

Ogygia*

JOHN VELLA

Transdisciplinary Approach

A study titled “Homer’s Ogygia: Imaginary or Historiography?” by the author of this article sheds additional light on the island of Gozo during the 2nd millennium BC. This was not the first study by the author about toponyms and how they reveal history not told on formal texts. The author claims that toponyms reflect much more than just topographical features.

Through a transdisciplinary approach, the author analysed the *Odyssey*, Homer’s epic poem, using local legend and oral lore, toponyms (place-names), languages (including ancient Greek and Maltese), as well as classical texts. Sources of information also included pictography, sea-level changes, maritime transport and astronomy.

Homer’s *Odyssey* especially Book V is the oldest known reference and written record that mentions the Maltese Islands, but there was never an attempt to analyse its content from all the perspectives presented in the present author’s study.

The research focusses on Ogygia and its mention in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Could Homer’s reference to Ogygia be simply imagined or does it refer to reality? The transdisciplinary research conducted by the present author between 2014 and 2016 sought evidence about this matter from various ancient and more recent sources. The study attempted to show how reference to toponyms in Homer’s epic poem actually refers to facts and real history. The study argues that the Ogygia toponym was a transliteration of an ancient Gozitan toponym which survives but which, over time, lost its meaning and ancient connections.

Probably based on the oral lore of ancient Greek maritime communities, Homer’s narrative provides scenarios and information through which one could derive information about the Gozitan-Maltese realities of the 2nd millennium BC.

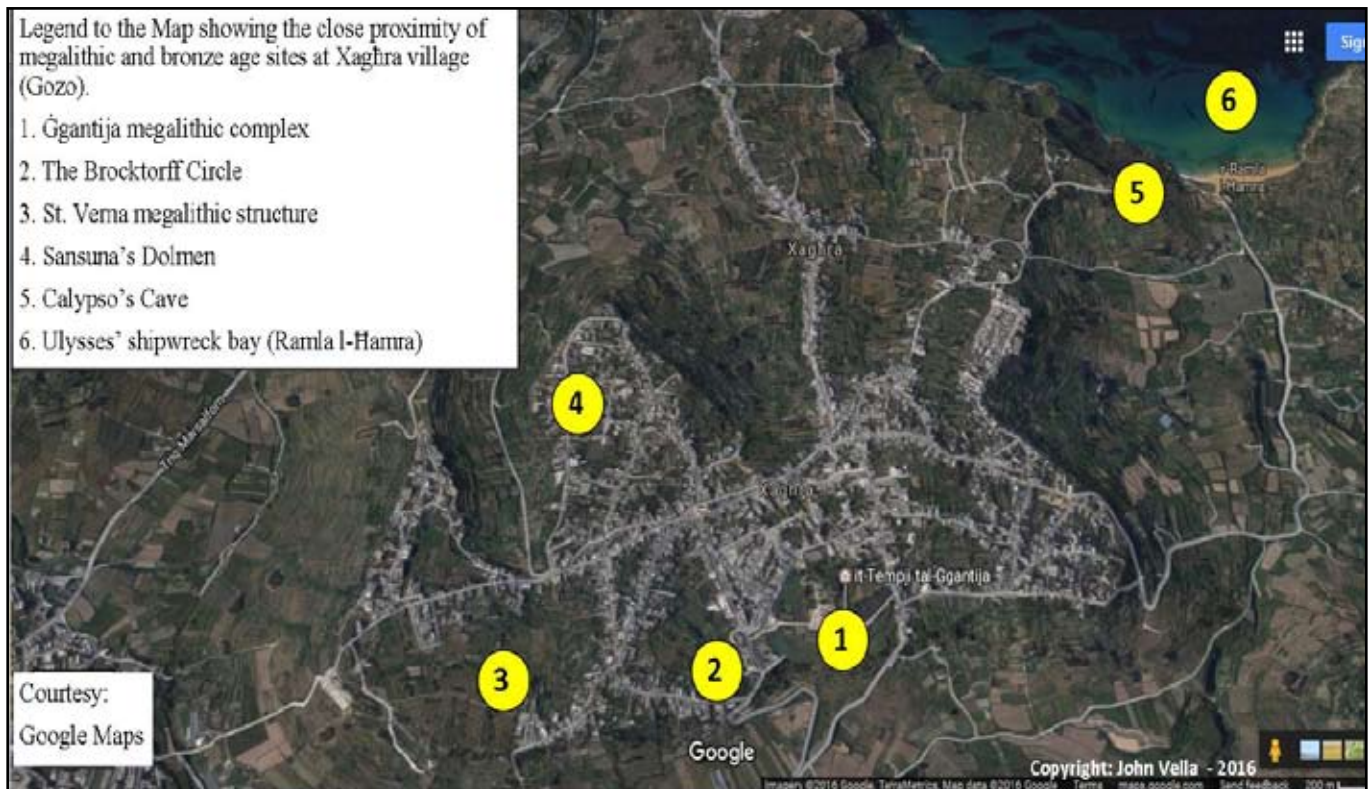
History and toponymy

One can compare Homer’s epic poetry with that of Troy as narrated through the *Iliad*. Troy was thought to be an imaginary place and a legend, but archaeological studies have proved otherwise. Through an analysis of the information supplied by Homer in the *Odyssey*, the present author attempted to prove that Ogygia really existed and formed part of the once larger Gozitan-Maltese island of four thousand years ago.

