

# The Maltese Islands in the *Odyssey*

ANTHONY BONANNO

The tradition of a connection between Malta and the *Odyssey* is a very deeply rooted one both locally and internationally. It has found its way in Maltese popular tradition, which has identified a specific cave in Gozo with Calypso, the nymph who held Odysseus stranded on her island for seven years. It emerges quite frequently even in the literary output of the island, be it in Maltese or in other languages.<sup>1</sup> Some sort of identification of one or several of the Maltese islands with one or other of the islands mentioned in the *Odyssey* is also frequently proposed in foreign literature, whether of a scholarly and learned nature,<sup>2</sup> or of a more popular and narrative nature.<sup>3</sup> This tradition goes back very far in time.

## The modern literary tradition

In modern times the earliest reference to this connection is not found, as one would normally expect, in Jean Quintin d'Autun, the first writer to produce a relatively extensive description of Malta,<sup>4</sup> even though he did refer to a legend associated with a mythical personality (Anna, sister of Dido), who should be contemporary with the episodes narrated in the *Odyssey*. The first reference I am aware of is in an unpublished work by the Maltese Jesuit, Girolamo Manduca, which is preserved in various manuscript copies in the National Library of Malta and in the Archive of the Cathedral at Mdina.

Girolamo Manduca (1573-1643) was a very erudite man and wrote several works which remained unpublished but still survive in manuscript form.<sup>5</sup> The work which is mostly concerned with Maltese antiquities, even archaeological ones, is the *Relazione osian Tradizioni avute e trasmesse dalli Antichi circa le cose dell'Isola di Malta e di quanto si è potuto cavare da scritture antiche degne di Fede*.<sup>6</sup> His writings also contain short discussions of classical remains, including those of a presumed palatial building at Mellieha, which he identifies with the "palace" of Calypso.<sup>7</sup>

Gian Francesco Abela, the Maltese vice-chancellor of the Order of St John, is hailed as the father of Maltese historiography, mostly for his monumental work on Malta and its history.<sup>8</sup> In the section entitled *Dei vari nomi dell'Isola e de' suoi primi Abitatori*,<sup>9</sup> Abela refers to giants, or the Homeric Cyclops, as being the first “humans” after the deluge to inhabit Sicily and, consequently, the neighbouring islands, including Malta and Gozo. He found “infallible” evidence for this in the discovery in Malta of bones of giants of enormous size. Abela believed that the next people to inhabit Malta were the Phaeacians, in the Homeric epic the inhabitants of Schèria, who gave hospitality to Odysseus, and in whose court Odysseus himself narrates his previous wanderings before being given a ship with which to reach his beloved Ithaca. Abela too writes of the remains of a very ancient (“*antichissimo*”) building, consisting of very large stones, exposed on the coast of the “*porto delle saline*”, which he identifies, in agreement with Manduca, as the dwelling of Calypso.<sup>10</sup>

A work of great importance, which was published twenty-eight years before Abela's, and which must have greatly influenced the latter, is Philip Clüver's *Sicilia Antiqua*.<sup>11</sup> This German geographer and antiquarian was the first to advocate the theory of a Greek colonisation of the Maltese islands in antiquity.<sup>12</sup> Initially, Clüver appears to be convinced that Malta was inhabited by the Phaeacians before the Trojan war, when they were ousted by the Phoenicians.<sup>13</sup> However, in the last section of the chapter on Malta, he discusses at some length the identification of Ogygia, the island of Calypso, with Malta.<sup>14</sup> He finds a surprisingly close correspondence between Homer's description of the island inhabited by the daughter of Atlas in *Odyssey* V. ll. 55-75 and the account given by Jean Quintin of the fertility of Malta.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the comparison is not made with his own, first-hand experience of reality, but with a generic literary description which could equally apply to several other Mediterranean islands, such as the Lipari islands and those in the vicinity of the gulf of Naples.

