

Emblem and Topography of Munxar

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1.0 Introduction

On the way from Rabat¹ to Xlendi, just as the carob trees of il-Lunzjata are left behind, a glance to the left side shows several houses scattered on top of the valley. This is the village of Munxar, a closely-knit village community, a characteristic evoked by its Latin motto *Parvulus² sed munitus*, - small but secure - *zghir iżda fis-sod*.

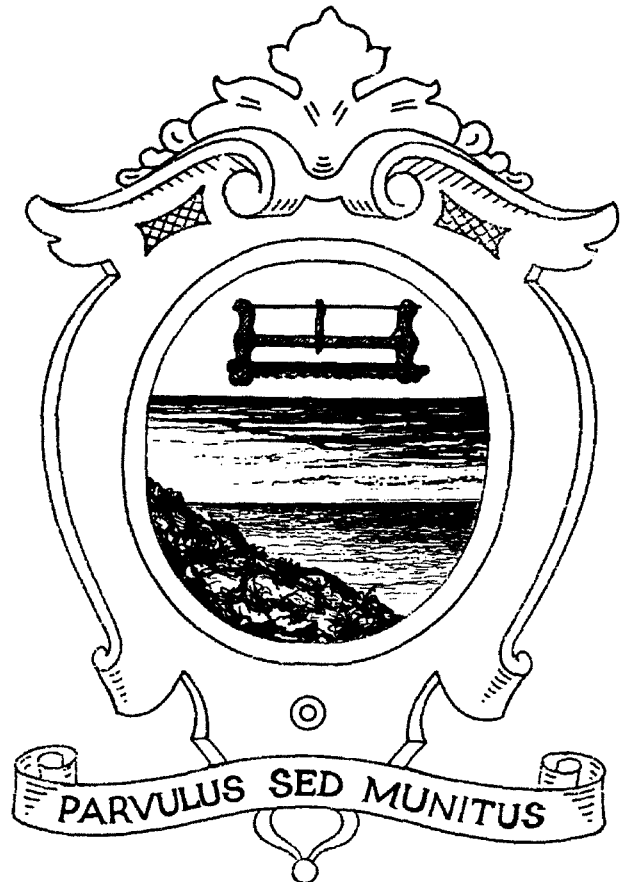
1.1 The Name

The word Munxar in Arabic and Maltese means simply a bucksaw which is a 'tool' with two handles which was used by our ancestors for sawing timber.³ The name Munxar was derived from the site of Ras il-Bajda, which similar to a saw separates Xlendi Bay from the parts of Ras il-Bajjada situated in the northern part of Munxar at close range to Xlendi. This village is situated to the south-west of Rabat. It lies to the south of the island between Xlendi Valley and the village of Ta' Sannat. Il-Munxar is the second smallest village in Gozo.

The name Munxar is first recorded as 'Il Monxar', *vinea vitibus et arboribus plantata in contrata Xlendi* in a notarial act by Ferdinand Ciappara of 2 July 1584,⁴ that is more than 415 years ago. It only appeared for the first time on maps designed by the British in the middle of the nineteenth century. Few people lived in Munxar during these times. It appears that Munxar is the unique village in our island whose name has derived from the Maltese language since its origins.

1.2 Emblem

Munxar, like every other village in Gozo boasts of its own emblem. The emblem originally consisted of a rocky promontory jutting out into a blue sea on a sky blue field with a bucksaw in the middle of a silver chief.⁵ This was designed by the antiquarian Lorenzo Zammit Haber and symbolizes Ras il-Bajda, the white headland, which gave origin to the name of the village. The bucksaw on the chief is in



The (former) Emblem of Munxar

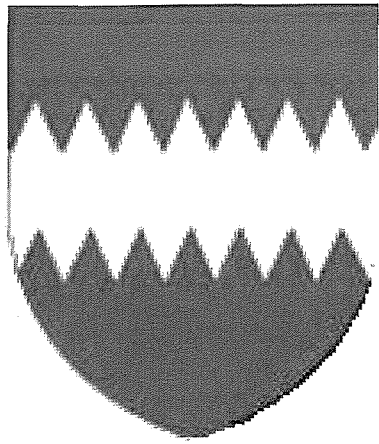
¹ Rabat is the capital city of Gozo.

² *Parvulus* is a term of affection.

³ See ERIN SERRACHINO-INGLOTT, *Il-Miklem Malti* 6 (1984) 22.

⁴ See GODFREY WETTINGER, *The place-names and the personal nomenclature of Gozo*, Gozo 1980, 187.

⁵ See JOSEPH BEZZINA, *Gozo a Historical glimpse - Gaultana* 6, Gozo 1991, 27.



