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ON THE OCCURRENCE OF *AGAMA AGAMA* (L.)
(REPTILIA: AGAMIDAE) IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

Estratto da *Società Veneziana di Scienze Naturali - LAVORI*

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Abstract

A live female specimen of *Agama agama* (L.) was found amongst crates of imported beer at Marsa, Malta in October 1979. This lizard was probably transported to Malta from North Africa with cargo.

Riassunto

Sulla presenza di Agama agama (L.) (Reptilia: Agamidae) nelle Isole Maltesi.

Un esemplare femmina di *Agama agama* fu trovato vivo tra contenitori di birra importata a Marsa, Malta, nell'ottobre 1979.

Questa lucertola fu probabilmente importata a Malta con la merce dall'Africa del Nord.

Five species of lacertilian reptiles from four different families (Gekkonidae, 2 species; Chamaeleontidae, Lacertidae and Scincidae, 1 species each) are known to occur and breed in the Maltese Islands (GULIA, 1890; DESPOTT, 1915; LANFRANCO, 1955; LANZA, 1972). Recently two specimens of agamid lizards (family Agamidae) have been captured from Malta. One of these, as yet unidentified, is currently at the National Museum of Natural History, Mdina, Malta (C. SAVONA VENTURA, personal communication). The other specimen, identified as *Agama agama*, is in the authors' collection and is the subject of this note.

Collection data for this specimen are as follows: Family:

AGAMIDAE

Agama agama (Linnaeus, 1758): 1 female.

Collected: 26th October 1979 from Marsa, Malta.

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Identified by E.N. Arnold, British Museum (Nat. Hist.)

The lizard was found hiding amongst crates of imported beer which were being unloaded from a lorry and was alive when captured but died in captivity some 2 months later. The specimen was handed to one of the authors (SPS) a few days after its capture and because of this delay later attempts to trace the lorry and ascertain the point of origin of its load proved fruitless.

When live, the lizard was of a dark brown ground colour with faint lighter patches dorsally and of a uniform pale yellow-brown colour ventrally. The specimen measured 98 mm from tip of snout to vent. The distal part of the tail was however lost during capture of the lizard.

Agama agama is indigenous to Africa where it is a common and widespread species. The specimen reported on here was almost certainly introduced. The circumstances of its capture suggest that it may have arrived in the Maltese Islands with cargo but the possibility that it was brought to Malta as a pet and later escaped from captivity cannot be excluded. In recent years there has been a very large increase in both cargo traffic between Malta and North Africa and in the number of persons based in Malta but who regularly work for long periods in North African countries. This situation is expected to favour further introductions of African species to the Maltese Islands.

In the past there have been numerous accidental and/or deliberate introductions of reptiles into the Maltese Islands (DESPOTT, 1913; LANFRANCO, 1964; SAVONA VENTURA, in preparation). It is interesting to note that at least two, and possibly three, species which are currently regarded as forming part of the Maltese herpetofauna were originally introduced by man and later became naturalized. The Chameleon (*Chamaeleo chamaeleon*) was apparently introduced from North Africa around 1880 by Jesuit priests and released in a private garden in St. Julians (North-east Malta) (GULIA, 1890; DESPOTT, 1915). A recent survey has shown this species to have spread to various localities in South, Southeast and Southwest Malta and there is even a single record from the island of Gozo (C. SAVONA VENTURA, personal communication). The Algerian Whip Snake (*Coluber algirus* (Jan)) was apparently introduced into Malta with shipments of firewood during the first World War (BORG, 1939) and is now found in Northeast Malta. A third species (*Telescopus fallax fallax* (Fleischm.)) may also have been originally introduced by man (GIGLIOLI, 1894; BORG, 1939).

Agama agama favours dry rocky habitats with low-growing bushes and is not averse to living close to built-up areas. Such habitats predominate in the Maltese Islands and it is quite possible that further introductions of these lizards may result in this species becoming established locally.

Acknowledgements

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