

# Curious Gozitan Place-Names - Part III

## Revealing some of Wettinger's Unpublished Gozitan Place-Names

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### Introduction

In this article, some of the place-names from Godfrey Wettinger's publication (Wettinger 2000) are analysed and explained. In his excellent book about Maltese and Gozitan place-names, Wettinger lists a total of almost five thousand headings or entries (toponyms) from the earliest sources he had researched throughout his academic career till the year 2000, when this book was published. In the introduction of this book, under the subsection 'Comprehensiveness', Wettinger states that *'innumerable place-names have been missed in this work. Reasons are obvious. For one thing, it has not been possible to search all the possible sources of place-name documentation.'*

When he refers to Gozitan toponymy, under the same subsection, he states that the Military 6-inch to 1-mile Maps, prepared in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century do not include Gozo, and that *'J. Zammit Ciantar's thesis on Gozitan place-names contains a larger number of current place-names than the present work, but still misses scores of those dealt with here'*.

Moreover, in the Addenda (pages 637 to 645), Wettinger lists some 180 entries, out of which more than 30 entries refer to place-names in Gozo. As a general introduction, Wettinger states:

*'The following entries contain verbal elements which could not be rendered confidently into the current standard Maltese orthography. They are given here so that the documentary information itself may be preserved and to enable others to provide their own explanations, perhaps in the light of fresh documentation.'*

In this article 'new' or 'never-published' Gozitan place-names are identified thanks to the original documentation published in Wettinger's Addenda.

### Some Important Considerations

The intrinsic wealth in Wettinger's publication is the massive amount of Maltese words found in documentary sources (mainly from the Notarial Archives in Valletta) yielding thousands of toponyms in the Maltese Islands, mainly from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. One must keep in mind that these words (in Maltese) precede Caxaro's Cantilena by at least a hundred years. However one must keep in mind that no standard Maltese orthography existed during this period, and hence each notary had the 'freedom' to write these Maltese words according to the best way he was academically trained to interpret the Maltese sounds that existed at that time. The fact that almost invariably the Gozitan toponym 'il-Gharb' is written as 'garb', 'garbi' or 'garbo' is a clear indication that the harsh sound of the Maltese "għajn" was being pronounced at that time. This is the equivalent of the Arabic "rghajn" (رغ). This is also attested by the Maltese word equivalent to a field, 'il-Għalqa', which is almost invariably documented as 'galca'.

Hence, when rendering the original documentation in today's standard Maltese orthography, one is faced or is exposed to errors or inaccuracies as explained below.

*Possible inaccuracies by the notaries (in old documents)*

Each notary could write the official contract in Latin, Sicilian, Catalan, Spanish and/or (Old) Italian, according to his academic formation. Hence, one may find a Maltese word/place-name with a Latin declension. Moreover specific 'sounds' or phonemes could be represented by different letters or digraphs. As an example, any 'ch' can easily be interpreted as having the Maltese 'k' or 'q' sounds or the Maltese 'ċ' or 'x', the latter two being more of a Catalan or Spanish influence.

One must keep in mind, that in this period of time (14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century), the Maltese language was more semitic oriented and hence more semitic productive. Moreover, certain Arabic sounds were still being pronounced, with no equivalence in any of the Romance languages known to these notaries. Hence these ‘sounds’ had to be adapted and written in the best way the notaries heard them.

One must keep in mind also that these notaries may or may not have understood the Maltese language. Hence one finds some forms of concatenation of two words or a different or an anomalous separation of two words. Some are easy to detect (for example: *ta libiar* > *tal-ibjar*), but others can pose difficulties.

In addition, one must keep in mind also that these notaries could have been prone to orthographic mistakes, either due to the fact of misinterpreting or misunderstanding the informant, that is the oral source, or because of their occasional spelling mistake.

#### *Possible inaccuracies by the researchers*

Researchers must be trained in palaeography when transcribing old documents. However, even the most trained researcher can find situations where there is uncertainty and/or ambiguity to decide how a word can be transcribed. Some letters can be easily confused, such as: an S with an F (or vice-versa) or an N with a U (or vice-versa) and an N with an M (or vice-versa).