The present Coat-of-arms of Munxar

reference to the etymological origin of the village. The emblem has been redesigned by Captain Adrian Strickland to better reflect the etymology of its name heraldically and is now: *azure a fess indented argent*; a blue shield with a white horizontal double-edged band across the centre.⁶

1.3 General Topography

The toponyms and village street names provide a lot of information about Munxar as a village. Instead of the street names, it is more interesting to go into detail on particular regions, that certainly make more sense to the locals than the mere official street names. Besides from being much older, they carry a lot of information on the region.

The areas of Munxar can be grouped under five basic areas, each of which is further divided into particular sites.

- The Cliff Area
- The Quarry Area
- The Valley Area
- Others
- Xlendi



Aerial view of Munxar (© MEPA)

⁶Dipartiment tal-Infommazzjoni, *L-ibriet u l-irhula tal-Gzejjer Maltin u l-istemmi tagħhom*, Malta 1993, 21

The following is an analysis of each area.

1.3.1 The Cliff Area

This area that forms the south-western part of the village is exposed to strong winds. The surrounding fields are used for the grazing of sheep and goats. An interesting characteristic of these cliffs is the type of fishing activity which goes on off these cliffs. Fishermen dig holes in the rocks and secure a rope. At this point they tie the rope around their waist and lower themselves down the cliff until they reach a ledge - a rock in the shape of a blade - which is a few metres above sea level. They then fish from that ledge and before going up, they check the rope to see if it is still tied firmly inside the hole. This area is also used for bird trapping and it is sought by bird trappers from all over Gozo. The coast line on the south has the following place-names from the south towards the north:

- a) Il-Pinnur
- b) Tal-Bardan
- c) Tal-Ponta
- d) Is-Sanap
- e) Ir-Ras

Il-Pinnur meaning weathercock, stands for rocks which are in the form of a spur. Il-Pinnur is the highest point in the area.

Tal-Bardan meaning intense cold - *imreżżaħ*, a name which is truly suitable for this area since it is on the edge of high rocks exposed to strong, cold winds.

Tal-Ponta meaning point or tip. An interesting feature found at tal-Ponta is It-Toqba tal-Klieb which serves as a means to get rid of unwanted dogs by throwing them down this hole.

Is-Sanap meaning mustard, is derived from the Maltese word *senapa*, which is a type of plant that probably grew in abundance in this area. Mustard is made from these plants.⁷ This area is between the Xlendi watch tower and the Tal-Bardan area. A small cave which is relatively small and holds

about four standing people known as Ġhar Sanap is found in this area.⁸

Ir-Ras meaning the headland, is an area where salt pans are found. During the winter months the rough sea would go over the rocks and fill the salt pans with sea water, while during the arid summer months salt pans would be filled from *l-iskandlori*, - deep, big cisterns. After several sunny days the salt pans would dry off and the salt was swept with bristle brooms. Later the salt was taken in the caves found near the Xlendi watchtower so as to dry more. The salt was then put in sacks and ready to be sold.⁹

1.3.2 The Quarry Area

The quarry area, so called as it formerly had several quarries, comprises the following place-names listed in alphabetical order:

- a) L-Ġhalaq
- b) Ta' Buriexa (taħt ix-Xatba)
- c) Ta' Marżiena
- d) Ta' Randu (Sannat / Munxar border)
- e) Ta' Sufa (Sannat / Munxar border)
- f) Tal-Ħdira

These place-names are mainly derived from nicknames or proper names. Most of the quarries are now closed and have been transformed into farms for dairy animals.

L-Ġhalaq meaning closure is situated in the south-western part of the village. The church in Munxar was built from stones quarried in this area.

Ta' Marżiena possibly referring to an Italian or Sicilian family surname. It is situated in the eastern part of the village. Worth mentioning are the remnants of a prehistoric temple found in this area.

Ta' Randu derived from the proper name Ferdinandu¹⁰ is situated in the south-eastern part of Munxar. In this area there is a lime kiln - today it does not function any longer - which was the

⁷ See ERIN SERRACHINO-INGLOTT, *Il-Miklem Malti* 8 (1984) 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ JOE BAJADA, personal communication (20 August 1999).

¹⁰ VICTOR GALEA, personal communication (11 November 1999).

greatest one found in Munxar. Lime was produced by burning stones in the kiln for three days and nights. Not even the rain and the strong winds could extinguish these fires.

1.3.3 The Valley Area

There are two main valleys within the boundaries of Munxar - Il-Wied tax-Xlendi and Wied tal-Għawdxija. They are on opposite sides and then meet together to form one valley.

