

LYCOPHRON AND MALTA

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THE poet Lycophron, born about 330-325 B.C., was a native of Chalcis in Euboea and spent most of his life at Alexandria in Egypt. He was the natural son of Socles and the adopted son of the historian Lycus of Rhegium. In the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-247 B.C.) he was commissioned to arrange the Comic Poets in the Royal Library in Alexandria. He wrote a number of tragedies and was given the name *πλειτας* by the later Alexandrine scholars.¹

Only a few fragments of Lycophron's tragedies have come down to us; the *Alexandra*, however, a work in 1474 lines of iambic poetry, has been preserved in its entirety. It deals with the prophecies uttered by Alexandra or Cassandra and it relates in a prophetic vein the later fortunes of the Greek and Trojan heroes. It was written purposely in an enigmatical style and for this reason Suidas calls it τὸ σκοτεινὸν ποιήμα (The Obscure Poem). It was certainly written after 309 B.C. and most probably after 295 B.C.² The poet tries to show that what Troy lost in the East was balanced by the success of Troy's descendants, the Romans, in the West.³ From a historical point of view it reflects the great impression which the Roman military victories had made upon the contemporary Hellenistic world.⁴

Cassandra, opening her 'inspired Bacchic lips'⁵ enumerates the various islands and places which will be inhabited by the Greeks and Trojans. In verses 1027-1029 she says:

Ἄλλοι δὲ Μελίτην νῆσον. Ὀθρωνοῦ πέλας
πλάγκτοι, κατοικησουσιν, ἦν περίξ κλύδων
ἔμπλην παχυνου Σικανὸς προσμασσεται.

¹ Cf Lycophron, *Alexandra*, translated by A.W. Mair, Loeb Edition, p. 311; Suidas *Lexicon*, Halis 1853, sub voce *Lycophron*.

² Cf Lycophron, op.cit., p. 307; Enciclopedia Italiana, Edizione 1949, Vol. XXI, p. 95.

³ Cf vv 1226 f.

⁴ Cf Enciclopedia Italiana, op.cit. p. 94.

⁵ Cf v 30.

Others, wandering in the neighbourhood of Othronus, will inhabit the island of Melite, round which the Sicanian surf laps near Pachynus.⁶

Cassandra says that others will inhabit the island of Melite. Which Melite does Lycophron have in mind? Cassandra adds three small details: (a) Melite is washed by the Sicanian Sea; (b) it lies near Pachynus; (c) it is in the neighbourhood of Othronus, modern Fano.⁷ The Sicanian or Sicilian Sea washes Malta and not the Adriatic island of Melite, modern Meleda.⁸ Cape Pachynus, which is far from Fano, is that point in Sicily that is nearest to Malta. On the other hand Othronus is an island near Meleda in the Adriatic. The Scholiast of Lycophron does not help us much to solve the problem. 'Othronos', says the Scholiast, '(is) an island between Epirus and Italy; the island of Melite lies close to it. Othronus is an island to the South of Sicily and it lies before the promontory of Pachynus in Sicily. Othronos lies close to the mouth of the Adriatic'.⁹ The Scholiast contradicts himself. If Melite lies between Epirus and Italy it cannot lie in the south of Sicily. Stephanus of Byzantium says: 'Othronos: a city: according to some an island to the south of Sicily; according to others, the island of Malta'.¹⁰

It would seem, therefore, that in ancient times Lycophron's passage was interpreted differently by different commentators: some thought that by Melite he meant Meleda, others maintained that he was referring to Malta. Those who held that Lycophron was alluding to Malta postulated the existence of an Othronos near Sicily. In actual fact no island bearing that name ever existed to the south of Sicily. The only explanation appears to be that Lycophron (and his Scholiast) mixed up the two

⁶ Cf Lycophronis Alexandra, edidit Lorenzo Mascialino, Teubner, MCMLXIV, p. 46, vv 1027-1029.

⁷ Cf R.E. Vol. 36, 1942, pp. 1870-1871.

⁸ F. Abela, Descrizione di Malta, Malta 1647 calls Malta l'isola del mar siculo.

⁹ Cf. Schol. Lycophron 1027: 'Οθρωνός νῆσος μεταξύ Ἑπείρου καὶ Ἰταλίας. ταύτη δὲ νῆσος παρκαεῖται Μελίτη. Ὀθρωνός νῆσος πρὸς νότον Σικελίας, ἣτις προβεβλήται τοῦ παχυνου ἀρωτηρίον Σικελίας, ἣ δὲ Ὀθρωνός πρὸς τῷ στοματι τοῦ Ἀδρίου.

¹⁰ Cf. Stephan von Byzanz, Ethnika, Graz, 1958: Ὀθρωνός. πόλις, οἰδὲ νῆσον πρὸς νότον Σικελίας. ἄλλοι δὲ Μελίτην νῆσον.

¹¹ Cf Stephan von Byzanz, Ethnika, Graz, 1958: Σικελίας, ἣδὲ Ὀθρωνός πρὸς τῷ στοματι τοῦ Ἀδρίου.

Melite. Lycophron's geography is hazy elsewhere. In lines 1030-1033 the poet expatiates on the legends connected with Pachynus. He mentions the western point which was called after Ulysses (1.030), the river Helorus (1.1033) and the shrine of Athena (1.1032). Hence there can be no doubt that, although he places Melite near Othronos, the poet had in mind the island of Malta. At that time interest in the history of Sicily had revived. Timaeus wrote the *Σικελικὰ* at the end of the fourth century B.C. and influenced the poet Callimachus, who wrote much about Sicily, Lycus, who wrote a history of Sicily, and Lycophron himself.

Cassandra does not say who the 'others' are. Doubtlessly they are Trojan or Greek heroes and they are few in number. Thucydides in the sixth book of the Peloponnesian Wars says that Sicily and the neighbouring islands had been inhabited by Trojans.¹¹ Of course, the presence of Trojans in Sicily and Malta belongs to the realm of mythology. However, from a historical standpoint one can say that in the eyes of the Alexandrine poet Malta was inhabited by people of Trojan stock. Moreover the author connects the inhabitants of Malta with those of Sicily, Southern Italy and of Rome itself.

¹¹v1,2.