

THREE ARTICLES

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I

XENOPHANES AND MALTA

XENOPHANES (c. 570-c. 470 B.C.),¹ poet and philosopher, was born in the Ionian city of Colophon. Driven away from his country he spent many years in Sicily.² He is also reputed, perhaps erroneously, to have been the founder of the Eleatic School of Philosophy.

According to the Doxographers Xenophanes believed, perhaps under the influence of Anaximander's cosmogony, that the earth was subject to alternate encroachments of land on sea and of sea on land.³ According to Hippolytus⁴ Xenophanes thought that a mingling of earth and sea takes place and that in course of time the earth is dissolved by the wet element. He brings as a proof the fact that shells are found in the midst of the land and on mountains; that in the quarries at Syracuse the impression of a fish and of seaweed (or seals) have been found, in Paros the impression of a bay-leaf in the depth of a stone, and in Melite flattened shapes of all sea creatures.⁵

Hippolytus does not say whether Xenophanes had in mind Malta or the Adriatic island of Mljet, known also as Melite. The words actually used are ἐν μελίτῳ which have been emended into ἐν Μελίτῃ by Karsten and accepted by H. Diels and others.⁶ However, we know from Diogenes that Xenophanes lived in Syracuse and Catania⁷ – that is not far from Malta. Furthermore, fossil remains of various kinds of fish and sea creatures

¹ For this date Cf Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, C.U.P. Vol. I 1962, p. 363.

² Cf Diogenes Laertius, IX, 18.

³ Cf Guthrie, *op. cit.* p. 387.

⁴ Cf H. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci*, Berlin, 1958, p. 566, 6.

⁵ Cf H. Diels, *op. cit.* Hippolyti Philosophoumenon: ἐν δὲ Μελίτῃ πλάσας συμπάντων τῶν θαλασσίων. For πλάσας Cf Theophrastus, *Sens.* 73, Aristotle, H. A 526b 9; GA, 758a, 14; for θαλασσίων Cf Herodotus, 2, 123; Plato, *Euthd.*, 298d; Aristotle, H. A 478a 26.

⁶ Cf H. Diels, *op. cit.* p. 566, 6.

⁷ Cf IX, 18.

exist to this very day in Malta.⁸ Hence, probably, H. Diels and Guthrie are right when they translate Melite by Malta, if, of course, the emended word is correct.⁹

If this is the case, then Xenophanes is the first Greek writer we know of who mentions the island of Malta. The first unmistakable reference to Malta occurs in a passage of Ps. Skylax (fl. 350 B.C.).¹⁰ The adjective *Μελιταῖος* or *Maltese* is first found inscribed on a vase excavated at Vulci which goes back to about 500 B.C.¹¹ Hecataeus (540-480 B.C.) is the first Greek writer who mentions Gozo.¹² One can also say that either Xenophanes himself visited the island, which is not unlikely, or else derived his information about the geology of Malta from people who visited it. Together with Hecataeus Xenophanes helped to make our islands more known to the sixth century Greeks.

⁸For example at a place called il-Blata not far from Bahrija there are abundant fossil remains of every sort of sea-creature.

⁹Cf H. Diels, *Doxographi graeci*, op. cit. p. 566, 6; id. *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, p. 123, 6; Guthrie, op. cit. p. 387.

¹⁰Cf C. Müller, *Geographi graeci minores*, Hildesheim, 1965, Skylax 111.

¹¹Cf R.E. Vol. VIII, p. 2552.

¹²Cf *Hecataei Milesii Fragmenta*, a cura di Giuseppe Nenci, Firenze, 1954, p. 98, No 358.

II

POLEMO AND MALTA

POLEMO, called ὁ περιηγητής, the writer of guide-books enumerating and describing what is worthy of note in several cities and countries, was born in the district of the Troad in the third century before our era.¹ He settled at Athens where he worked up the material he had collected from inscriptions, dedications and public monuments into a number of books.² He died in the second half of the second century B.C.³

¹Cf L. Preller, *Polemonis Periegetae Fragmenta*, collegit, digessit, notis auxit, Leipzig, 1838 reprinted in Amsterdam 1964; also Real-Encyclopedie, Article on Polemo, Vol. xxi, 2, 1952, p. 1291.