Clüver also finds further confirmation for his identification in the geographical location of the same island given by Homer elsewhere in the *Odyssey*. In Book VII (l. 244) Ogygia is said to lie far out in the open sea and in Book I (ll. 50-51) it is placed “where the navel of the sea is”. The tradition of this Homeric connection with Malta was kept alive by numerous other writers both Maltese,<sup>16</sup> and foreign.<sup>17</sup>

### **The ancient literary sources**

Nevertheless, the connection of one of the Maltese islands, precisely Gozo, with the Homeric island of Calypso is not a modern one; it is not a modern invention, but goes back to the third-century-BC Hellenistic scholar and poet Callimachus (c. 310-240 BC). It is thought that its origins might be taken as far as the poet Hesiod, around 700 BC, but Callimachus's is the first surviving reference.<sup>18</sup>

Callimachus was an Alexandrian *grammaticus* from Cyrene, and one of the most representative writers of Alexandrian poetry of the early Hellenistic period. Most of his works have gone lost, but he was often quoted by ancient grammarians. Besides, the papyrological discoveries made in Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have filled many gaps in his works. The reference to Gozo survives in a fragment which is classified as *incertae sedis*, which means that it is not known to which of Callimachus's works it belonged.<sup>19</sup> The surviving fragment preserves only a part of a sentence, namely, "the little islet of Calypso – Gaudos", where both "the little islet" and "Gaudos" are in the accusative case, that is, the object of some transitive verb.

Callimachus's identification of Ogygia with Gozo was already opposed by a later Alexandrian poet and grammarian, Apollodoros (*floruit* c. 140 BC), who defended the position taken by the geographer Eratosthenes (c. 285-194 BC), disciple of Callimachus, namely that Odysseus's wanderings could not have been around Sicily. We are told this in two passages by the Greek geographer Strabo (I. 44 and VII, 299) who, however, criticises Apollodoros for failing to state which places were, in reality, visited by Odysseus.

Already in ancient times the island of Ogygia was identified with at least twelve different islands.<sup>20</sup> It is claimed, moreover, that the discussion of the geography of the *Odyssey*, including some of the more fanciful and unfounded identifications, was already documented in more than 3300 publications in 1976;<sup>21</sup> it must have grown extensively since then. It is quite obvious that retracing all these references would be an extremely difficult, and I would dare to say, even futile, task. The best approach would be, to my mind, to tackle the undertaking from scratch, with the original text in hand, and analysing only the more plausible and more frequently cited identifications.

That the journey of Odysseus took place mainly, if not exclusively, around Sicily is a commonly supported theory.<sup>22</sup> Bérard was the major exponent of the Mediterranean theory of Homer's geography, but he identified Ogygia with Perejel, an island near Tangier.<sup>23</sup> On this, Pocock, in spite of his position on the Sicilian connection, agrees with Bérard.

### The physical features

The most obvious thing to do in the circumstances is to examine, in the first place, whether specific geographical places were indeed intended in the Homeric poem and, secondly, if the geographical and physical features ascribed by Homer to his place names fit in with the reality of the suggested identifications.

In the case in hand, for the purpose of the present paper, we ought to assume that Homer's poem referred to specific geographical entities – the most obvious ones being the point of departure, Troy (where the Greeks, including Odysseus, had spent ten years besieging that city) and the point of arrival, Ithaca (Odysseus's pined for island home). Both are, and have been



**Figure 1**

Part of the cliffs on the west coast of Gozo. The sheer rise of the cliffs from the sea recalls the sheer cliffs characterizing the 'floating' island of Aeolus.



**Figure 2**

A panoramic view of Ramla bay, Gozo. Several caves overlook this bay. Oral tradition has identified one of them with Calypso's cave.

proved to be, geographical and contemporary historical realities. Between these two real geographical points Homer inserts a number of episodes of various degrees of fancy which take place in determined places, each with its own characteristic and distinguishing features. These characteristics need not have been experienced directly by the poet, or the narrating minstrel. On the contrary, it is much more likely that they reached them through the often inflated and exaggerated narrations of seafarers. So one should not, I believe, expect a perfect correspondence of each and every physical feature attributed to the different places.

Having taken that stand, the next step is to see which of the three most cited identifications with Malta fit best, if not entirely, with the geographical and geomorphological reality of the island.

