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ABOUT THE MEANINGS OF ŻURRIEQ, WIED IŻ-ŻURRIEQ AND WIED-IŻ-ŻERQA

In his pioneer work on Maltese place-names¹, Professor J. Aquilina briefly mentions Żurrieq and neighbouring Wied iż-Żurrieq in Malta, as well as Wied iż-Żerqa, near Ras San Dimitri in Gozo¹. Without, in this case, offering etymologies of his own, Professor Aquilina quotes two other authors. The former, the 17th century Maltese writer Abela, says, with respect to Żurrieq, “*che tanto significa quanto azzurro, o ceruleo, che si rende così a gl'occhi de riguardanti quel mare per sua profondità, da che venne a chiamarsi da gli Arabi Ezrak*”². E.H. Palmer, the latter, does not concern himself with Malta, but lists in his “Survey of Western Palestine”, published in 1881, a Wadi ez-Zerqa, which he translates as “the valley of the blue water”³, thus giving an interesting parallel to Gozo’s Wied iż-Żerqa. Strikingly enough, Abela and Palmer agree in interpreting *zurrieq* and *zerqa* as substantives derived from the same meaning of the root ZRQ, i.e. “blueness”.

It is clear, however, that they have not exhausted the question, for three reasons.

In the first place, their etymologies are not based on any recorded testimony of either the Maltese language or the Palestinian Arabic speech. While no Maltese dictionary for instance gives *zurrieq* or *zerqa* as alternative words for the blue colour, whether applied to water or otherwise, *zerqa* cannot be found with the meaning given by Palmer in dictionaries or word-lists of the Palestinian spoken Arabic.

Abela’s and Palmer’s versions cannot therefore be accepted, although they may be based on popular etymologies collected from local informants long after the original meanings had been lost.

Secondly, the fact that in the place-names in question *wied* or *wa:di*, lack the definite article and yet are followed by one, makes it very unlikely that the following word is an adjective. If anything, it tends to indicate possession instead. Furthermore, since according to both Maltese and Arabic grammatical rules, an adjective must agree in gender with a noun in the singular, one would expect an adjective in the masculine after *wied* or *wa:di* and not *zerqa* which is the feminine form for “blue”.

Thirdly and lastly, before *zurrieq* and *zerqa* are accepted as the remnants of previously unrecorded adjectives, the already recorded substantives derived from the same root should be explored for alternative explanations.

1. Aquilina J. ‘A brief survey of Maltese place-names’, in *Papers in Maltese linguistics*, Royal University of Malta 1961, p. 235.

2. Ibidem, p. 235.

3. Ibidem, p. 233. It is interesting to note that, in the vicinity of the Moroccan town of Tetuan, there is, in the Beni Hozmar mountains, a waterfall long known to local European residents, as ‘Chellala’ or ‘Cascade de Zarka’. This Moroccan hydronym seems to pose the same problems of interpretation as the Gozitan and Palestinian ones.

It is essential in this respect to resort to as wide a range of lexical material as possible and to explore not just one of the semantic areas covered by the root ZRQ but the other one as well. In effect, apart from ‘the idea of ‘blueness’, ZRQ has another meaning, ‘to project into space’. Both meanings supplying a wealth of material, we are going to examine it to find other possible equivalents of *zurrieq* and *zerqa* taken from a variety of sources.

ŻERQA

In this case, the root ZRQ, in the sense of “blueness”, gives only one substantive, resembling Gozitan – and Palestinian – *Zerqa*, a pre-name, *Zarqâ*, which may have meant originally, ‘the blue one’. According to a pre-Islamic legend, *Zarqâ* was a sort of Bedouin Cassandra, whose name has been preserved in a saying.⁴ Transcribed as ‘*Zerqa*’⁵ It is listed in Beaussier’s dictionary of Algerian and Tunisian Arabic⁶. *Wied iż-Żerqa* could therefore very well mean “*Zerqa*’s valley”, even though the prefixation of the definite article is a little unusual.

The second meaning of the root, “to project forward, to hurl, to cast”, is, in this case, as well as in *zurrieq*’s, as will be seen below, much richer in derivatives offering other possible explanations.

As a matter of fact, Beaussier also gives *زرقة*, translated in French as ‘jet’⁷. Unfortunately, it is not vowelled, and it is impossible to say whether it should be read as ‘*zarqa*’, *zerqa*’, *zirqa*’, *zorqa*’ or *zurqa*’. On the other hand, the French translation is not very clear, in the absence of a contextualization, because of the polysemy of the French word, since ‘jet’ can be the “throwing of an object”, the “gush of a liquid” or even “a fountain jet”.

More precise than Beaussier is Dozy’s “Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes”, which gives interesting *زرقة* *zarqa*; coup de lance”, and “*زرقة* *zirqa*, pl *زوارق* *zawâriq*; saignée, rigole pour tirer de l’eau de quelqu’endroit”.⁸ It is worth noting that both words are taken from Pedro de Alcalá’s “Vocabulario aravigo en letra castellana”, published in Granada in 1505. Alcalá was one of the

4. The saying is ‘*absaru min Zarqâ’i-l-Yamâma*’, “with a more piercing sight than *Zarqâ* of the *Yamâma*”. See R. Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe, des origines à la fin du XV^e siècle de J.C.* Paris, 1966, t. 3, p. 784. I am indebted to Jacqueline Hénin, maître de conférence of Arabic, INALCO, Paris for drawing my attention to the fact.