²Cf *Dictionary of Classical Antiquity*, Nettleship and Sandys, London 1891.

³Cf L. Preller, op. cit. p. 1: *Aetas autem Polemonis est doctissima illa Alexandrinorum... vixit inter annos 221 et 180 ante Christum*; also R.E. op. cit. p. 1291: *Unter Berücksichtigung der genannten Nachrichten und der vielen voranzusitzenden Reisen wird man Polemos Lebenszeit in den Zeitraum 220-160 ansetzen.*

One of his books or a part of his one of books bears the title of κτίσεις τῶν Ἰταλικῶν καὶ Σικελικῶν πόλεων – *The Origins of the Italian and Sicilian Cities*.⁴ The *Etymologicum Florentinum* preserves a fragment of this work which mentions the island of Malta.⁵ The emended version of this fragment is as follows: Μελιταῖα κυνίδια λέγεται ὅτι πλησίον Ἰταλίας Μελίτη ἐστὶ νῆσος ἕξ ἧς εἰσὶ Μελιταῖα κυνίδια Πολέμων δ' ἐν κτίσεσι Σικελίας Μελίτην Φησὶν εἶναι.

Melitaeen dogs are so called because near Italy there is an island, Melite, from where the Melitaeen dogs come. Polemo, however, in the κτίσεις says that it is Melite of Sicily.⁶

One can safely infer from this tiny fragment that Polemo in his work on the *Origins of the Italian and Sicilian cities* included Malta and presumably Gozo among them. He might also have visited Malta as the extant fragments of his work show that he was writing about places from personal experience.⁷ However that may be, he wrote on Malta and it is a pity that his work has not survived.

There is a further consideration to be made: Polemo, as quoted in the *Etymologicum*, says Σικελίας Μελίτην – *Malta of Sicily*. In other words he does not only mention Malta but includes it under that section of his work which deals with Sicily. In so doing he breaks away completely with the tradition probably begun by Hecataeus who places Gozo near Carthage⁸ and followed by Pseudo-Skylax who groups Malta and Gozo with Carthage.⁹ In 218 B.C. Malta became part of the Roman Province of Sicily and was to remain so for more than a thousand years.

Finally Polemo is the first writer we know who says that the Melitaeen dogs – which were so popular in the Greek-speaking world – are so called because they come from the island of Malta.

⁴This title is first found in the Scholion of Apollonius of Rhodes IV, 324, Cf R.E. op. cit. p. 1301.

⁵According to R.E. (op. cit. p. 1301) this fragment is found in the *Etymologicum Magnum*. The *Etymologicum Magnum* does not quote this fragment. It is found in the *Etymologicum Florentinum*. Cf M.E. Miller, *Mélanges de littérature grecque*, Paris 1868, p. 213.

⁶A discussion of this emended version is found in the Article on 'Polemo in R.E. op. cit. p. 1301. Cf also M.E. Miller, op. cit. and P. Pfeiffer *Callimachus*, Oxford, 1949, Fr. 13, p. 470.

⁷Cf R.E. op. cit. p. 1291: *Mit sicherheit kann man annehmen, dass er (Polemo) die in seinen zahlreichen Schriften behandelten und genannten Ortschaften, Städte und Landschaften zum grossen Teil aus eigenen Anschauung kannte.*

⁸Cf Stephanus Byzantinus, ἐκ τῶν ἑθνικῶν Graz, 1958, 200.

⁹Cf C. Müller, *Geographi graeci minores*, Vol. I, Skylax 111, Hildesheim, 1965.

