

---

# THE TRADITION OF AN ANCIENT GREEK COLONY IN MALTA

**Anthony Bonanno**

---

The persistent tradition of a Greek colonization of the Maltese Islands in ancient times was inspired mainly by ancient literary allusions. These are basically: 1) the identification of the Homeric island of Ogygia, Calypso's refuge, with Malta; 2) the reference in the Greek poet Lycophron to the settlement in Malta of a group of Greek warriors on their return home from the Trojan war; 3) the ties of friendship between the Maltese and Phalaris, the Greek tyrant of Agrigento, revealed in three of a group of letters attributed to him; 4) the mythical reign of a king of Malta, named Battus, homonymous of another Greek king historically associated with the foundation of the Greek colony of Cyrene in North Africa; 5) Thucydides' inclusion of 'the small islands' with that part of Sicily which, after an alleged Phoenician domination, was colonized by the Greeks.

This theory appeared to receive confirmation from numerous archaeological objects found in these islands which showed Greek characteristics or bore inscriptions in the Greek language.

## LITERARY EVIDENCE

For this reason, although Quintinus cannot be considered the inventor or originator of this particular tradition (as he is of other traditions concerning Maltese ancient history),<sup>1</sup> because he did not write specifically of a Greek domination of Malta, still he sowed the first seeds which were to germinate in the works dealing with Maltese antiquities in the following century. He did so by failing to question the historical value of the legendary reign of a Maltese Battus and of the apocryphal connection with Phalaris (both of which he mentions in his description of Malta ) and by reproducing a Greek inscription and a Maltese coin both containing the Greek version of the name of the Maltese people (MELITAION).<sup>2</sup>

The first writer to advocate this theory of a Greek settlement in Malta was the German geographer and antiquarian Philipp Clüver in his book on ancient Sicily published in 1619.<sup>3</sup> Initially Clüver appears convinced that the Phoenicians, hav-

- 
1. See A. Bonanno, "Quintinus and the location of the temple of Hercules at Marsaxlokk," *Melita Historica*, VIII, 3 (1982) (in the press).
  2. J. Quintinus, *Insulae Melitae descriptio ex commentariis rerum quotidianarum*, Lyons 1536, ff. A3v-A4v, B1v; re-edited and translated in H.C.R. Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536)*, Malta 1980, pp. 18-21, 26-27.
  3. Ph. Cluverius, *Sicilia antiqua; cum minoribus insulis ei adjacentibus; item Sardinia et Corsica*, Leiden 1619. T. Fazellus, *De rebus siculis decades duae*, Palermo 1558, pp.10-12, following closely in the footsteps of Quintinus, had also avoided commenting on a Greek colonisation of Malta.

ing occupied Malta even before the Trojan war when they ousted the Phoenicians, continued to do so until the time of Skylax (around 350 B.C.) and Diodorus Siculus (first century B.C.) both of whom declare Malta Phoenician or Carthaginian.<sup>4</sup> But after citing the passage from Lycophron's *Alexandra*, in which a group of Greek warriors on their homeward journey is said to have settled in Malta soon after the sack of Troy, he seems to change his mind. Admitting that Lycophron was a poet and could thus be inventing new Greek colonies he seeks surer evidence elsewhere. The possibility of a Greek settlement, albeit of a much later date than that suggested by Lycophron, appeared to be strengthened by the ties of friendship between the Maltese and Phalaris, the Greek sixth century tyrant of Akragas, implied in the letters allegedly written by the latter.<sup>5</sup>

To support this view Clüver cites the ancient marble inscription and the coin "de quibus ita tradit Ioannes Quintinus Heduus..."<sup>6</sup> The ivory statuettes of Victory stolen by Verres from the sanctuary of the goddess Juno in Malta could not, in Clüver's opinion, be other than Greek.<sup>7</sup> Even Diodorus Melitensis mentioned by the orator Cicero in the same context was Greek, as well as the precious silver cups he took such pains in saving from the rapacious pillages of Verres.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in the Roman assault of 218 B.C. Malta with its city and Carthaginian garrison could not have been given up (*traditur* is the verb used by the historian Livy<sup>9</sup>) other than by the Greek population of the city.<sup>10</sup>