Il-Wied tax-Xlendi, a valley that flows from Munxar to Xlendi is flanked by stretches of fertile soil. The main characteristic feature of this valley is the reeds that are present. The reeds have a commercial value since they are particularly used for making reed curtains - *ħasira*. The valley is one of the deepest ones in Gozo. 'La Grotta' Discotheque, which was formerly a lime kiln and later a farmhouse, is found on the edge of this valley. There are two large natural caves in which animals used to help people to grind corn. Another feature found in this valley is what is called It-toqba ta' Kristu. The legend '*Il-leggenda tal-Għarab*' is associated with it. A Turkish man appeared near a house where a peasant lady was kneading flour. The Turk asked her to follow him. Cunningly, the girl told him to let her finish the cake - *ftira* - so that they could take it with them. When the Turk agreed the lady made a very soft, sticky cake with the flour and water and threw it to his face. She ran and hid in It-Toqba ta' Kristu¹¹ found in the rocks called Geddam Ħanzir. It-Toqba ta' Kristu is a cave which resembles a rock-hewn tomb of the Punic era and has the height of a person. When one passes in front of this cave in the direction to Xlendi, the cave appears as if to open and then to close due to its shape. When passing in front of it, children used to shout '*Ja bieb, ingħalaq!*', or '*Ja bieb, infetah!*' - 'Oh door, close!', or 'Oh door, open!'. Children used to imagine Christ coming out of the cave since it was imagined to be similar to Christ's grave.¹²

The village church is built at the mouth of **Wied tal-Għawdxija** valley. There are several fruit trees in

this valley which are always green since the valley is very sunny and sheltered from high winds. Il-Blat tal-Kapuċċel is a rocky plateau which is found on the border of the valley. The 'Andar Hotel' which was built in August 1990 is a four star hotel on these rocks.

As has already been stated the two valleys mentioned above meet together to form one valley. This valley is one of the largest valley systems present in Gozo. It stretches to an approximate length of 1.8 km. Its features are unique and the manner in which the valley has formed is evidence of past geological, geomorphological, climatic and eustatic processes which have acted on different degrees to form this present valley. The geological composition of the valley limits itself to three geological formations: the lower coralline limestone, the lower globigerina limestone and the middle globigerina limestone.

The mouth of this valley presents a complicated phenomena. The Maltese islands have been exposed on the surface for the past five million years. This time period presented different climates. There were different ice-ages occurring at various degrees, thus affecting directly the sea level which in turn affected the coastal zones. This is imprinted at the end of this valley, where it shows clearly that the inlet known as Il-Kantra Valley¹³ and Xlendi Bay were once dry and their valley bottoms extended to far out at sea. Thus, today Xlendi presents a drowned valley system. All this goes to show that long ago the Maltese islands were larger in size and as time goes by they are getting smaller due to the rise in sea level, which is a direct effect of a climate change.¹⁴

Many complex and dynamic, natural, physical processes were the major cause of the present status of this valley which is very picturesque with its sheer cliff drops, caves and rampant vegetation. All this makes the valley unique, not only in geological and geomorphological processes but also in flora and fauna aspects. All these criteria call for more serious environmental management policies in order to save our natural heritage from being lost.

¹¹ JOE BAJADA, personal communication (20 August 1999).

¹² See SAVIOUR DEBRINCAT, *Ir-Rabtiet tal-Prof. Gużè Aquilina mal-Munxar*, in *Id-Dawl* No. 22 (April-December 1997) 16-18.

¹³ See Chapter 2.3 and footnote 27.

¹⁴ GEORGE SAID, *Geological and Geomorphological Aspects of Xlendi Valley*, unpublished study, Gozo 2000.

1.3.4 Others

The following is an alphabetical list of other place-names scattered around the village.

Il-Blat tal-Kapuċċel - Kapuċċel or *ħasi*¹⁵ is a young, two to three months old castrated rooster (capon). Il-Blat tal-Kapuċċel is situated on the west side of Munxar. It is a rocky plateau named after a man who it was said could not have children.

Il-Habel it-Twil - Habel in this sense *meaning* a stretch of land, Twil *meaning* long. This long narrow strip of land which resembles a long rope is situated in the south-western part of the village, in the limits of Tal-Bardan.

Il-Habel tal-Hawlija *meaning* a row of unfertile land. This area is also situated in the south-western part of the village.

Il-Mejda *meaning* table, is probably named after its structure which resembles a table. This area found in the western part of Munxar is sometimes known also as Il-Mejda tal-Għodlien. It is a one level, flat ground more than four hundred feet high. Generally the fields have whitish soil and not clayey or red soil.

Is-Saqwi *meaning* irrigated land, is found in the north-eastern part of the village. The fields found in this area need to be watered especially in Summer since the rain water is not enough for the crops.

It-Taqsis *meaning* cutting with scissors. This area is situated in the south-west of Munxar. The fields found in this area are sown with crops on alternate years.