5. The rendering of Classical Arabic q by g which is extremely common in the Bedouinized post-Hilalian dialects of North Africa, is unusual in Malta which was not affected by the 11th century invasion of the Maghreb by the Hilalian nomads. Yet, Professor Aquilina has identified a spontaneous rendering of q by g in the Gozitan village of Xewkija. See J. Aquilina, ‘Some historical changes of Maltese’, in J. Aquilina, op. cit., p. 133.

6. M. Beaussier, *Dictionnaire pratique arabe-français contenant tous les mots employés dans l’arabe parlé en Algérie et en Tunisie, ainsi que dans le style épistolaire, les pièces usuelles et les actes judiciaires. Nouvelle édition revue, corrigée et augmentée par M. Mohammed Ben Cheneb Alger*, 1931. p. 431.

7. Ibidem.

8. R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, 3e, éd Leyde, Paris, 1967, vol 1, p. 587.

earliest Europeans to take an interest in the spoken variety of Arabic, rather than the scholarly one, and therefore records, although with understandable methodological imperfections, actual 16th century Spanish Arabic usage. The Spanish dialects belonging like Maltese, to the pre-*Hilalian* generation of Western Mediterranean dialects, the parallels they supply are particularly noteworthy, since the two dialects share quite a number of traits.

It is however impossible to determine whether both *zirqa* and *zarqa* ever coexisted in Maltese or in Palestinian Arabic, or if only one was employed, and which one, in the course of time, evolved into Gozitan or Palestinian *Zerqa*.

If we are to base ourselves on these parallels *Wied iż-Żirqa* has three possible meanings: the first one being *Zerqa*'s valley, referring to some connection with a woman by that name, possibly a landowner, because the legend was located there by the local inhabitants much in the same way as Gozo boasts a 'Calypso's grotto'; the second one referring to an incident that may or was supposed to have occurred there, "the valley of the casting of the spear", and finally a descriptive one, "the valley of the small irrigation channel or pipe". In the absence of documentary evidence, it is impossible to decide between any of the three possibilities; they are all equally plausible, although for reasons discussed further in the course of this paper, the last proposal may be slightly more plausible than the other two.

ZURRIEQ

Concerning *Żurrieq* and *Wied iż-Żurrieq*, we find the same type of dilemmas, although this time the two meanings of the root ZRQ tend to offer an almost equal number of possibilities.

Indeed, although it is impossible to find in the dictionaries anything in any way close to Abela's picturesque etymology, the idea of blueness cannot be readily dismissed, although the resemblance between the recorded derivatives and Maltese *zurrieq* are, as well see, deceptive.

Such is the case of *zurriġ*, a botanical term recorded by G.S. Colin among the Moroccan Beduins as "chardon bleu (*Eryngium trinquetum*)"⁹. It would be very tempting to interpret *Wied iż-Żurrieq* as the "valley of the blue thistle", but even if convincing explanations could be found to account for the difference between the long *i* and the diphthong *ie*, one would still have to explain how the name of a variety of thistle could have disappeared from a land where the plant is so common, and yet have been retained in two place-names.

9. G.S. Colin, *Le dictionnaire Colin d'arabe dialectal marocain*; sous la direction de Zakia Iraqui Sinaceur, Rabat, 1994, vol. 3, p. 708.

Another "false friend" is زَرُّوق 'zarrûq', 'coined by the Arabic dialects of neighbouring North Africa'¹⁰, often met as nickname and a not uncommon surname recorded by Beaussier in Algeria¹¹, by Colin in Morocco¹² and present to this day in Tunis as well¹³.

Could *zurrieq* be the equivalent Maltese form with the same meaning, in which case *Wied iż-Żurrieq* would mean 'the valley of the blue-eyed one'?

This is not impossible, though one would have to risk very doubtful hypotheses to account for the phonetic changes involved; and again, the trouble would be that both the form and the meaning are otherwise unrecorded in Malta.

Yet again, the second meaning of the root ZRQ supplies derivations which fit better into the picture both morphologically and phonetically.

This is the case of Moroccan *zorrêg*, again recorded by G.S. Colin in Morocco and defined as "serpent long et menu qui bondit comme un trait et transperce ses victimes; vipère heurtante (de grosse taille): echis carinata"¹⁴.

It is almost perfect from a phonetical point of view, since the Moroccan semi-diphthong *ê* is very close to the Maltese diphthong *ie*. Some dictionaries, particularly Falzon's¹⁵, even give *zorrieq* as a variant, probably local, of *Żurrieq*. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, the Maltese islands have from time immemorial prided themselves on harbouring no venomous snakes, a privilege supposedly granted by saint Paul himself. One cannot however preclude the possibility of a person having borne *zurrieq* or *zorrieq* in such an unhappy sense or at least having arrived to Malta with it and having left it to the place of his residence. But this would have to be substantiated by onomastic evidence which so far is wanting.