The German scholar's conclusion after considering these and other arguments was that Skylax and Diodorus Siculus were anachronistic in bringing the Phoenicio-Carthaginian occupation of Malta down to their own times, while Lycophron was exaggerating the opposite way by taking the Greek colonisation of the island up to the time of the sack of Troy. A similar transposition in time and space was, according to Clüver, Ovid's story of the hospitality offered by Battus, Greek king of Malta, to Anna, sister of Dido. Both legends, however, must have been inspired by the awareness of a Greek colonization of Malta.<sup>11</sup> As to the *barbaroi* mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles in connection with St. Paul's shipwreck on Malta,<sup>12</sup> these would have to be Punic, either survivors from the First Punic war or returned refugees after the Second or Third Punic war. These

---

4. Cluverius, pp.430-431. There were several authors by the name of Skylax. The earliest one, mentioned by Herodotus, lived in the fifth century B.C. but it appears that the *Periplus*, which contains the reference to Malta, was written a few years before the reign of Alexander (mid-4th century B.C.): K. Müller (ed.), *Geographi Graeci Minores*, vol. I, Paris 1855 (reprinted 1965) pp.xxvii-li; J. Busuttill, "The Periplus of the Mediterranean", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Royal University of Malta*, III, no.4 (1968) pp.320-322. It is obvious, on the other hand, that Diodorus (V, 12, 1-4) was anachronistic; by his time Malta had been under the Romans for more than a century.

5. Cluverius, pp.431-432. On Lycophron and Phalaris see below.

6. *Ibid.*, p.432.

7. Cicero, *Verr.* II, 4, 103-104.

8. Cicero, *Verr.* II, 4, 38-39.

9. Livy, XXI, 51.

10. Cluverius, pp.432-434.

11. *Ibid.*, pp.434-435.

12. Acts of the Apostles, XXVIII,1-11.

lived in the countryside whereas the Greeks populated the town.<sup>13</sup>

The last section of Clüver's chapter on Malta is taken up by a discussion of 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<sup>15</sup> and Quintin's account of the fertility of Malta<sup>16</sup> and finds further proof in support of his identification in the geographical location of the same island given by Homer elsewhere in the *Odyssey*. In book VII Ogygia is said to lie far out in the open sea and in Book I it is placed "where the navel of the sea is".<sup>17</sup>

The identification of Gozo, Malta's sister island, with the Homeric island of Calypso (which is taken for granted by the local people) is not a modern 'invention' but goes back to the third century B.C. writer Callimachus (c.305-245 B.C.).<sup>18</sup> Callimachus was an Alexandrian *grammaticus* and one of the most representative writers of Alexandrian poetry of the early period. Most of his works have gone lost but he is often quoted by other ancient grammarians. Besides, the papyrological discoveries in Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have filled many gaps in his works. This reference to Gozo survives in a fragment which is classified as *incertae sedis*, i.e. it is not known to which of Callimachus' works it belonged.<sup>19</sup>

Clüver adopts Callimachus's identification, substituting Malta for Gozo. Abela<sup>20</sup> follows suit and quotes also the authority of Geronimo Manduca, the Maltese Jesuit, who had gone even further and, in his description of the caves of Mellieha, in particular the crypt consecrated to Our Lady, had written of a "palatium miro ordine in speluncis excitum ex Homericis notis, recenter deprehensum a Philippo Cluverio in descriptionis Melitae, & Siciliae".<sup>21</sup> The tradition of this Homeric connection with Malta was kept alive by numerous other writers, both Maltese and foreign,<sup>22</sup> but several other islands were proposed

---

13. Cluverius, p.443.

14. *Ibid.*, pp.445-447.

