

# Curious Gozitan Place Names

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## Introduction

Information about place names can be derived from three factors: the source (or sources) in which the place name is documented; the locality where this place is or was situated; and the time during which this place name was or is still in use.

### *Sources*

The source of any toponym can be classified under the following three categories: documentary sources, where the place names are written in a document, such as notarial contracts, manuscripts and books; cartographic sources, such as portulans, maps, surveyed maps, and *cabrei*; and oral sources, where the place names are 'stored' in the 'collective memory' of some people living in a particular locality.

Here one must stress the importance of knowing where a place to which the place name refers, is located, since there are instances where the same place name occurs in two, three or more locations. As an example from Gozo, the place name "il-Blata l-Bajda" is situated in three different locations in Gozo: in Rabat, Għajnsielem (close to Żewwieqa) and in Nadur (facing the sea, on the right hand side of Ramla Bay). The same applies to the toponym "il-Fgura", which is located both in Għajnsielem and in Għarb. Hence for just one place name there may be multiple locations.

### *Time period*

The period of time during which this place name existed or is still in use, is also to be considered for at least two reasons. The first reason is that some place names are not used any more simply because nowadays the places do not exist anymore. A classic example from Gozo is the place name, "Ħaġret l-Armi", documented in Maltese by Aguis de Soldanis (1766) in his 'Damma', but mentioned earlier by Gian Frangisk Abela (1647), in Italian as Pietra delle Armi.

This place name was close to the tower of Mġarr ix-Xini, according to Agius de Soldanis' description in his 'Damma'. According to Gozitan historian Joseph Bezzina (2004), this place name could have been very close to a collapsed cave known as "il-Qniepen", which is also close to Mġarr ix-Xini Bay. Another well-known example is the famous landmark "it-Tieqa tad-Dwejra" or simply called "it-Tieqa". In this case, we know almost exactly the date and time when "it-Tieqa" ceased to exist: 8th day of March, 2017 at about 09.15hrs. In the case of "Ħaġret l-Armi", we do not have a clue in this regard.

The second reason why the period of time is essential when studying toponymy is the fact that on the same location there could be some form of development and/or buildings which can lead to a complete change to a different toponym. A well-known example is the hill on the left-hand side as one approaches Mġarr harbour (known as "ix-Xatt" and/or "il-Port" by locals). About 300 years ago, the hill would have been called "il-Qortin ta' Ras it-Tafal". However, about 200 years ago, the hill would have been called "il-Forti Chambrai" or simply, in Maltese orthography "Xambre", as it is still called today. Hence the first place name fell into disuse, and eventually today nobody uses this place name to refer to this location. Other place names which emerged in the transitional period when this fort started to be constructed are the following: "il-Belt il-Ġdida" and "il-Belt ta' Ras it-Tafal". Hence, here we experience another aspect in the study of toponymy: there can be multiple place names for just one location.

### *Etymology*

The etymology of place names is a very intriguing and interesting subject. First of all one must say that some toponyms were coined by the people living near or quite close to the place. These were common folk, mostly illiterate, who spoke the vernacular language, which was the only language known to them. Hence, here we have another

aspect of toponyms: their linguistic relevance through which one can appreciate and be able to date which words were in use at the time. Let us consider two examples from Gozo. What is today known as “iċ-Ċittadella”, was known as “il-Belt” and/or “is-Sur” in the middle of the 18th century. This is documented by Agius de Soldanis. It was natural to answer the simple question, “Where do you live ?” in this way: “*Jien noqgħod il-Belt*” or “*Jien noqgħod ġos-Sur*”. These semitic words were the ‘natural’ choice for this place name, at that time rather than the Italian word “iċ-Ċittadella”.

### Classification of Toponyms

One can classify toponyms in at least three different ways, as follows:

Location on a map. Place names may appear on maps and the whereabouts of the place can therefore be identified. There is also the possibility that there may be sufficient sources to be able to indicate the whereabouts of a toponym on a map, but not with precision.