#### a) *The Land of the Phaeacians*

In Book V, after being storm-tossed for several days, Odysseus is cast on the shores of the country of the Phaeacians where he finds safety from the sharp rocks by swimming to the mouth of a "fast-running stream", and is given generous hospitality by the King, Alcinoos, and his daughter Nausicaa. In Book XIII, then, we see Odysseus being escorted home on a ship laden with rich presents from King Alcinoos and his entourage and manned by young nobles selected by Alcinoos, while Odysseus himself was allowed to sleep throughout the voyage. The voyage took only a day of rowing, from sunrise to sunset. The Phaeacian sailors were even familiar with the cove where they landed on Ithaca.

This, in my view, is a clear indication that Malta could not possibly be the land of the Phaeacians which, besides, is never described as an island. It appears as a coastal land that was fairly close – only a day's voyage – to Odysseus's final destination. It took Patrick Brydone almost twice the time to reach Malta from Sicily – only 90 km away – in a small, oar-driven boat on a calm sea in June 1780.<sup>24</sup> The suggestion that the renowned megalithic temples of the island might be the palace and court of Alcinoos is even less credible.<sup>25</sup>

#### b) *The Island of Aeolus*

In Book IX, after the episode of the Cyclops, Odysseus first joined his companions, who were waiting for him on the other ships on "our island". There they ate and feasted. This must be an island situated quite close to the Cyclops's abode. From here they set sail the next morning. Book X starts with these words: "Our next landfall was the floating island of Aeolia, the home of Aeolus son of Hippotas... All round this island there runs an unbroken wall of bronze, and below it the cliffs rise sheer from the sea."

Odysseus was guest of Aeolus for a whole month. Then, Aeolus called

up a breeze from the west to blow Odysseus's ships and their crews across the sea in the direction of Ithaca. "For the next nine days we sailed on, day and night; and on the tenth we were already in sight of our homeland, and had actually come near enough to see the people tending their fires." But at that point Odysseus's men untied the bag of winds and the resulting tempest drove the ships back to the Aeolian island.

The sheer rise of the cliffs from the sea recalls the sheer cliffs that characterise the whole of the south and southwest coast of both Malta and Gozo; but these cliffs are far from unbroken and are almost completely absent from the northeast coast. What supports this hypothetical identification with Malta best is the favourable westerly wind called up by Aeolus, since Malta lies to the west of Ithaca, and the time taken (nine days) to reach Ithaca from Aeolia fits reasonably well with the distance between Malta and Ithaca.<sup>26</sup>

This particular feature fits much less, it should be admitted, with the Aeolian islands since to cross from these to Ithaca Odysseus and his men would have had to sail through the straits of Messina, whose navigational dangers are depicted so lively in the episode of Scylla and Charybdis. It is even less likely that Odysseus's ships were swept back from within sight of Ithaca to the Aeolian islands on the same route, and without a single mention of the Straits. However, the Aeolian islands have similarly high and steep cliffs and there seems to be almost general consensus on their identification with Aeolus, from whom they derived their name since antiquity.

### c) *Ogygia, the Island of Calypso*

Odysseus's forced stay on Calypso's pleasant island is introduced at the very beginning of Book 1. "Odysseus alone was prevented from returning to the home and wife he longed for by that powerful goddess, the nymph Calypso, who wished him to marry her and kept him in her vaulted cave."

Athena, in her plea to her father Zeus in the presence of the assembly of the gods, stated that the wise but unlucky Odysseus had been parted for so long from all his friends and was pining on a lonely island far away in the middle of the seas. The island is described as "well wooded". Then, in Book V the messenger god Hermes meets Calypso in her great cavern.

"The cave was sheltered by a verdant copse of alders, aspens, and fragrant cypresses, which was the roosting-place of feathered creatures, horned owls and falcons and garrulous coughts, birds of the coast, whose daily business takes them down to the sea. Trailing round the very mouth of the cavern, a garden vine ran riot, with great bunches of ripe grapes; while from four separate but neighbouring springs four crystal rivulets were trained to run this way and that; and in soft meadows on either side the iris and the parsley flourished."