15. Homer, *Odyssey*, V, 11.55-75.

16. Quintus, ff.B3r-B4v; Vella, *Earliest Description*, pp.30-39. Cluverius cites also Fazellus pp. 10-12.

17. Homer, *Odyssey*, VII, 1.244; I, 11.50-51

18. It is thought that its origin might be taken as far as Hesiod: G. D'Ippolito, "Malta nell' 'Odisea'? Considerazioni sulla geografia omerica," *KOKALOS*, XXII-XXIII (1976-1977) vol.1, p.407.

19. O. Schneider (ed.), *Callimachea*, Leipzig 1870-1873, vol.II, pp.672-673, frag. 524; R. Pfeiffer (ed.), *Callimachus*, Oxford 1949 (reprinted 1965) pp.355-356, frag.470 Callimachus' identification of Ogygia with Gozo was criticized by a contemporary Hellenistic poet and grammarian, Apollodoros, who defended the position taken by the geographer Eratosthenes: Strabo, I, 44; VII, 299, see J. Busuttill, "The Isle of Calypso-Gozo?", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Royal University of Malta*, VI, no.2 (1975) pp.218-220.

20. G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta*, Malta 1647, pp.119, 139, 158-160. The text is reproduced *verbatim* in G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, vol.I, Malta 1772, pp.431, 469-478.

21. G. Manduca, *Historia de Sancto Publico Melitae Principe*, NLM Biblioteca Mss. 25, 165, 644.

22. For some bibliography see J. Houel, *Voyage Pittoresque des Isles ae Sicile, de Lipari et de Malte*, vol.IV, Paris 1787, pp.114-117; O. Bres, *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur Malte*, Paris 1799, p.12, note 1; A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities*, Malta 1882, pp.77-78; *Id.*, *Frammento Critico della Storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romana*

by other scholars and the more recent trend among scholars of authority is to exclude specific real geographical localities in the interpretation of topographical features in the *Odyssey*.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, even if Malta (or Gozo) were indeed the island on which Odysseus was shipwrecked and spent seven years of his *nostos*, it would not prove in any way that Malta was inhabited by Greeks; if anything it would mean that the island was under the control of a Greek-speaking nymph, i.e. Calypso. And, to move from the legendary to the historical, it could possibly reflect a historical reality whereby the Maltese islands were somehow inside the cultural or commercial sphere of the Mycenaean civilization, for which there exists some archaeological evidence, albeit very hazy.<sup>24</sup>

The connection with the Mycenaean world at this particular point in time is further strengthened by Lycophron's brief but clear reference to the settlement in Malta of a group of Greeks who, after the siege and destruction of Troy – 1250 B.C. is the approximate date assigned by modern archaeological investigation to the latter event – were being prevented by the gods from reaching their respective homelands. The passage in question, which is found in the *Alexandra*, a long prophecy foretelling the mishaps that were to beset Greeks and Trojans alike after Paris's abduction of the beautiful Helen, runs as follows:<sup>25</sup>

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 Sisyphos and the renowned temple of the Maiden Longatis, where Heloros emits its cool stream.

The geographical landmarks given by the poet leave no doubt as to the identification of Melite with Malta, although writers supporting an identification with the Adriatic Meleda have not been lacking.<sup>26</sup> From the context of the passage it also appears certain that the settlers in Malta were Greek, not Trojan.<sup>27</sup>

Although with Clüver one is reluctant to attribute too much historical value to Lycophron's allusion to Malta one cannot ignore the recent, and not so recent, reappraisals of a number of mythical geographical allusions which are similarly the fruit of Alexandrian scholarship. Although there is yet no archaeological confirmation of the Trojan origins of Rome itself in Latium, as advocated by Virgil's *Aeneid*, the reference in the same epic to a Trojan settlement at Segesta in

---

*e Bisantina, Musulmana e Normanno-Aragonese delle Isole di Malta*, Malta 1899, pp.60-61. Caruana himself does not accept the tradition.