III

THE CORAL INDUSTRY

GRATTIUS Faliscus, a Roman poet contemporary with Ovid,¹ is the author of the *Cynegeticon libri* – a poem on hunting in hexameter verse of which 536 lines have been preserved. The author, with Xenophon's *Cynegetica* as his model, describes the various kinds of game and the best breeds of horses and dogs in a style that is both technical and heavy. In the section of the work dealing with the breeds of dogs the poet mentions certain remedies against rabies² which some Romans of his day took. Grattius says that some fasten necklets of sacred shells round the neck of the sick dog and he adds:

Et vivum lapidem et circa Melite[n]sia nectunt
curulia et magicis adiutas cantibus herbas.³

'They fasten the stone of living fire and Maltese corals and herbs to the accompaniment of magic incantations'.

Coral was highly prized in antiquity for jewellery, ornamentation and decorative purposes. Probably on account of its red colour it was thought to have mysterious properties. Among the Romans branches of coral were hung round children's necks to protect them from danger.⁴ According to Solinus anything made out of coral exercises a beneficial influence.⁵ Grattius refers to the Maltese corals later as a *tutela*,⁶ which suggests that the coral stones were hung round the necks of the sick dogs as prophylactic amulets.⁷ A belief in the potency of coral as a charm continued to be entertained throughout medieval times.

The coral⁸ stones referred to in the poem are the red or precious corals

¹Ovid mentions the poet in the Letters from Pontus (4, 16, 34): (cum) aptaque venanti Grattius arma daret.

²Cf VV 383-407.

³VV 405-406. Variant readings: Melitensia (VOENDU) Melitesia (AE) Meliteraria (O); nectunt (AE), nectu (D); curulia (A), curia alia (D), coralia (E).

⁴Cf Pliny, *N.H.* 32, 11, 3: surculi infantiae adligati tutelam habere creduntur.

⁵Cf *De curulis ramulis*, 11, 26.

⁶Cf VV 406-407: ac sic effectus oculique venena maligni
vicit tutela pax impetrata deorum.

⁷Cf *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, Vol. 1, part II, p. 1504; Vol. 1, part I, p. 253.

⁸For the etymology of the Greek word *κουρολλιον* and its kindred forms Cf J.B. Hofmann, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Griechischen*, München, 1949; H. Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Vol. 1, Heidelberg, 1960; E. Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Heidelberg, 1950. The Latin

of commerce (*coralia rubra*).⁹ The precious coral with its variety of all shades of red is found abundantly in the Mediterranean. The coasts of Sardinia, Southern Italy, Corsica, Sicily and the North African littoral are rich in coral reefs also nowadays. In antiquity coral fishery was carried on round the Maltese coasts as the passage of Grattius implies. We are told by Hesychius that those who were engaged in fishing corals round Sicily (including, of course, Malta) used to be called *κωραλλεῖς*.¹⁰ The presence of coral reefs off the Maltese shores is well established by finds which take place from time to time.¹¹

In Pliny's time a great trade was carried on in coral between the Mediterranean and India.¹² The Indian demand was so great that coral was very rarely seen in the regions which produced it. We do not know whether the coral stones fished off the Maltese coasts found their way to India. The passage of Grattius implies, however, that Maltese coral stones found their way to Rome. This means that in the second half of the last century before Christ there was a coral industry in Malta, providing jobs for a number of people known as *κωραλλεῖς* and having markets abroad which absorbed the material.

word *curalium* with its kindred forms is derived from the Greek. Cf A. Ernout, *Aspects du Vocabulaire Latin*, p. 50. The Maltese *qroll* seems to be derived from Italian.

⁹ Cf R.E. Vol. 1, 2, p. 1374, sub voce Koralle: Mann kann sagen dass, wenn im Altertum von Koralle die Rede ist, immer die elde oder rote gemeint wird, Cf also Hesychius: λίθος θαλάσσιος ἔρυθρος; Ausonius, 10, 69-70; Priscian, *Periegesis*, 1008.

¹⁰ Cf Hesychius *κωραλλεῖς οἱ ἀναλέγοντες τὸ κωράλιον περὶ Σικελίαν*.

¹¹ Cf T. Zammit, *Malta, The islands and its History*, Valletta, 1926, p.

¹² Cf Pliny, N.H. 32, 11, 3.