There may also be inaccuracies when rendering the word into standard Maltese orthography. Moreover, the researcher can also state that he is transcribing the word as it is known to be written today (and not the grammatically correct renderings). Hence, today *Mgarr* is accepted instead of *Mgar*/*Mgâr*. Moreover, the researcher can state also that he is using an all-inclusive approach, meaning that if there are two or more possible interpretations, both are to be included. This will be the approach used in this article.

#### **The Place-Names**

In this article, only five different sources have been analysed and compared with other known toponyms, either from Gozo using the publication *The Place-Names of Gozo Volume I – Part 1* as a

point of reference. Sometimes, other place-names in Spain, Malta and Comino are used for comparative purposes only to be able to decipher and/or to give a plausible meaning to these place-names.

#### **Place-names**

##### *1. Għalaq ta' Paskwalinu, il-Għalaq ta' Bisqallin, il-*

Text: *Jl ghalac ta pascualino, territorium in contrata migiar Jxini, Gozo (as stated by Wettinger)*

Date: 1585

Source: Notarial Archives, Valletta (Malta) BGWe (2000), pg. 638, entry no.16

Comments: To transcribe this entry was quite straightforward when considering that there are other toponyms in Gozo having the lexeme “Għalaq”. Refer to BSSa (2020), pg. 140, where there are 8 entries (located in *Munxar*, *Kerċem* and *Qala*). *Bisqallin* is the archaic Maltese equivalent of *Paskwalinu*. Refer to the toponym *Hal Bisqallin* in BGWe (2000), pg. 273.

Meaning: There is no doubt that “Għalaq” is related to “Għalqa”, in the sense that this is a closed or an enclosed territory. However, it is difficult to state whether this is considered to be a singular noun or a noun in the collective form (like *Ramla – Ramel*). However, we do know that it belonged to *Paskwalino* or *Bisqallin*, and that this territory is located in the area of today’s *Mgarr ix-Xini*.

##### *2. Lok tal-Klejba, il-*

Text: *Jlloc tal ghileipe, locum unum rusticum cum duabus clausunculis mandrettis cisterna et area in contrata ta Cabesa, Gozo (as stated by Wettinger)*

Date: 1585

Source: Notarial Archives, Valletta (Malta) BGWe (2000), pg. 639, entry no.4

Comments: The most problematic word to transcribe is *ghileipe*, but when one considers that there is the toponym *il-Wilġa tal-Kelba* (Refer to BSSa (2020), pg. 417: located in *Għasri*), and that this place-name is located in the vicinity, near the hamlet of *Santa Luċija* (previously known as *ta' Qabbiesa* or *tal-Qabbiesa*), the transcription of *Klejba* is quite plausible. For those who are not familiar with the Maltese language, *Klejba* is the semitic diminutive of *Kelba*.

Meaning: Here the most plausible meaning of Klejba is that of a nickname, especially since there is the definite article with the preposition ta' (tal-Klejba). Thus, this is the rural residence (locum unum rusticum) of this person, having also two small fields (clausunculis) or mandrettis (small mandras, considered to be small gardens in Gozo) and a cistern. This rural residence is located in the area of ta' Qabbiesa (today's Santa Lucija).

### 3. *Ibjar ta' Bejn il-Qlejja', tal-*

Text: *ta libiar ta beyn Jl chileye, clausura*, Gozo (as stated by Wettinger)

Date: 1594

Source: Cathedral Museum, Mdina (Malta) BGWe (2000), pg. 642, entry no.6

Comments: Here the most problematic word to transcribe is chileye, since this can be *Qlejja'* (the plural of *Qalgħa*, just as *Snajja'* is the plural of *Sengħa*) or *Qlejgħa* which is the semitic diminutive of *Qalgħa*. Given that there is the preposition *Bejn*,

which means 'between' in Maltese, the obvious choice is the plural form *Qlejja'*. This can be confirmed by comparative analysis with other place-names such as *Bejn il-Kmiemen*, today erroneously known as the Blue Lagoon. Refer to BSSa (2020), pg.16 and pg.17 for more examples in Gozo. These include *Bejn il-Ġebliet* and *Ta' Bejn l-Isqawi*. Here *Ġebliet* is the sound plural of *Ġebbla*, whilst *Isqawi* is the broken plural of *Saqwi*, whilst *Kmiemen* refers to both the islands of *Kemmuna* and *Kemmunett*.