23. See D'Ippolito, *Malta nell'Odissea?*, pp.400-419.

24. See *infra*.

25. Lycophron, *Alexandra*, 11.1027-1033.

26. For a discussion of this see A. Bonanno, "Lycophron and Malta", *Miscellanea in Onore di Eugenio Manni*, Roma 1979, pp.273-276.

27. *Ibid.*, p.276 and C. von Holzinger (ed.), *Lycophron's Alexandra*, Leipzig 1895, p.317. J. Busuttil, "Lycophron and Malta", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Royal University of Malta*, VI, no.2 (1975) pp.223-225, followed by E. Manni, "Fra Malta e Sicilia: Problemi religiosi di età prepunica", *KOKALOS*, XXII-XXIII (1976-1977) p.122, is of the opposite view.

Western Sicily by a number of Aeneas's companions has been finding increasing corroboration from recent archaeological discoveries, which seem to provide some linguistic evidence for an Anatolian, that is possibly Trojan, provenance of the language spoken there in later historical times.<sup>28</sup>

The historical value of Lycophron's reference is, therefore, similar to that of the possible identification of the island with the Homeric Ogygia. It could be a vague recollection of a real historical situation in the late Maltese Bronze Age, that is in the last few hundred years before the eighth century when the first sure evidence of a Phoenician presence in Malta occurs. Although there is already some archaeological evidence which may be brought forward in support of a Greek (i.e. Mycenaean) element in Malta at this time, it needs much more unequivocal data which can only be acquired by further archaeological investigation.<sup>29</sup>

It is uncertain to which period the episode of Battus's hospitality to Anna should be made to refer. The traditional date of the foundation of Carthage by Dido (also known as Elissa) is the late ninth century (814 B.C.).<sup>30</sup> When Dido died her sister Anna was forced to flee from Carthage and sought refuge with Battus in Malta from where she left for Rome a couple of years later.<sup>31</sup> This would mean that Battus was king of Malta towards the end of the ninth century. Virgil, however, dedicated a whole book of his epic on the legendary origins of Rome to the romance between the same Dido and Aeneas, the hero of the epic, who stopped at Carthage on his way to Latium where he was destined to found the Roman nation.<sup>32</sup> Aeneas and his companions were also refugees, this time of Trojan stock, from the siege of Troy. Virgil, therefore, placed Dido's reign around 1250 B.C. Consequently even Battus was king of Malta at that time. As a matter of fact even Ovid makes Anna a contemporary of Aeneas because in Latium she is given hospitality by the latter before throwing herself into the Tiber. But both instances appear to be anachronisms introduced by the Latin poet Naevius after the First Punic War, and as such should not be taken seriously.

Quintinus did not pronounce himself on the ethnic origin of the Maltese Battus.<sup>33</sup> Though very likely of African origin the name 'Battus' is mostly associated with the founder of the Greek colony of Cyrene in modern Libya (631 B.C.) and with the successive kings of that city.<sup>34</sup> Clüver took this as further proof of a Greek colony in Malta, of which Ovid must have been aware and has transposed it to the time of the Trojan war.<sup>35</sup> Abela, however, disagreed with Clüver and deem-

28. R. Ambrosini, "Italica o anatolica la lingua dei graffiti di Segesta?", *Studi e Saggi Linguistici*, VIII (1968); V.I. Georgiev, *The Elymian Language*, Innsbruck 1974; V. Tusa, "Frammenti di ceramica con graffiti da Segesta", *KOKALOS*, XXI (1975); L. Natoli, "Segesta", *KOKALOS*, XXII-XXIII (1976-1977) vol.II,2, pp.779-780, previous bibliography in notes 1-3.

29. See *infra*.

30. Timaeus of Tauromenion: K.&T. Müller (ed.), *Fragmenta Historicum Graecarum*, Paris 1853, vol.I, p.197; Livy, *Epit. Libri LI*; Cicero, *De Republica*, II, 23,42; and others.

