

THE MALTESE TEXTILE INDUSTRY IN ANTIQUITY

by

Rev. J. BUSUTTIL, B.A.(Hons.), Lic.D., Ph.D.(Lond.)

Ancient writers, both Greek and Latin, refer in their works to a Maltese textile industry. ¹ Not only do these writers mention the existence of this industry but they also speak of the finished articles. Varro, the writer of Roman Antiquities, refers to a Maltese 'mitra' ²; Diodorus Siculus, the Historian, speaks of 'ὀθονία' which the ancient inhabitants of Malta used to produce ³; Cicero mentions 'vestis melitensis' and alludes to a 'pulvinus melitensis' ⁴; Silius Italicus speaks of the Maltese 'tela' ⁵ and Novius of a Maltese 'supparus' ⁶.

It is not known when this industry was first introduced in Malta. Apparently it had already been in existence in prehistoric times ⁷. It is clear that the industry must have existed well before the third century B.C. Callimachus (died 240 B.C.) is the first Greek poet who refers to the Maltese textile products. He simply calls them 'Μελίταια' which shows that these articles had already been well known before Callimachus's time ⁸. Apparently it was still flourishing in Hesychius's time, i.e. in the seventh century A.D.

It has been commonly held that the ancient Maltese textile articles were made out of spun cotton. The reason why several scholars have been of this opinion is that up to the eighteenth century the Maltese islands were renowned for their cotton crop and their cotton industry. It has, however, been shown that the cotton industry was first introduced in Malta and in Sicily by the Arabs in the ninth century. ⁹

1. Cf. DIODORUS SICULUS, 5,12: τεχνίτης τε γὰρ ἔχει πανταδαπὸν τῆς ἐργασίας κρητιστοὺς δὲ τοὺς ὀθονίᾳ ποιοῦντας; CICERO, *In Verrem*, 11,4,103: Insula est Melita... in qua est eodem nomine oppidum . . . quod tamen isti textrinum per triennium ad muliebrem vestem conficiendam fuit.
2. Varro, *Sat. Men.*: mitram melitensem, (apud Non. 14,16); Cf. Also Lucretius, 4,1129: et bene parta patrum fiunt anademata, mitrae interdum in pallam atque alidensia Ciaque vertunt. Lambinus emends the meaningless alidensia into Melitensia.
3. See Above. Cf. also HESYCHIUS 1027: ὀθονία τινὰ διαφορά ἐκ Μελίτης τῆς νήσου.
4. *In Verr.* 2,46,103: 'plurimam vestem melitensem'; 2,5,27: 'in qua pulvinus erat perlucidus melitensis'.
5. *Punic.* XIV,274: lanigera Melita . . . telaque superba.
6. Apud Non. 540,11: NACH RIBBECK, Melitensem nicht Veliensem zu lesen ist, spricht von einem supparus melitensis linteus (Real-Encyclopedie, Article on Flachs, p. 2460).
7. Cf. T. ZAMMIT, *Prehistoric Malta* O.U.P., 1930, p. 55.
8. Cf. SCHMIDT, *Heschyii Alexandrini Lexikon*, 1027: Μελίταια (Call. fr. 393), Jena 1867.
9. Cf. A. MAYR, *Malta im Altertum*, München, 1909, p. 21: Indes liegt es am nächsten anzunehmen, das dieses Gewächs (cotton) nach Malta wie nach Sizilien erst durch die Araber gekommen ist.

Sir T. Zammit in his work *'Prehistoric Malta'* relates how incinerated specimens of calcined textile going back to prehistoric times were obtained from debris. These specimens were examined in a laboratory and it has been established that the material 'is most likely flax or a fibre of that type'.¹⁰ Flax or lint, of course, is the material from which linen, not cotton, is produced. So, if there was a textile industry in Malta in prehistoric times, it must have been a linen industry.

Although those ancient writers who mention the Maltese textile industry have never referred explicitly to the material out of which the finished articles were produced, nonetheless, since they have used certain particular words to denote these articles, it is evident that it was linen, not cotton, they had in mind.

Diodorus Siculus and Hesychius mention the Maltese *δοονια*. Now according to Hesychius himself, the word *δοονια* means *λινὰ ἱματια* or *linen garments*. Novius employs the word *supparus*. The grammarian Nonius says that *supparus* is "vestimentum puellare lineum"¹¹ and according to Festus "velum omne, quod ex lino est, dicitur supparum"¹². Cicero has *vestis melitensis*. *Vestis* is a general word used to designate any kind of dress made out of any kind of material. It is known, however, that Verres blackmailed those merchants who came to sell their wares in Sicily into giving him, among other things, "vestem linteam" or linen garments.¹³ It is also known that Verres took out of Sicily a large quantity of Maltese garments¹⁴. It does not seem improbable that some of the linen garments which Verres took to Rome were the "linen garments" which he had obtained from the merchants, some of whom, might have been Maltese. Furthermore Cicero mentions a Maltese 'pulvinus' or 'cushion'. He says that this *pulvinus* was *perlucidus* or transparent. The adjective *transparent* suits more a linen material than a cotton one.