Meaning: This is quite clear: it refers to a field (clausura) having wells or cisterns (*tal-Ibjar*) located between hillocks (*Bejn il-Qlejja'*). However, the only place-name which possess the lexeme *Qalgħa* in Gozo according to Wettinger's Place-names is today written as *il-Qala*. Refer to BGWe (2000), pg.430. However this does not preclude that other hillocks in Gozo could be similarly described as *Qalgħa*. One must note that *Qalgħa*, is only given the meaning of a hillock in the Maltese context. The real meaning in Arabic is a castle. In Spain, there are innumerable places with the lexeme *Alcalá*, where



An early 19<sup>th</sup> century map showing the Area tal-Qabbiesa (known as Santa Lucija nowadays).

one can see either the castle or the ruins of the castle built during the Muslim occupation of Spain.

#### 4. *Imwejjed tas-Sittin, l-*

Text: *Jl mueyd ta Sittayr, pecia terrae in contrata cabese*, Gozo (as stated by Wettinger)

Date: 1551

Source: Notarial Archives, Valletta (Malta) BGWe (2000), pg. 639, entry no.6

Comments: The most problematic word to transcribe into standard Maltese is *Sittayr*. Here, to date, the only plausible way to render this word is that it should have been *Sittayn*: the inaccuracy could easily be made by the Notary or by the Researcher. Hence *Sittayn* can easily be the dialectal version of *Sittin*. This is also reinforced by the surname Busuttil, where a certain Fidericu Busitin is mentioned in the Militia List (c.1417). Refer to BMCa (2003), pg. 60 where the occurrence of the surname *Butletin* is attested in Muslim Sicily in the 12<sup>th</sup> century thanks to Fiorini (1986). Moreover, it is pertinent to state that there are similar toponyms in Gozo with the same format. *Tal-Erbatax* is a place-name in Gozo attested both in Wettinger (2000) and Salafia (2020). Refer to BGWe (2000), pg.121 and BSSa (2020), pg.66. It is interesting to note Wettinger's source dates back to 1575. The second similar toponym is *Tal-Ħamsin*, a field located at Xewkija. In this case, Wettinger's source is even earlier (1562). Refer to BGWe (2000), pg.296. Hence, by comparison, *tas-Sittin* is used since *ta' Sittin* is less likely and/or plausible.

Meaning: This place-name refers to a field-strip (*pecia terrae*) belonging to this person whose nickname is *Sittin* located in an area where there are elevated tablelands (*Imwejjed*). Here *Imwejjed* is considered to be the broken plural of *Mejda*. But, in order to make sense, this must refer not just to ONE field-strip but to MANY field-strips. The other more plausible meaning is that *Imwejjed* (like *Imwejda*) is the semitic diminutive of *Mejda*, which means an elevated tableland. A similar example is *Irħajjel* which is the semitic diminutive of *Raħal*. From the many place-names containing the lexeme *Mejda*, and which can be located on a map, one can safely state that the elevated tableland is usually roundish or elliptical. Refer to BSSa (2020), pg.259 and pg.260, where there are about 40 entries with the lexeme *Mejda* in Gozo.