31. Ovid, *Fasti*, III, 567-578.

32. Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.

33. Quintinus, ff.A3v-A4r; Vella, *Earliest Description*, pp.18-22.

34. See Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie*, III,1, 1897, pp.146-149, s.v. 'Battos'. See also Bonanno, *Quintinus* (in the press) note 5.

35. Cluverius, pp.434-435.

ed Battus Phoenician.<sup>36</sup>

The ancient literary allusions discussed so far are all extracts from poetry and as such their historical value is questionable. But the fourth ancient source quoted for the first time by Clüver to support his contention of a Greek colony in Malta is a historian, namely Thucydides. Thucydides is respected even by modern standards as one of the most, if not the most, reliable historian of the Classical world. His *History of the Peloponnesian War* was concerned, however, with contemporary or quasi-contemporary history and rarely does he make digressions into Greek history of previous centuries as he does in this case. Furthermore, the evidence extracted by Clüver from the sentence in question is of a purely negative nature, a classic *argumentum ex silentio*. Thucydides' brief comment, which is of paramount importance in the context of Greek and Phoenician colonisation in Sicily is the following:<sup>37</sup>

The Phoenicians at one time had settlements all around the island; they fortified headlands on the sea-coast and settled in the small islands adjacent, for the sake of trading with the Sicels. But when the Hellenes began to find their way by sea to Sicily in greater numbers they withdrew from the larger part of the island, and forming a union established themselves in Motya, Soloeis and Panormus, in the neighbourhood of the Elymi.

In Clüver's view Malta and Gozo should be numbered among the 'small islands' lying around Sicily mentioned in the first sentence as being occupied by the Phoenicians. In fact, always according to Clüver, they had been so since the latter had taken over from the Phoenicians before the Trojan war. But at this crucial point in the history of Sicily when that island was colonised by the Greeks (as from the second half of the eighth century B.C.) the only Phoenician possessions in the area are indicated by Thucydides in the second sentence to be Motya, Solus and Panormus. Clüver notices the significant absence of the 'small islands' and concludes that "immediately after their first passage into Sicily the Greeks ousted the Phoenicians from Malta".<sup>38</sup> Abela follows closely on Clüver quoting his very words and concludes that the Greeks started to come to Sicily and Malta in 735 B.C. (foundation of Naxos, the first Greek colony in Sicily).<sup>39</sup>

The last ancient reference which gave sustenance to the view of a Greek permanence in Malta consists of three from a collection of letters ascribed to Phalaris, the notorious tyrant of Akragas between 570 and 555 B.C.<sup>40</sup> In one of the letters, addressed to the citizens of Segesta, another Sicilian city, Phalaris speaks of the very friendly relations between himself and the Maltese. The other two letters are addressed to the people of Malta: the first one deals with a sum of money the

36. Abela, p.196; Ciantar, p.543. Followed by E. Coleiro, "Malta nelle letterature classiche", *Missione Archeologica a Malta, Rapporto Preliminare 1963*, Roma 1964, p.34. Cfr. J. Busuttil, "Anna and Malta", *Melita Historica*, V, no.3 (1970) pp.251-253.

37. Thucydides, VI, 2, 6.

38. Cluverius, p.432

39. Abela, pp.164-166; Ciantar, pp.479-482.

40. See Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie*, XIX,2, 1938, pp.1649-1652, s.v. 'Phalaris'.

tyrant had been persuaded to lend to the Maltese and the second advises the Maltese to refrain from praising him. The artificiality of the arguments in these two letters and their rhetorical language reveal immediately, even to the non-specialist reader, the literary affectation of the author and the oratorical nature of the exercise. The whole collection of Phalaris's letters, in fact, has long been recognized to be a forgery, an academic exercise of a second century A.D. rhetorician.<sup>41</sup>