Calypso was persuaded by Hermes to allow her unwilling guest to leave her. She even provided him with the tools and timber to construct his own

raft. She took him to "the farthest part of the island, where the trees grew tall, alders and poplars and firs that shot up to the sky."

It is at the end of Book XII, in conclusion of Odysseus's long narration of his wanderings to his hosts, the Phaeacian king and his wife, that he tells us how he had reached Ogygia. After the episode of Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus, alone, had drifted bestride a great log, rowing with his hands.

"Nine days of drifting followed; but in the night of the tenth the gods washed me up on the isle of Ogygia, the home of the fair Calypso, that formidable goddess with a woman's voice; and she received me kindly and looked after me. But why go again through all this? Only yesterday I told you and your noble consort the whole story here in your house, and it goes against the grain with me to repeat a tale already plainly told."

Although consisting of a group of four islands, Malta has always been considered and known as an island, so one should not take the discrepancy suggested by the adjective "lonely" too far. On the other hand, as a group the Maltese islands are the "loneliest," the ones furthest away from the mainland and, certainly the most central in the Mediterranean sea. It is, therefore, very difficult to think of a better candidate for the identification of Ogygia than the Malta group of islands as a whole, or one of the group.

The identification of Malta (or Gozo) with Calypso causes certainly the least problems in terms of geography and environment. Homer depicts the island Ogygia as a far away island surrounded by water, "where the navel of the sea is". So far, the correspondence is perfect. The epithet that raises some doubt is that which describes Calypso's island as well-wooded, and "full of poplar, cypress and... trees, and fields of violets and selinus", as well as "rich in water", where four springs flowed in four directions.

Although Malta today cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as rich in water, it should be remembered that in prehistoric times, when the island was not covered by the present conurbation, more water flowed in springs gushing out from the interface between the Upper Coralline stratum and the clay one below it. Were it not so, the flourishing agricultural economy, which rendered possible the efflorescence of the complex temple culture, would not have been possible.

#### d) *The Laestrygonian Land*

A new identification, with the land of the Laestrygonians, has been added more recently.<sup>27</sup> In Book X, after being dismissed by Aeolus, Odysseus and his men had to row their ships away from the latter's island.

"For six days we forged ahead, never lying up even at night, and on the seventh we came to Telepylus, Lamus' stronghold in the Laestrygonian land, where shepherds bringing in their flocks at night hail and are answered by their fellows driving out at dawn. For in this land nightfall and morning tread so closely on each other's

heels... Here we found an excellent harbour, closed in on all sides by an unbroken ring of precipitous cliffs, with two headlands facing each other at the mouth so as to leave only a narrow channel in between. ... (W)agons bringing timber from the high mountains to the settlement.”

The Laestrygonians were huge men, “more like giants than men.” Odysseus escaped with only the men of his ship and eventually reached “the island of Aeaëa, the home of the beautiful Circe”. After this they came to “the frontiers of the world” where Odysseus went down to the underworld.

The most suggestive elements in this identification are the close correspondence of Homer’s harbour to the harbours on either side of the present city of Valletta, and the presence of impressive megalithic temples in the region surrounding the Grand Harbour, which recall the huge stones hurled by the gigantic Laestrygonians on Odysseus’s ships. However, the rest is completely different: there are no mountains in Malta, and there the night is always long enough to separate one day from the next by a minimum of seven hours. This identification is, therefore, hardly credible.

### **The archaeological evidence**

Where does this lead us in historical terms? In the first place, even if Malta (or Gozo for that matter) were indeed the island on which Odysseus was shipwrecked and spent seven years of his *nostos*, what would it suggest? It certainly would not prove that Malta was inhabited by Greeks at the time of the Trojan wars, although another Hellenistic poet, Lycophron, wrote of a group of Greek refugees from that war settling on Malta.<sup>28</sup> If anything, it could possibly reflect a historical reality in which the Maltese islands were somehow within the cultural or commercial sphere of the Mycenaean world, the world of the Homeric poems. For this there exists some archaeological, albeit not terribly specific or abundant, evidence.

