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ANTHONY BONANNO

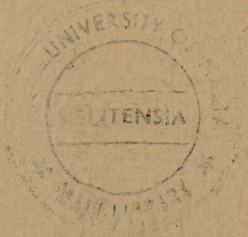
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LYCOPHRON AND MALTA

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A. Bonanno
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ANTHONY BONANNO

LYCOPHRON AND MALTA



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Very few ancient writers refer directly to Malta in their works and one of these is the tragic poet Lycophron¹. Extremely little is known about Lycophron's life and almost all our information on his career comes from a notice in Suidas² and a «Life» by the twelfth century Byzantine scholar Tzetzes prefixed to his commentary of the *Alexandra*³. Born in Chalcis in Euboea towards the end of the fourth century B.C. he seems to have spent his earlier years in Chalcis, Athens, and possibly Rhegion. He was later given hospitality and an academic post at the Mouseion of Alexandria. Where and when he died we do not know⁴.

Lycophron dedicated his literary activity to the writing of tragedies of which he produced either 46 or 64⁵. He was by later Alexandrian scholars included in the Pleias, the group of seven most emi-

¹ For other references to Malta in ancient literature see E. COLEIRO, «Malta in Classical Literature», *The Classical Journal* [Malta], 1 (Oct. 1947) pp. 15-32; *id.*, «Malta nelle letterature classiche», *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto preliminare della Campagna* 1963 (Rome 1964) pp. 25-38. For ancient sources referring to the Byzantine period see G. BUSUTTIL, «Fonti greche per la storia delle isole maltesi», *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto preliminare della Campagna* 1968 (Rome 1969) pp. 15-26; T. S. BROWN, «Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources» in A. T. LUTTRELL, *Medieval Malta, Studies on Malta before the Knights* (London 1975) pp. 71-86.

² Suidas, s.v. Λυκόφρων.

³ Contained in several editions like Paul Lecisius (Basel 1548); J. Potter (Oxford 1697); G. Kinkel (Leipzig 1880).

⁴ For an extensive discussion of the sources and the various problems regarding Lycophron's life and works see Ziegler, s.v. «Lykophron», *Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, XIII, 2 (1927) coll. 2316-2381.

⁵ According to Tzetzes, *loc. cit.*

nent tragic poets of the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphos (B.C. 285-246) ⁶. We are also told that he wrote a satyric drama ⁷ and a treatise *Περὶ κωμωδίας* ⁸.

The *Ἀλεξάνδρα*, known also as *Κασσάνδρα* is the only work by Lycophron surviving in its entirety. It is a characteristically Alexandrian production ⁹ and a display of recondite learning in both diction and mythology. It is even referred to as « the obscure poem » ¹⁰. The poem, in 1474 iambic trimeters, is an account given to Priam, king of the Trojans by the custodian in charge of Cassandra. Between the prologue (ll. 1-30) and the epilogue (ll. 1461-1474) the poet inserts the long prophecy of Alexandra of all that will come about as a result of her brother Paris' visit to Sparta.

Cassandra announces the imminent destruction of Ilium, the death of the Trojan heroes and the fates of the Trojan women. She foretells the hardships to be met by both the victorious Achaeans and the surviving Trojans in their search for foreign lands in which to settle. Among these the adventurous wanderings of Ulysses and the eventful navigation of Aeneas down to his foundation of Rome occupy a position of prominence and significance ¹¹. The oracle recounts the causes of the ancient rivalry between East and West and ends with the reconciliation of the two continents.

The passage on Malta (ll. 1027-1033) occurs amidst the various peregrinations and colonisations of both Trojans and Greeks and appears between the prophecy of Niraëus' and Thoas' wanderings in Libya,

⁶ Suidas, *s.v.* Λυκόφρων.

⁷ Athen. ii. 55 c-d; x. 420 a.

⁸ Athen. vii. 278 a-b; xi. 485 d and 501 d-e; xiii. 555 a.

⁹ Although it is argued by some (e.g. Bates) that it belonged to the early, or pre-Alexandrian, period of Lycophron's life. See *Lycophron* ed. A. W. Mair (London-Cambridge, Mass. 1955) p. 307.

¹⁰ Suidas, *loc. cit.*: τὸ σκοτεινὸν ποίημα.

¹¹ Two obscure passages, ll. 1226-1280 and 1446-1450, which seem to refer to Rome already as a powerful nation on both land and sea, raise serious difficulties for the usually accepted dates of the composition of the poem, about 274 B.C. (Holzinger). It is indeed hard to conceive of a Greek poet of the Alexandrian school writing about the Romans as holding « the sceptre and monarchy of earth and sea » (l. 1229) before even the First Punic War (264-241 B.C.). As a result some scholars have argued that the two passages are later interpolations, or that the whole tragedy is the work of a later poet (e.g. Niebuhr).