#### 5. *Wied Ġħisa, Wied Lisa*

Text: *gued lixa, terrenum in contrata Sancte Agathe*, Gozo (as stated by Wettinger)

Date: 1565

Source: Notarial Archives, Valletta (Malta) BGWe (2000), pg. 638, entry no.2

Comments: First of all, there is no doubt that *gued* is equivalent to *Wied* (in Maltese) or its Arabic equivalent (*Wādi*). One should not be surprised that its description is given as a piece of land (*terrenum*) since the name of the valley may refer directly to the area where there may be water flowing when it rains. Moreover, in my research about place-names of valleys in the Maltese islands, there have been instances where a specific place-name of a valley literally consists of some three fields having the topography of a small valley but with no specific or marked water-course. Before trying to explain the name of the valley (*lixa*), it is pertinent to point out that this valley is located in the area (*contrata*) called *ta' Sant'Agata*. The only place-name found to-date in Gozo with this denomination is located in Rabat. (Refer to BSSa (2020, pg.355). As regards the name of the valley (*lixa*), there is a mention of *Wied Lisa* (also in Gozo) in Dusina's report (1575) as transcribed by Aquilina and Fiorini (2005). Given that *lixa* could be interpreted as the proper name *Lisa*, then *Wied Lisa* is a plausible way to render the text into standard Maltese orthography, *Lisa* being the abbreviated form of the biblical name Elizabeth. Hence, at this stage one may ask what is the earliest references to the name Elizabeth in Maltese toponymy. From Wettinger (2000), one will find two references: *ta' Bitti*, a field located in the vicinity of Żejtun, documented in 1546 and *ix-Xaġhra ta' Sbetta*, as documented by G.F. Abela in his *Descrittione di Malta* (1647). Both *Bitti* (i.e. a variant of *Betti* or *Bettina*) and *Sbetta* are other local forms of Elizabeth. However when analysing some of the Spanish place-names of Arabic origins, and comparing them with similar (almost identical) ones in the Maltese islands, I noticed a great similarity between a small town in the province of Alicante, called *Benisa* (written *Benissa* in Catalan or Valencian language) and the way G. F. Abela documented the place-name *Benħisa*. On page 22, there is the place-name *Punta Bin Iisa*, listed just after the entry *Cala Frana*.

*El Cala tà Vyed il Buni*, cioè Seno della valle di *Buni*, nome proprio arabico.

*Cala Frana*, seno così detto.

*Punta Bin Iisa*, chiamata anco *tà sicca*, cioè Punta del figlio di *Iisa*, nome proprio arabico, ò fia della secca, che quiui si vede; In questo luogo è vna guardia detta come siegue.

*Mellyeha* cioè della salina per qualche poco di sale, che colà si raccoglie.

*Cala tà Vyede sciacca*, cioè picciolo seno della valle di *sciacca*.

*Vyed Szrubber*, Valle di *Pini*.

*Ghar Hasan*, Grotta di quel tal Arabo; quiui dentro è vn continuo distillo d'acqua freschissima, che inuita al tempo d'estate l'andarui per diporto, essendo il luogo assai opportuno, esposto alla vista del mare, e frequentato da colombe, che vi si prendono con le reti.

Punta Bin lisa, detail.