Syntax or structure. Place names may consist of only one word (known as lexeme) or more than one main lexeme. Examples already given of the first type are: “il-Belt”, “iċ-Ċittadella”, and “il-Qniepen”; whilst those of the second type are “il-Belt il-Ġdida”, “il-Blata l-Bajda”, “it-Tieqa tad-Dwejra”, and “il-Qortin ta’ Ras it-Tafal”.

Etymology. The meaning and/or etymology of the place names can also be used to classify place names, with the two main categories being descriptive toponyms and anthroponyms (place names indicating the owner or the user or the benefactor/protector

of the land or place mentioned). These two main categories can be further sub-divided. Such sub-sections are not dealt with in this article.

Another aspect of toponyms relates to the meaning of the place name. Here again there are three possibilities to consider. Sometimes the place name is so strange that its meaning is very difficult to decipher. Hence, one has to wait and hope that at some future time there would appear a new document which could give a clue to the meaning. The other opposite scenario is when the meaning of the place name is so obvious and/or there are so many sources that the meaning is correct with certainty. The intermediate situation is that when there is a plausible meaning. In the last situation, there may be more than one plausible meaning.

So, these three possibilities can be summarised as follows:

- a. a toponym with a correct meaning (examples: Victoria, il-Għarb);
- b. a toponym with one or more plausible meanings (il-Qala, Ta’ Sannat);
- c. a toponym to which, to-date, one cannot attribute a plausible meaning.

The place name, “Victoria” is quite obvious: there is sufficient documentation that shows that this refers to Queen Victoria who elevated the status of the administrative capital (ir-Rabat). The same applies to “il-Għarb”, a descriptive toponym meaning ‘the west’, referring initially to the western ‘contrada’ of Gozo, elevated to the status of a parish (and hence that of a village) in 1679. Here one can have the certainty of this meaning using comparative toponymy, where one finds Algarve, the southern region of Portugal, but the



Detail from a Map of Gozo (Source: Private Collection), dated 1824 showing Midthna tal Gharb and Gharb.

western region of Al Andalus. In fact this region is also documented as “Garb al-Andalus”. Another example is “il-Mithna tal-Għarb” which is clearly shown in a map of Gozo, dated 1824. This is the mill on the way towards Dwejra, from Rabat, seen on the right after passing Gelmus Hill. Today this windmill is not located within the boundaries of the municipality of Għarb, but it is clear that “tal-Għarb” refers to the fact that it is located on the western part of Rabat.

Two place names to which, to-date, one cannot attribute with meaning with certainty, but both have plausible meanings, are “Ta’ Sannat” and “il-Qala”.

In his excellent contribution towards the village of Sannat, “Sannat fi Ġrajjet Għawdex”, Joseph Bezzina (1989) lists various plausible meanings of the toponym Sannat, quoting Agius de Soldanis (1746) (remotely plausible), Erin Serracino Inglott (1984) (plausible), Joe Zammit Ciantar (1982) (plausible), and Wettinger (1980) (plausible). Based on the corpus of Gozitan place names researched and collected so far, the two most plausible meanings of Ta’ Sannat are (a) a descriptive meaning derived from the roots of the lexeme sined (roots S-N-D) and (b) the anthroponym plausible meaning suggested by Wettinger (the name could be of Greek origin, as suggested by Wettinger but also of Arabic/Hebrew origin). If I were to choose, and to give my opinion, I would consider the anthroponym as the more plausible meaning. This is because the place name “Ġebel Sannat” is documented directly by Agius de Soldanis twice, in his book about Gozo (1746) and in his dictionary (1766). Another source for the same toponym is the Agius de Soldanis map (dated 1745), although this map was prepared by Fr. Luigi Bartolo and not Agius de Soldanis. The fact that there is this phrase in construct state (*stat kostrutt*) as “Ġebel Sannat”, as opposed to *Ġebel is-Sannat*, is indicative that “Sannat” is a proper name. The second reason is that in my research I came across another identical place name, “Ta’ Sannat”, described as *isem ta’ biċċa raba’* (cultivated land) in the locality of “il-Qala”.