Quintinus, nevertheless, besides accepting uncritically the genuineness of the letters, confuses them with two chapters dedicated to Phalaris in the Latin writer Lucian.<sup>42</sup> He uses this evidence to extol the fame of Malta in the very early years of its history "when Rome had hardly been founded properly". Then Malta "grew prosperous by means of its friendships with kings and tyrants only a few centuries after its foundation". For Clüver, however, the letters addressed to the Maltese constitute very important evidence for a Greek population in Malta at that time because if the Maltese had been Phoenician or Carthaginian they would not have sought financial aid from the Greek tyrant when there was continuous warfare between these two powers.<sup>43</sup>

Abela assumed that the letters added certainty to the belief in a Greek colony and reproduced their full text. He even believed that the Maltese as a sign of friendship with the tyrant constructed a castle in Malta and named it *Gorghenti* after the Greek name *Akragas* of his city. The remains of this castle, consisting of large stones, were still visible on a high rock above the garden bearing the same name (present *Girgenti*).<sup>44</sup>

For the next two centuries these ancient literary references were accepted by most writers of Maltese ancient history who were thus convinced that Malta had once been colonised by the Greeks.<sup>45</sup> A universally accepted tradition was thus established which was challenged for the first time in 1896 by Antonio Emanuele Caruana. Caruana was a Maltese linguist and philologist and is better known for his historical novel *Inez Farrug*. In the chapter entitled "La presunta dominazione greca" of his work on the origin of Maltese, he concluded that Malta was never dominated by the Greeks and explained that the archaeological remains and inscriptions showing Greek characters and typologies were due to the Hellenistic influence of later centuries, influences which were also identifiable in Carthage itself.<sup>46</sup> This was a very courageous stand and Caruana provoked a hot controversy in the Maltese learned milieu and an acrimonious

41. R. Bentley, *Dissertations upon the Epistles of Phalaris*, London 1699. See J. Busuttill, "The letters of Phalaris to the Maltese", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Royal University of Malta*, III, no.3(1967) pp.220-223.

42. Quintinus, f.A4; Vella, *Earliest Description*, pp.20-21, note 69.

43. Cluverius, pp.431-432.

44. Abela, pp.183-185; Ciantar, pp.511-515.

45. G.A. Ciantar, *Dissertazione sopra alcune Anticaglie di Malta*, NLM Biblioteca Ms. 166, f.30r; F. Agius de Soldanis, *Il Gozo Antico e Moderno e Sacro-Profano*, NLM Biblioteca Ms. 145, ff.59-60; O. Bres. *Recherches*, pp.11-15, 20-21; *Idem*, *Malta Antica Illustrata co' Monumenti e coll' Istoria*, Roma 1816, pp.180-230: with previous bibliography.

46. A.E. Caruana, *Sull'Origine della Lingua Maltese*, *Studio Storico, Etnografico e Filologico*, Malta 1896, pp.97-188. The work had been published piecemeal in *Il Portafoglio Maltese* of 1894-1895. Surprisingly his name does not appear in R. Mifsud Bonnici's, *Dizżjunarju Bio-Bibliografiku*, Malta 1960.

reaction from his namesake, Annetto Antonio Caruana, who was then the Librarian and a well-known archaeologist.<sup>47</sup>