Epirus and Illyria (ll. 1011-1026) and the exile of Elephenor on the island of Othronos (ll. 1034-1046). The text runs as follows¹²:

Ἄλλοι δε Μελίτην νῆσον Ὀθρωνοῦ πέλας
 πλαγκτοὶ κατοικήσουσιν, ἣν πέριξ κλύδων
 ἔμπλην Παχύνου Σικανὸς προσμάσσεται,
 τοῦ Σισυφείου παιδὸς ὀχθηρὰν ἄκραν
 ἐπώνυμόν ποθ' ὑστέρω χρόνῳ γράφων
 κλεινὸν θ' Ἴδρυμα παρθένου Λογγάτιδος,
 Ἐλωρος ἔνθα ψυχρὸν ἐκβάλλει ποτόν.

« And other wanderers shall inhabit the island of Melita, near Othronos, round which the Sicilian wave breaks in the vicinity of Pachynos scoring that steep promontory which shall in later times bear the name of the son of Sisyphos¹³ and the renowned temple of the maiden Longatis¹⁴, where Heloros emits its cool stream ».

On the reading of the word Melita all the manuscripts and scholia are in perfect agreement¹⁵. As usual, however, whenever the name of Melita occurs in ancient texts, the debate centres round the geographical identification of this island: whether it should be identified with Malta, the largest of the group of islands south of Sicily¹⁶, or with the island of Meleda (now Mljet) near the coast of Jugoslavia in the Adriatic¹⁷. The confusion in this passage arises because Lycophron

¹² The text reproduced here is based on the edition by L. Mascialino (Leipzig 1964), to my knowledge the most recent one. This edition contains an updated *apparatus criticus* and a list of previous editions and studies. The text is the same as that in *id.*, *Lycophrōn, Alejandra* (Barcelona 1956). With the exception of minor perhaps negligible variants, limited to one or two accents and the reversal of the order of two words χρόνῳ γράφων (l. 1031) the text is identical to that in E. Sheer's edition (Berlin 1881). See also editions by M. C. G. Müller (Leipzig 1811); G. Kinkel (Leipzig 1880); C. von Holzinger (Leipzig 1895); and G. R. MAIR, *cit.*

¹³ According to one legend Sisyphos was Odysseus' father by Anticleia. The southern point of Sicily was called Ὀδυσσεΐα ἄκρα (Ptolem. iii. 4.7).

¹⁴ Athena.

¹⁵ See editions cited *supra* n. 12. See also I. GUALANDRI, *Index nominum propriorum quae in Scholiis Tzetzianis ad Lycophronem laudantur* (Milan 1962) 318, 6, 9.

¹⁶ This view is supported by the majority of scholia and scholars: see KINKEL, *cit.*, p. 162; HOLZINGER, *cit.*, p. 317; MASCIALINO, *cit.* (1956); MAIR, *cit.*, p. 406.

¹⁷ Tzetzes followed by A. MEINEKE, *Stephan von Byzanz, Ethnica* (Berlin 1849) p. 484 and A. A. CARUANA, *Frammento Critico della Storia delle Isole di Malta* (Malta 1899), p. 128.

seems to be placing Melita near Othronos identified by Pliny and Hesychios as « an island off Corcyra » (modern Corfù in the Adriatic)¹⁸. On the other hand Stephanos of Byzantium informs us that Othronos is « according to some an island to the south of Sicily »¹⁹. The reference to Othronos in the lines immediately following this passage (ll. 1034-1046) may be taken to suggest that even in the case under discussion Lycophron had in mind the Adriatic Othronos, in which case the island Meleda might appear to be indicated.

Nevertheless, since the other geographical details point unmistakably to Malta, it is to be deduced that either the poet is confusing his geography, or else a different interpretation is required for ll. 1027-1028, namely that « others, having wandered in the vicinity of Othronos, shall settle on the island of Melita... »²⁰. The great distance that separates Malta from Corcyra is not easily explained away by the latter interpretation and confusion of names or geography is the more plausible answer. As for Othronos, Lycophron may have had in mind some other island south of Sicily not far from Malta. Furthermore, the identification of Melita with the Yugoslav island is seriously contradicted by the great distance (about 300 km) between Meleda and Othronos even if they are both washed by the Adriatic sea.

That Lycophron's Melita is to be identified with Malta is clearly shown by the other geographical references: Melita is washed by the Sicilian sea, and it is close to cape Pachynus on the southeastern tip of Sicily by which the river Heloros flows into the sea. Lycophron does not specify who the colonisers of Malta (these ἄλλοι) are, but we can safely infer from the context that they are Greeks on their way home from the Trojan war.

¹⁸ Plin. *N.H.*, iv. 52; Hesych., *s.v.* Ὀθρωνός.

¹⁹ Steph. Byz., *s.v.* Ὀθρωνός. Whether Stephanos inferred this information from the same passage of Lycophron, who places Othronos near Malta, or from other sources, it is not possible to say. On Othronos see also J. SCHMIDT, *s.v.* « Othronos », *Real-Encyclopädie*, XVIII, 2 (1942) coll. 1870-1871.

²⁰ As in Mascialino's translation, *cit.* (1956).

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