With reference to the meaning of the place name of the locality of “il-Qala”, in my opinion there are two equally plausible meanings: one refers to a creek or sea inlet (same meaning as “Qalet Marku”

in Malta, and “Qalet ix-Xilep”, found both in Malta and Gozo) and the other refers to a fortified structure on a hillock or just the hillock. In the latter case, the place name should be written as “Qalgħa” not “Qala” to be grammatically correct. In Malta there are hillocks recorded both as “Qalgħa” and “Qala”. However in Gozo, the diminutive of “Qalgħa”, that is, “Qlejgħa” exists in two different place names: “il-Wied tal-Qlejgħa” and “il-Qlejgħa” (both in the locality of iż-Żebbuġ). In my opinion, both are plausible meanings, which might have converged into just one toponym: “il-Qala”. But if I were to choose the better of the two, for reasons I shall not explain here, I would opt for the meaning of a hillock.

## Bendu

An interesting place name in Gozo is “il-Għajn ta’ Bendu”. This is a spring located in Fontana, more or less in front of the more famous “il-Għajn il-Kbira”. Agius de Soldanis, in his “Damma” records this place name slightly differently as “Għajn Bendu”. Before explaining the meaning of “Bendu”, one might ask whether there are other toponyms in Gozo and in Malta containing this word. The answer is yes: there are three references in Gozo and at least one in Malta:

- a. Ta’ Bendu: *isem ta’ biċċa raba’* (cultivated land), located at Ta’ Kerċem;
- b. Ta’ Bendu: *isem ta’ biċċa art* (piece of land), located at Ta’ Kerċem;
- c. Ta’ Bendu: *isem ta’ biċċa raba’* (cultivated land), located at il-Munxar; and
- d. Ta’ Nadur Bendu: *isem ta’ biċċa art* (piece of land), located at iż-Żurrieq (Malta).

From the structure or syntax of these place names, one can conclude that “Bendu” is a proper name, presumably a masculine name, as in the colloquial expression “nagħaġ ta’ Bendu”. I always had the gut feeling that Bendu is the contracted form of “Benedettu” (Benedict in Maltese) similar to “Ġużu” as the contracted version of “Ġużeppi”. However I never found a document to confirm this... until I started collecting all the place names from Agius de Soldanis’ dictionary. Under the word Ghain, in folio 191, one finds: *Ghain Bendu o Benedetto, un altra, poco lontano dalla prima...* This is a clear indication that Bendu refers to Benedetto (in Italian) or Benedittu (in Maltese).



Il-Ghajn ta' Bendu, Fontana.

## Sufar

I came across this place name when I was collecting all the toponyms from Gozo from the set of Survey Sheets printed in 1968. These were the following: “Ta’ Wied Sufar” and “Wied Sufar”. The first toponym refers to the lands in the vicinity of the valley itself while the second is the name of the valley. This valley is located in “San Lawrenz”, very close to “il-Qawra” (now known as the Inland Sea for tourists). When analysing all the toponyms from Joe Zammit Ciantar’s unpublished thesis (1978) about Gozitan place names, the valley is recorded as “Wied Sofar”, in the vicinity of “id-Dwejra”. So far nothing new: Sofar is a phonetic variation of “Sufar” or vice-versa. But the lexemes “Sufar” and/or “Sofar” puzzled me for quite some time until ‘new’ information from two completely different sources enable me to be able to give a plausible meaning. Chronologically, I will start with the most recent source: a very interesting article published by Alex Camilleri (2006) about the place names in the area of “id-Dwejra” (Gozo).

When analysing all the place names, I became aware and moreover I was convinced that I was pronouncing mentally this place name wrongly: in this article, the same place name is given as “Wied Sôfar”. Mentally, I was always pronouncing wrongly the valley as Wied Sufâr and/or Wied Sofâr (that is, stressing the last syllable, like we pronounce “buqar”). Here one might ask: why are you convinced that this is the correct way to pronounce these two ‘strange’ words. The answer is given in the same article, in which the author thanks and mentions his relatives from Għarb who helped him to collect these toponyms. Here one must stress the importance of oral sources: one advantage or asset is the fact that oral sources are very important to be able to pronounce place names ‘correctly’. The other source was very crucial to solve this puzzle in a logical way. When researching the rural tenements in Gozo, from the Archives and Records’ Section of the Public Works Department (Floriana, Malta), I came across the following: *Lands Ta Wied L’Ghasafar* limits of *Dueira*.



