical records from this locality are those of SOMMIER and CARUANA GATTO (1915).

The bushes discovered were accompanied by a robust form of the related *Sanguisorba minor* Scop., *Ophrys* cf. *sphagodes* Miller, *Plantago serraria* L., *Thymus capitatus* (L.) Hoffmanns. & Link, *Urginea maritima* (L.) Baker, *Orchis coriophora* L., *Asphodelus aestivus* Brot., *Teucrium fruticans* L., *Dactylis glomerata* L., *Tetragonolobus purpureus* Moench, *Cynara cardunculus* L., *Leontodon tuberosus* L., and *Euphorbia pinea* L.

A dominant species of eastern Mediterranean garigue communities, *Sarcopoterium spinosum* grows in Italy, Sicily and from Greece to Israel.

Again it is possible that this eastern species could be indigenous in Malta since Malta is very close to the western limit of its geographical range. In this case however, the colony consists of an old bush, surrounded by younger ones of different sizes giving the impression of an invading introduction, rather than traces of an old population on its way out. This would not be surprising when considering that, during the first half of this century, units of the British Army were frequently on the move between Malta and the Near East, and during the same time the Pembroke Rifle Range was being utilized for rifle practice and manoeuvres, in which thousands of soldiers fresh from eastern Mediterranean countries must have taken part. Further supporting this suggestion is the presence at Pembroke Camp of a rare early-flowering form of *Gynandris sisyrinchium* (L.) Parl. (found by the author in March 1986) which according to GOLDBLATT (personal communication) who examined plants of this form from another Maltese population, could also be an introduction from the Eastern Mediterranean.

Any conclusion drawn on the status of these two species in the flora of the Maltese Islands would be mere speculation. What is certain is the fact that they are now established elements of the Maltese flora.

In both cases specimens have been deposited in the private herbarium of Edwin Lanfranco in Malta and at the Kew Herbarium.

The author is indebted to Edwin Lanfranco for identifying both species and to Prof. Peter Goldblatt of Missouri (USA) for information about the early-flowering *Gynandris sisyrinchium*.

#### REFERENCE

- SOMMIER, S., and CARUANA GATTO, A. (1915). *Flora Melitensis Nova*, Stab. Pellas, Firenze. 502pp.

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