Much closer to *Żurrieq*, is زَرَّاق 'zurrâq', which is found, although with various different meanings, in both 15th century Spain and in contemporary Palestine.

This can be regarded as the closest possible form to *Żurrieq* since, as is well known, the Arabic spoken in Medieval Sicily weakened long *a* into the diphthong 'ie' preserved to this day in Maltese and in Maltese alone.

Claude Denizeau, quoting Gustav Dalman's pre-war work on crafts and occupations in Palestine, gives *zurrâq* and its variant *zerrâq* as "grosse paille qui reste après le battage"¹⁶.

10. R.A. Harrell, *A dictionary of Moroccan Arabic; Moroccan-English* (Edited by R.S. Harrell; compiled by T. Fox, M. Abu Talib Washington, 1966, p. 229.

11. M. Beaussier, op. cit., p. 431.

12. G.S. Colin, op. cit., p. 706.

13. "Madame Zarrouk" or زَرُّوق Zarrûq, 41-43 rue Echem, in Tunis is a confectioner's well-known for its Oriental pastries.

14. G.S. Colin, op. cit. p. 708.

15. G.B. Falzon, *Dizionario Maltese-Italiano-Inglese*, Malta, 1845, p. 294.

16. C. Denizeau, *Dictionnaire des parlers arabes de Syrie, Liban et Palestine*; (supplément au dictionnaire arabe-français de A. Barthélémy), Paris, 1960, p. 218.

On the other hand¹⁷, Dozy lists under the root ZRQ two instances of *zurrâq* which do not raise the same problem.

The first one taken from Lane's French translation of "Tâdj al'Arous", a classical dictionary of the Arabic language, is defined as "celui qui lance le naphte", *zurrâqa* being "le tube avec lequel on lançait le naphte"¹⁸ both evidently referring to medieval warfare.

The second one is taken from the already mentioned 15th-century Christian Spanish lexicographers of the spoken Arabic of Moslem Spain, Alcalá and Nunez who according to Dozy¹⁹, define زُرَّاقُ الْمَاءِ *zurrâq al-mâ'*, as "siphon, bout de tuyau, tuyau de fontaine" for the former, and as "grosse pompe pour les incendies", for the latter, two obviously related meanings.

It is not uninteresting to note that Dozy also quotes Sicilian Arabic زُرَّاقَةُ الْمَاءِ *zurrâqa al-mâ* as a synonym of فَوَّارَةٌ *fawwâra* "jet d'eau", according to Amari, the famous historian of Moslem Sicily²⁰.

Naturally, it would be unwise in the present state of our information, to pick up arbitrarily one of the above-mentioned meanings and decide that this is what *zurrieq* originally meant in Maltese when the village of Żurrieq and Wied iż-Żurrieq first received their names.

Let us be content to note that all these instances of *zurrâq* agree in so far as they all refer to some kind of tube, whether it be a straw, a weapon or a hydraulic installation or device. Whether Medieval Maltese *zurrâq* had all three meanings, or just one or two is impossible to determine in the present state of our documentation.

However, although this does not even add a shade of plausibility to any of these three possibilities, one cannot fail to note that both *żerqa* and *zurrieq* may refer to hydraulic installations. This would be in keeping with the importance of agriculture in Medieval Malta and the great progress in hydraulic techniques made under Arab rule during that period.

Why the words later went out of use may be explained by the techniques having been replaced by a more recent development. The restriction of the name to a place may have been even speedier if this type of installation was not very widespread or even restricted to the places we now know under those names. This is more or

17. R. Dozy, op. cit., p. 587.

18. Ibidem, p. 587.

19. Ibidem, p. 587.

20. Ibidem, p. 587.

21. For a wealth of material concerning Gozitan place-names which can be interpreted through Medieval Arabic, see G. Wettinger. 'The place-names and the personal nomenclature of Gozo, 1372-1600' in *Oriental studies presented to Benedikt S.J. Isserlin ...*, Leiden, 1976, p. 173 et seq. See also by the same author, 'Some grammatical characteristics of the place-names of Malta and Gozo in early modern times', in *Journal of Maltese Studies*, no.15, 1983, pp. 31-68.

less what happened to the Maltese word *fawwara* which originally meant 'fountain' like in the other Arabic dialects, and has almost completely disappeared from the contemporary speech. The Romance loan-word *funtana* is now preferred, although *fawwara* is still present in the names of a number of springs and fountains.

As a conclusion, it is interesting to notice that the mysterious names of these two Maltese valleys lend themselves, once the correct patterns of derivation and root have been identified, to three classical types of possible interpretations as to their origin:

First, a personal name, a woman called Żerqa, the blue one, a man called iż-Żurrieq, meaning 'the serpent' or 'the one who cast napht';

—second, a substantive commemorating an incident or activity with which the place was at one time connected, 'iz-zerqa' then meaning something like 'the casting of the spear' and wied iż-żurrieq meaning the place where the straw is left after threshing;

—Finally, a substantive describing a concrete object, an irrigation channel or pipe in the case of *żerqa*, some sort of spout in the case of *zurrieq*.