Ta Wied Sufar: Extract from Survey Sheets (dated 1968) (Source: <http://geoserver.pa.org.mt/publicgeoserver>)

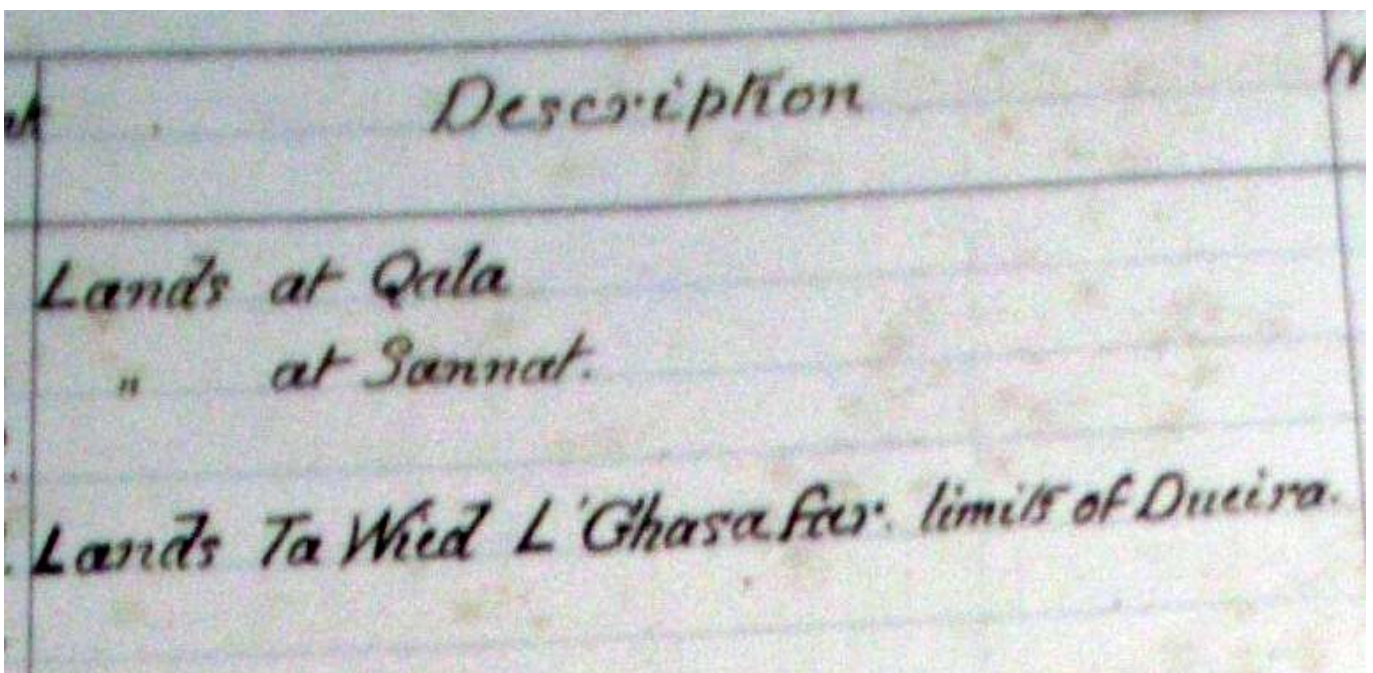
Using today's orthography, the place name is "Ta' Wied l-Ghasafar". Given that dialectal variations of "Ghasafar" can be "Ghasofar" and "Ghasufar", the plausible meaning now becomes clear. "Wied l-Ghasafar" becomes "Wied l-Ghasofar", and with "Gha" being softly pronounced the toponym is recorded as "Wied Sofar". The same process obviously applies with "Wied l-Ghasufar", which is recorded as "Wied Sufar". To be completely sure of this mutation, one needs to verify that the valley "Wied Sufar" and lands "Ta' Wied Sufar" are located where the lands "Ta' Wied l-Ghasafar" are also located. From the survey sheets, the first two places can be located with precision BUT we know just the whereabouts of

the latter, which is in the limits of "id-Dwejra". Hence, one can conclude that this is a plausible meaning. To conclude this part, one might ask: are there any other place names in Gozo with the lexeme "Ghasafar"? The answer is yes. To-date, I have also encountered "Tal-Ghasafar" (*bicča art*) at San Lawrenz, "l-Iskoll tal-Ghasafar" close to Mgarr Harbour, and "is-Sined tal-Ghasafar" (*bicča art*) at Ta' Kerċem.