The author argues that an analysis of Homer’s description of Calypso’s Island, presents an authentic picture of the natural environment, the landscape, the vegetation, the types of plants, fruits and wood available on the island. It also presents a picture of ancient Gozitan-Maltese people, their crafts, their beliefs and their cultural contacts at the time of the *Odyssey*. According to the present author, the procurement of shipbuilding materials and tools for Ulysses’s vessel came from the wooded areas south of the then Gozo-Malta island.

The author attributes various abilities to Calypso, who is depicted as representing the island’s inhabitants. She would instruct Ulysses to find his way home on the waves aided by the signs of the night sky. Besides her charm and her natural beauty, she also possessed wisdom and knowledge useful for survival on an island, where solitude and isolation were also felt.

* This is a brief account of a paper presented in March 2016 at the 9th Annual International Conference on Mediterranean Studies held in Athens, Greece. It was published in October 2016. The full paper as published on the double-peer reviewed ‘Athens Journal of History’ is available at <http://www.atiner.gr/papers/MDT2016-2007.pdf>. The published paper should be cited as: Vella, J. (2016). “Homer’s Ogygia: An Imaginary or a Historiography?”, *Athens: ATINER’S Conference Paper Series, No: MDT2016-2007*.



Distribution of Ogygia sites in Xaghra.

Ogygia and Ġgantija

The author argues that certain changes over time may have led to a real story being transformed into a legend. A factor emerging from the study is that the changes in sea-level were determinant to the formation of the islands as we know them today. Due to the fact that there was an absence of the written documentation relating to these natural changes, there was the perception that Homer's Ogygia was an imaginary narrative. Yet both intangible and tangible evidence would seem to prove otherwise, as most of the details given by Homer, according to the author, are a faithful description of the Xaghra environs in the years 1188-1178 BC.

Reference to various classical authors suggests that the legend of Ogygia continued to be narrated for millennia. Later authors, and geographers in particular, contributed to the doubts, misinterpretation and misplacement of Ogygia. Changes in the landscape were major contributors to such geographic confusion by later authors including Strabo and Pliny. According to the mentioned study, a major contributor to such uncertainty, misplacement and misunderstanding of the Ogygia toponym was the fact that most

authors had few or no knowledge of the Maltese and Gozitan language, culture and traditions.

In a further analysis, the study argues that there is a relationship between the toponym of Ogygia in Homer and that of 'Ġgantija' on Gozo. The study connects the two toponyms of Ġgantija and Ogygia linguistically through the word "Giant", the Giant being an astronomical figure in the Homeric narrative.

The author explains how Greek mythology connects the same meaning with the constellation of Orion, which in Greek mythology relates to the giant hunter. This argument contrasts with that of Agius De Soldanis who referred to the presence of giants on Gozo.

The research also delved into pictographic sources, in search of nineteenth century etchings, drawings and lithographs showing Ġgantija. These described it as 'tower of the giants' since they did a literal translation of what they could perceive or understand.

The natural environs and the megalithic remains at various sites in the Xaghra village boundaries are



View from a distance of the Temple of Giants on the Island of Calypso, today the Island of Gozo. Source: Mazzara (1827).

evidence of human activity in antiquity. The study, apart from associating Calypso with the Ġgantija megalithic structure, also briefly refers to legends connected with other remains on Gozo.

The toponyms are studied from the perspective of the Maltese language, derived from ancient Greek, relating to mythological, navigational and astronomical aspects.

Conclusion

The study may therefore be considered as a well-studied attempt to show that Homer’s epic poetry, especially the content about Ogygia and Calypso, were not an imaginary narrative but an account of authentic historical events which kept being told from one generation to another among ancient Greek maritime communities. They were kept alive through local oral lore, but over time the

real events where transformed into an imaginary legend.

John Vella is an independent Maltese scholar and researcher. He is also the founder and curator of Bir Mula Heritage museum. In 2011, he obtained a Master of Science from the University of Leicester (U.K.) in Human Resource Management and Development. He is currently a PhD student at the University of Malta researching on grassroots museums with the Mediterranean Institute of the University of Malta.