The most convincing archaeological evidence of a connection with the Mycenaean world comes from a fragment of a Mycenaean cup found in the Bronze Age fortified village of Borg in-Nadur. It is probably Late Helladic IIIb and dated c. 1350 BC.<sup>29</sup> On its own, the cup does not go a long way to prove a Mycenaean connection; it could have found its way to Malta indirectly through some Sicilian intermediary. Indeed, Sicily enjoys a strong literary tradition of Mycenaean contacts as well as settlements; and archaeology has provided corroborative evidence for it.<sup>30</sup> On her part, Malta had strong trading relations with Sicily, precisely in the *Borg in-Nadur* phase (c. 1500-700 BC), and Maltese ceramic products were exported to, or reproduced in, that island.<sup>31</sup>

So it could be that the memory of a Mycenaean settlement (like that suggested by Odysseus’s seven-years’ stay and Lycophrons’ settlement of Greek heroes), or of a trading post, in Malta survived in the oral tradition of the Homeric lays and was then transmitted to us by Hellenistic scholarly literature. Whether Malta was on a direct Mycenaean commercial route or



whether products reached the island occasionally by an indirect route through Sicily, it is not yet possible to establish. What can be said for certain is that the Maltese Bronze Age people had some cultural aspects in common with the Mycenaean centres. The *Tarxien Cemetery* people venerated discoid clay idols which also seem to occur in Mycenaean contexts,<sup>32</sup> though one has to make allowance for an apparent chronological precedence of the Maltese idols over the Mycenaean ones. Then, the *Borg in-Nadur* people lived in strongly fortified villages the defence works of which were built of massive, polygonal blocks of stone in a structural technique known as Cyclopean or Pelasgic, which is also characteristic of Mycenaean defensive works.<sup>33</sup>

The above archaeological evidence in favour of a close Homeric association cannot be claimed to be overwhelming, far from it. However, it is not negligible, either. It is a nucleus that, together with the ancient literary tradition, encourages us to search for more because in archaeology, while serendipity is most often the order of the day, persistent search reaps rewarding harvests.

#### Appendix – the ancient sources (other than Homer)

##### *Callimachus*, Frag. 524:

The little islet of Calypso – Gaudos.

##### *Strabo*, I, 44.

Apollodoros, however, siding with Erathostenes and his school, criticises Callimachus, because, though a *grammaticus*, Callimachus names Gaudos and Corcyra (as the islands) round which he says the wanderings of Odysseus had taken place – contrary to Homer's plan and the *exoceanismus* of the Homeric places. Yet, if the wanderings did not take place anywhere, and the story has been completely invented by Homer, then the criticism is fair; or if they had taken place, but around different regions, then Apollodoros should tell us straightaway where, thus correcting at the same time Callimachus's mistake. Since Homer's story cannot convincingly be said to be wholly fictitious, as we have shown above, and since no other regions are shown to command greater credibility, Callimachus might be absolved from censure.<sup>34</sup>

##### *Strabo*, VII, 299

Apollodoros also criticises those who maintain that the wanderings of Odysseus in Homer's account took place around Sicily; for in that case, (he says) they should say that the wanderings did take place there, but that the poet (Homer) placed them in the ocean for the sake of mythology; the others can be excused, but certainly not Callimachus: he pretends to be a *grammaticus* and says that Gaudos is the island of Calypso and Corcyra Scheria.<sup>35</sup>