### Iż-Żurrieq

This place name is mostly known in Malta as a village in the southern part of Malta. But what about Gozo? I admit that when I came across this place name in Gozo, I was puzzled. The source was a book printed in Italian in 1915, which describes hundreds of plants found in the Maltese Islands: *Flora Melitensis Nova* authored by A. Caruana Gatto and S. Sommier (1915).

There are three direct references to Zurriek in Gozo, and the three references mention the 'old telegraph' (*il vecchio telegrafo*). I will quote the third reference in Italian: *abbondante in una grande pozza d'acqua fra San Paolo e il telegrafo di Zurriek*. This led me to speculate that this referred to "il-Ghadira ta' Sarraflu", or simply as "il-Ghadira", as it is known by the locals from Ta' Kerċem. San Paolo could easily refer to Qasam



Ta Wied L'Ghasafar: Extract from Gozo Tenements Register (Source: Archives Public Works), undated (but circa 1880)

39. — **Matthiola incana** (L.) R. Br.: GD. p. 3; Cleghorn p. 120; Gulia Repert. p. 24 et Barth I p. 379; CG. Nat. Malt. p. 8 et Medit. Nat. p. 277; Caruel in Parl. Fl. it. IX p. 796; Duthie Barth p. 544. *Cheiranthus incanus* Z. p. 12.

Vecchi muri e rupi specialmente marine. — **Malta**, in vari luoghi, per es. a *Coltonera* e sui muri dei forti della *Falletta!* **Gozo**, dove l'abbiamo raccolta al castello di *Rabato* e al Telegrafo a *Zurriek!* *Migiarro* (Gulia). — Febbraio-Maggio.

Vecchi muri e luoghi aridi rocciosi. — **Malta**, piuttosto rara, *Bingemma*, spalti della *Falletta*, *Delinara*, *Mbusta!* *Xarvi tal Vardia* (Gb.), *Zurrico*, *Melleha*, *Selmva* (Duthie!), presso *Crendi* (Borg!). **Gozo**, a *Zurriek* sui ruderi del vecchio telegrafo, nell'interno del castello di *Rabato*, *Torre dei Giganti!* **Comino!** **Cominotto** (Duthie). — Marzo-Maggio.

786. — **Heleocharis palustris** (L.) Rob. Br. *Eleocharis palustris* Z. p. 47; Gulia Barth II p. 9 (a. et var. b. *minor*). *Scirpus palustris* GD. p. 38.

Luoghi inondati e lungo i corsi d'acqua. — **Malta**, frequente, *Intahleb*, *Fiddien*, *U'ied Gherzuma*, *Ghain Mula*, *Ghain Rihana* ecc. **Gozo**, abbondante in una grande pozza d'acqua fra *San Paolo* e il telegrafo di *Zurriek!* — Aprile-Giugno.

Extracts from *Flora Melitensis Nova* (1915), clearly indicating the toponym *Zurriek* in Gozo.



Map of Gozo (Source: National Archives of Malta), dated 1893 where the toponym *Zurriek* is located close to *Cala Dueira*.

San Pawl, which is also located nearby. Luckily at a later stage I came across a navigational map, which indicated this toponym in Gozo, confirming that my intuition about the location was correct. But what about its meaning? This will be explained in the next part of the article.

## Conclusion

These few examples demonstrate how intriguing and interesting is the study of place names. And how difficult it sometimes is to decipher and hence be able to attribute a plausible meaning related to a place name. And more curious place names from Gozo are yet to follow!

*To be continued.*

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