Silius Italicus says that Malta was proud of its "*tela lanigera*". *Tela lanigera* stand for *woolen fabrics*. This could mean that there was in Malta a woollen industry side by side with the linen one — which is most unlikely as the existence of this second industry is not supported by any other evidence — or it might be that the word originally employed by Silius was not *lanigera* (woollen) but *linigera* (linen)¹⁵.

We can rightly conclude, therefore, that all the evidence — historical, archeological, and linguistic — points to the existence in Malta of a linen industry. Mayr maintains that this industry did not die out with the coming of the Arabs and that in his own days linen was still woven especially in Gozo.¹⁶

The textile industry was the most important one in ancient times. Diodorus Siculus says that there were craftsmen of all sorts in Malta, but the most

10. *Ib.* p. 55-56.

11. *Ib.* 540,14.

12. *Ib.* 311,3.

13. *In Verr.*, 5,56.

14. *Id. Ib.* 2,2,176: Dico te . . . plurimam vestem melitensem . . . Syracusis exportasse.

15. NACHR. *Flachs*, in L.C. p. 2460.

16. Cf. *op. cit.* p. 91: Es ist die Farbrichtung von Leinen und Seidespitzen, die gegenwärtig besonders auf Gozo als Hausindustrie betrieben wird.

important ones (κρητιστοὺς) were engaged in the production of ὀθονία ¹⁷. During Verres's governorship (71-68) the principal town of the island was one large factory producing women's clothing ¹⁸. Cicero accuses Verres of having helped himself to very large quantities of Maltese *vestis* ¹⁹. This shows that in the first century B.C. the industry must have been prosperous and that many workers were employed in it. In ancient times women usually worked in the production of Othonia, sometimes, however, the ὀθονοποιοὶ were also men.

Since a great supply of water is needed to cultivate flax, it is not unlikely that flax was not actually grown on the island but imported from abroad. ²⁰ The raw material would then be woven into Othonia, mitrae, suppari, etc., by the local Othonopoioi. When Malta was in the hands of the Carthaginians the finished articles would in all likelihood be sent to Carthage from where they would be re-exported to all the parts of the Mediterranean. When the Romans took over the administration of our islands the woven products would be exported to Sicily and from there taken to Rome. Individual drapers (ὀθονοπώλης) would cross to Sicily and sell their goods there.

The ancient textile industry was mainly geared to the production of women's clothing. The word *Othonia* is normally used in Greek to denote a certain type of feminine dress. Cicero tells us that the town *Melita* produced *muliebre[m] vestem*; and he charges Verres with having stolen large quantities of Maltese garments in order to give them as presents to the wives of his friends ²¹. The supparus was similarly worn by women.

Apparently Maltese textiles were highly appreciated abroad and they seem to have been firmly established in African and Italian markets. Hesychius quoting Callimachus refers to the Maltese garments simply as *Melitaia* 'the Maltese', which means that they were well known in Callimachus's days. Likewise Cicero speaks of the *Melitenses*, 'the Maltese', which shows that in the first century B.C. these garments had made great headway in the Roman markets.

What made these manufactured articles famous was their quality. "They are distinguished", says Diodorus, "for their fineness and for their softness". Hesychius calls the Maltese Othonia *δυνατοῖα* (remarkable) and Silius Italicus says that Melite is proud of its woven cloth. It is not known what prices these garments fetched. Presumably they were luxury goods and so they must have sold pretty well.

So far we have treated of the existence, importance and quality of the Maltese textile industry in antiquity. Now we shall go over the different textile articles one by one and try to say something about each one.

17. 5,12.

18. *In Verr.* 2,4,103.

19. *In Verr.* 2,2,183: *Unde tantum Melitensium . . . ; id* 2,2,176: *plurimam vestem melitensem.*

20. Cf. *Dict. des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, Vol. 3, 1261.

21. Cf. *In Verr.* 11,4,103-104; 11,2,183: *sed tantumne Melitensium, quasi etiam amicorum uxores . . . ornaturus esses?*

A. MITRA

Varro, *Sat. Men.* 433: mitram melitensem (Non. 14, 16).

"A Maltese mitra".

The Roman 'mitra', (a loan-word from the Greek language) was a head-band mostly worn by women to tie up their hair ²². It was a long and wide ribbon usually made of linen ²³.