## References

- 1 See, for example, the collection of poems entitled *Xibkatuliss* by Daniel Massa.
- 2 G. Patroni, *Commenti Mediterranei all'Odissea di Omero* (Milan 1950) [hereafter Patroni, *Commenti*]; H.-H. & A. Wolf, *Der Weg des Odysseus. Tunis-Malta-Italien in den Augen Homers* (Tübingen 1968) [hereafter Wolf, *Der Weg*]. See also J. Busuttill, "The isle of Calypso - Gozo?" *Journal of the Faculty of Arts [Malta]* VI, 2 (1975) 218-220.
- 3 V. Bérard, *Les Navigations d'Ulysse*, III, *Calypso et la Mer d'Atlantide* (Paris 1929) [hereafter Bérard, *Les Navigations*]; E. Bradford, *Ulysses Found* (London 1963).
- 4 J. Quintin, *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* (Lyons 1536) [hereafter Quintin, *Insulae Melitae*].
- 5 V. Borg, "Girolamo Manduca: his life and works" *Melita Historica* VII,3 (1978), 237-257.
- 6 N[ational]. L[ibrary]. M[alta]. Bibliotheca Ms. nos: 25, ff. 177-208; 165, ff. 95-110; 644, ff. 191-221.
- 7 N.L.M. Bibliotheca Ms. 25, ff. 23, 180. It is uncertain whether Manduca is here referring to the old "saline", therefore Mellieha, or the new ones at Salina.
- 8 G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta* (Malta 1647).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 139-148.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 11 Ph. Clüver, *Sicilia Antiqua* (Leiden 1619) [hereafter Clüver, *Sicilia Antiqua*].
- 12 A. Bonanno, "The tradition of an ancient Greek colony in Malta" *Hyphen [Malta]* IV,1 (1983) [hereafter Bonanno, *Tradition*] 1-17.
- 13 Clüver, *Sicilia Antiqua*, 430-1.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 445-7.
- 15 Quintin, *Insulae Melitae*, ff. B3<sup>r</sup>-B4<sup>v</sup>.
- 16 A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities* (Malta 1882) 77-78; *Id. Frammento Critico della Storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romana e Bisantina, Musulmana e Normanna-Aragonese delle Isole di Malta* (Malta 1899) 60-61.
- 17 J. Houel, *Voyage Pittoresque des Iles de Sicile, de Lipari et de Malte*, vol. IV (Paris 1787) 114-117; O. Bres, *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur Malte* (Paris 1799) 12, note 1.
- 18 G. D'Ippolito, "Malta nell'Odissea? Considerazioni sulla geografia omerica" *KOKALOS XXII-XXIII* (1976-1977) vol.1 [hereafter D'Ippolito, *Malta*], 400-419.
- 19 O. Schneider (ed.), *Callimachea*, II (Leipzig 1873) 672-673, frag. 524; R. Pfeiffer (ed.), *Callimachus* (Oxford 1949) (reprinted 1965) 355-356, frag. 470.
- 20 W.W. Hyde, *Ancient Greek Mariners* (Oxford 1947) 86.
- 21 D'Ippolito, *Malta*, 400.
- 22 S. Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London 1897); L.G. Pocock, *The Sicilian Origin of the Odyssey. A Study of the Topographical Evidence* (Wellington, New Zealand, 1957).
- 23 Bérard, *Les Navigations*.
- 24 P. Brydone, *A Tour through Sicily and Malta* (London 1780) I, 216-217.
- 25 Patroni, *Commenti*.
- 26 Wolf, *Der Weg*.
- 27 G. Sluga Messina, "Malta e Omero" in A. Fradkin Anati and E. Anati, *Missione a Malta* (Milan 1988), 183-191.
- 28 A. Bonanno, "Lycophron and Malta", *Miscellanea di studi classici in onore di Eugenio Manni*, (Rome 1979) 273-276; Bonanno, *Tradition*.
- 29 W. *The Mycenaean* (London 1964) [hereafter Taylour, *Mycenaean*] 106; J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: a Survey* (London 1971), 17, 227, fig. 42, pl. 32,6.
- 30 Taylour, *Mycenaean*, 149, 159-162, 168-169; L. Bernabò Brea, "Eolie, Sicilia e Malta nell'Età del Bronzo" *KOKALOS XXII-XXIII* (1976-1977) [hereafter Bernabò Brea, *Eolie*] 33-99.
- 31 L. Bernabò Brea, "Malta and the Mediterranean" *Antiquity*, XXXIV (1960) 134; Bernabò Brea, *Eolie*, 67-82, 92-99.
- 32 J.D. Evans, *Malta* (London 1959) 175-176; 1971: 161, pls. 56-57.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 185; 1971: 14-16, pl.1,2-3; Taylour *Mycenaean*, 110-112).
- 34 H. Berger, *Die Geographischen Fragmente des Eratosthenes* (Amsterdam 1964) 26.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 26.