L-Armagġ derived from the Italian word *animagio* meaning fields left for masses for the repose of the dead. It is on turn derived from the Sicilian word *anima* which means soul. This area is situated in the western part of Munxar.

Ras il-Bajjada - Ras *meaning* the land which tapers towards the edge, Bajjada refers to the white soil

found in the fields - *franka*. According to Wettinger, Bajjada is an old surname which precedes the year 1530.¹⁶ Listed in the Electoral Register there are thirty-two persons whose surname is Bajjada in Munxar.¹⁷ This area is sometimes also referred to as Ras il-Bajda which means a white cape. Ta' Ras il-Bajjada comprises the largest area of Munxar. It is situated in the western part of Munxar. This area is used for agriculture mainly dry farming such as clover, tomatoes and melons. Tobacco and cumin seed - *kemmun* were also two of the main products that used to be cultivated in this area. Locals told us that cumin seeds used to be exported.

Tal-Ġebel *meaning* of the stones, is situated in the western part of Munxar. The fields at Tal-Ġebel are embedded with rocks and are very difficult to cultivate. These fields lie between an upper part of a hill and an underlying clayey soil.

Tal-Mejjet *meaning* of the dead, has probably acquired its name from a family nickname. This area is also situated in the western part of Munxar.

Ta' Horeb *meaning* ruins, is derived from the word *ħerba*. It is found in the western part of Munxar and is so called because of its many ruins.

Ta' Kamleta probably named after a nickname or a name.¹⁸ It is found in the south-western part of the village.

Ta' Latnija *meaning* a cistern tank and a quarry, is also situated in the south-western part of the village. In this area the holes were first used as quarries where stones were excavated and later they were used as cistern tanks. The cisterns were later roofed.

Ta' Luvier probably named after a nickname or a proper name. It is situated in the western part of the village.

Tal-Ibraġ is the plural of *borg* *meaning* heap. It is situated in the south-western part of the village.

¹⁵ See ERIN SERRACHINO-INGLOTT, *Il-Miklem Malti* 5 (1984) 46.

¹⁶ See GODFREY WETTINGER, *The distribution of Surnames in Malta in 1419 and the 1480's* in *Journal of Maltese Studies* 5 (1968) 25-48.

¹⁷ Electoral Register. *It-tlettax il-Distrett*. 3 (April 1999) 2-86.

¹⁸ VICTOR GALEA, personal communication (11 November 1999).

Ta' Nawrat probably derived from the name Onorato¹⁹ and very likely it is a diminutive type of word because of the *w*. This area is situated in the centre of Munxar and the Parish Church is found here.

Ta' Ghenbu meaning a large grape, was probably a nickname. This area is situated in the south-western part of the village.

Ta' Rinota derived from the female proper name Renata. This area is situated in the eastern part of the village. Ta' Rinota is an area which was formerly used for agriculture but is now mostly built up.

Tax-Xatba meaning a large somewhat slanting field in a triangular shape. It is situated in the south-western part of Munxar.

Iz-Żghawri is very likely to be the diminutive form of *zghir* - small. It is situated in the south-western part of Munxar.

1.3.5 Xlendi

Some two kilometres from Munxar's parish church, there is Xlendi Bay, a popular tourist resort surrounded by countryside. Xlendi was first recorded as Xilendi in a notarial contract of 19 April 1550.²⁰

Xlendi is affiliated with the village of Munxar. It can be reached from Rabat, either by following the road

through the village of Munxar or by using the road which passes through the village of Fontana.

Xlendi is definitely one of the most picturesque spots on the island. The meandering countryside roads which lead to the heart of Xlendi are a must for every tourist and visitor. A walk in the crisp and nimble air and the welcoming smile or acknowledging nod of the local farmer and shepherd are the right appetizer for a mouth watering tuck in at one of the restaurants which surround the bay.

The church of Xlendi is dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the feast is celebrated on the first Sunday of September. The feast combines a variety of entertainment, attractions and traditions set within an age-old religious devotion to Our Lady who watches over the place with loving protection.²¹

1.4 Conclusion

These place names are of an early source, definitely originating before the time of the Knights. They show without any doubt that agriculture was the main activity carried out by the people of Munxar from the early stages of the village's development. Farmers working in the area used to refer to the fields by certain names, most of which are still in use. This shows that the Munxar area has been inhabited for several centuries.



Aerial view of Xlendi and Xlendi Valley (©Györe Zoltán)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See JOSEPH BEZZINA, *Gozo a Historical glimpse* - Gaulitana 6, Gozo 1991, 41.

²¹ MUNXAR LOCAL COUNCIL, *Munxar*, (1999) (on-line) : <http://www.gozo.com/Munxar>