B. OTHONIA

Diodorus Siculus 5, 12: τεκνίτας τε γὰρ ἔκει πανταδαπούς ταις ἐργασίαις τῇ τε λεπτοτητι καὶ τῇ μαλαιοτητι διαπρεπή.

"For the island has all sorts of craftsmen (working) in its workshops; but the most important ones are those who work on Othonia which are distinguished for their fineness and softness".

Heschyus, 1027: Μελιταία (Call. fr. 393) ὀθονίαι τινα διαφορὰ ἐκ Μελιτῆς τῆς νήσου

"Maltese (garments): certain remarkable Othonia from the island of Malta". ὀθονίαι is the diminutive of ὀθονή — a piece of fine linen cloth. It is normally used in the plural and designates a linen garment worn mainly by women ²⁴.

C. VESTES

Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2,2,176: Dico te . . . plurimam vestem melitensem . . . Syracusis exportasse . . .

"I maintain that you (Verres) have taken out of Syracuse a considerable amount of Maltese vestes".

Id. 2,2,183: Unde Tantum Melitensium . . . sed tantumne Melitensium, quasi etiam amicorum uxores . . . ornaturus esses?

"From where have you taken such large quantities of Maltese vestes . . . but were such quantities really necessary? you give the impression that you wished to adorn your friends' wives as well (as yours)".

Id. 2,4,103: Insula est Melita . . . in qua est eodem nomine oppidum, . . . quod tamen isti textrinum per triennium ad muliebrem vestem conficiendam fuit.

"There is an island, Malta, in which there is a city bearing the same name. For three years this city has served as a factory to produce women's vestes for the sake of Verres".

These vestes were a sort of transparent *stolae* worn on top of the *tunica interior* by women in Rome. ²⁵ Most of these vestes were exported to Sicily from where they were re-exported to Rome.

22. Cf. on *Mitra* in R.E.

23. Cf. Another article v. a. p. 2,119b.

24. Cf. Dict. des Antiquités grecques et romaines, passim.

25. Cf. R.E. article on *Flachs*; cf. also, M.G. HOUSTON, *Ancient Greek and Roman and Byzantine Costume and Decoration*, London, p. 1947.

D. PULVINUS

Cic. *In Verrem*, 2,5,27:

Nam, ut mos fuit Bithyniae regibus, lectica octaphoro ferebatur, in qua pulvinus erat perlucidus melitensis rosa fartus.

"Following the custom of the old kings of Bithynia Verres rode in a litter carried by eight men. In the litter there was a cushion of transparent Maltese cloth stuffed with roses".

The pulvinus mentioned here could either be the squab on which the traveller sat, or else the cushion on which the traveller rested his head ²⁶ The pulvinus was in normal circumstances stuffed with algae, dried leaves or feathers. In Cicero's time, however, people like Verres who wanted to make an ostentatious display of their wealth, had their couches and cushions filled with roses or violets ²⁷. If we read 'Melitensis' with the Oxford edition of Cicero's *Oration*, we have to conclude that these roses were not necessarily Maltese — most probably they were not. The pulvinus was usually made of ordinary cloth, sometimes, as in this case, it was made of very fine linen ²⁸.

E. SUPPARUS

Novius: supparus melitensis lineus (Non. 540,11; after Ribbeck).

"A linen supparus made in Malta".

A supparus or supparum (Σιππαρος) was a linen garment worn by women. It was introduced in Rome in the 3rd century B.C. It was a tunic worn over the *tunica interior* which reached to the feet.

It is reasonable to assume that the words *Othonia*, *vestis* and *supparus* mean one and the same object: they all designate in their contexts a feminine garment made of linen. Furthermore although it is not known when the textile industry was set up in Malta, it is evident that the Carthaginians influenced it considerably. The word *othonion* is closely connected with the Semitic word *etun* ²⁹; *supparus*, according to Naevius, was a *punicum vestimentum* or a Phoenician dress ³⁰; Phoenician mitres were famous and Carthage exported a good number of cushions ³¹.

26. Cf. *Dictionnaire des Antiquités grecques et Romaines*, Vol. III, 1005.

27. *Id.* Vol. VI, pulvinus; Cf. also Cic. *Fin.* 2,65; *Tusc.* 5,73; Horace, 1,1, *Od.* 5, 5,1.

28. *Id.* Vol. VI, pulvinus.

29. Cf. E. BOISACQ, *Dict. étymologique de la langue grecque*.

30. Cf. *FESTUS*, 310,15.

31. Cf. *JUVENAL*, 3,66: *mitra sidonia*; *Claudian*, 20,185: *mitra tyria*.