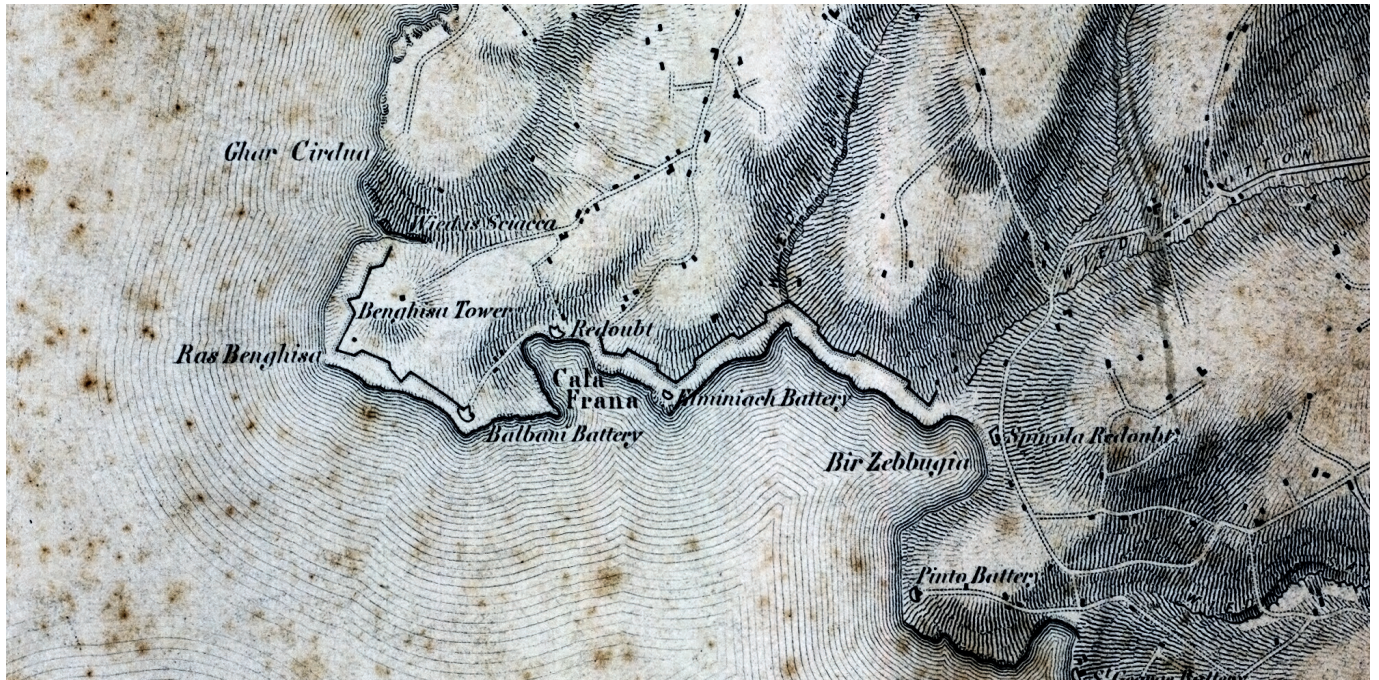
When analysing the manner in which place-names are written down by G. F. Abela, it is obvious that *Bin Iisa*, refers to *Bin Ghisa*, today written as *Binghisa* or incorrectly, in my opinion, as *Binghajsa* or *Benghajsa*. Given the fact that *lix* is not written with a capital L, one might be correct to think that the original intention was *gued Iixa* (with a capital I instead of a capital L). This interpretation would give a more plausible meaning to this place-name since there would be two separate toponyms (in this case, one in Malta - *Bin Ghisa*, and one in Gozo - *Wied Ghisa*), proving from the construct state (*stat kostrutt* in Maltese) that *Ghisa* is a personal first name.

Meaning: Here, there are two interpretations: either Lisa's valley or Ghisa's valley. Lisa is a name derived from the biblical name Elizabeth, whilst Ghisa is an Arabic name, equivalent for Jesus. Further documentation may shed light which is the correct version out of these possibilities, but for the time being, I consider *Wied Ghisa* as the better interpretation and the more plausible meaning.

## Conclusion

In this article, some interesting place-names were identified from the original texts as documented in the Addenda of Wettinger's book about Maltese Place-names. Some interesting information emerged, such as the anthroponym *Ghisa*, possibly present also in Gozo. However, this article includes only five texts out of some thirty texts referring to the place-names in Gozo. In my opinion, they could be rendered into standard Maltese. More research from relatively more recent sources (such as notarial contracts from the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) is needed to be able to decipher and render into standard Maltese place-names from earlier sources.

As a final note or disclaimer, it is pertinent to note that it was not possible for me to see and observe meticulously these texts in the original documents. However, even if this were possible, I do not consider myself trained in medieval palaeography to carry out such a task.



Ras Benghisa.

### End Note on Abbreviations

To facilitate the references to place-names and surnames mentioned in this article, the following abbreviations were used.

BMCa - (2003) Book by M. Cassar (published in 2003), The Surnames of the Maltese Islands.

BSSa - (2020) Book by S. Salafia (published in 2020), The Place-Names of Gozo (Vol.I, Part 1)

BGWe - (2000) Book by G. Wettinger (published in 2000), Place-Names of the Maltese Islands.

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