A.A. Caruana had made his position very clear on the matter when, in 1882, he wrote that Malta received a Greek Ionic settlement about 700 B.C. which was joined by another group, this time Doric, a little before it was taken over by the Carthaginians in 480 B.C. The Cathaginians allowed the Greek inhabitants to stay and later on the Romans, after their conquest of the island, "lived in perfect accord with the natives, both of Phoenician and Greek stock".<sup>48</sup> In his historical critique of 1899, then, he assumed the responsibility of confronting A.E. Caruana's 'peremptory' denial of the presence of ancient Greeks and the existence of a Greek autonomy in Malta.<sup>49</sup> Sparing no kind words in his criticism of his adversary, the archaeologist, without admitting it, betrays a markedly altered position. He rebuts the identification of Malta with the Homeric Ogygia (as well as Hyperia)<sup>50</sup> and lays bare the chronological confusion implied by Ovid's reference to a Maltese Battus.<sup>51</sup> He discards Lycophron's passage by following Tzetzis's identification of that Melite with the Illyrian Meleda<sup>52</sup> and reiterates the falsity of the letters attributed to Phalaris.<sup>53</sup> But he still clings to the idea of a Greek colony<sup>54</sup> while admitting that it was of a small size (*sottile*)<sup>55</sup> and that historians had exaggerated the numerical importance of this colony.<sup>56</sup> He also admits that Thucydides' passage does not constitute positive evidence of a Greek settlement in the eighth century,<sup>57</sup> and suggests a very peaceful Greek infiltration which was concerned mostly with the establishment of small farmsteads.<sup>58</sup>

It was thus at the end of the nineteenth century that the centuries-old 'historical' tradition of an ancient Greek domination of Malta was seriously questioned and effectively undermined. The decisive blow was delivered by A.E. Caruana who, with his convincing and well-founded arguments, dragged behind him his contemporary and rival A.A. Caruana (without the latter ever admitting it). The earliest authoritative accounts of Maltese ancient history in twentieth century, *Malta in Ancient Times* by the German Mayr<sup>59</sup> and *Roman Malta* by the English archaeologist Ashby,<sup>60</sup> both do away with this false tradition. No serious attempt has since been made to revive it.

47. See the introduction by G. Aquilina in A.E. Caruana, *Inex Farrug*, 3rd ed., Malta 1947, pp.vii-x.

48. A.A. Caruana, *Report*, pp.77-80. The same position is maintained till as late as 1898: *Idem, Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries*, Valletta 1898, p.3.

49. *Idem, Frammento Critico*, pp.20-21, 55-56.

50. *Ibid.*, p.61.

51. *Ibid.*, pp.108-109.

52. *Ibid.*, p.128. Even in this Caruana the archaeologist follows a step behind Caruana the linguist, *Origine*, pp.106-107.

53. *Ibid.*, pp.199-200. Also in A.E. Caruana, *Origine*, pp.107-110.

54. *Ibid.*, p.127

55. *Ibid.*, pp.15, 20, 129.

56. *Ibid.*, p.226.

57. *Ibid.*, p.129. Also in A.E. Caruana, *Origine*, p.111.

58. A.A. Caruana, *Frammento Critico*, p.129.

59. A. Mayr, *Die Insel Malta im Altertum*, Munich 1909, pp.65-105.

60. T. Ashby, "Roman Malta", *Journal of Roman Studies*, V (1915) pp.23-25.





1. (Left) One of the pair of candelabra with bilingual inscriptions in Greek and Punic. National Museum of Archaeology, Malta, and the Louvre, Paris.  
 (Right) Engraving of the same from G.A. Ciantar's *Malta Illustrata* (1772).



2. Bronze tablet with a Greek inscription recording the granting of a *proxenia* (almost equivalent to a modern honorary consulate) to Demetrios of Syracuse by the Maltese people (c. 218-214 B.C.). Discovered in Rome in the 16th century, now in the Museo Nazionale of Naples.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Compared with that of the literary sources the discussion of the archaeological evidence is much more straightforward. The number of archaeological objects which appeared to confirm a Greek presence in Malta grew steadily from the time of Quintinus's publication to that of the heated debate between the two Caruanas. Clüver, in addition to the Greek inscription and the Maltese coin mentioned by Quintinus and Fazellus, refers to ancient *objets d'art* which, on Cicero's evidence, once formed part of the Maltese artistic heritage. These were the ivory Victory statuettes stolen by Verres from the temple of Juno and the silver cups once in the possession of Diodorus Melitensis, all of which according to Clüver must have been of Greek wormanship.<sup>61</sup>

By the time of the publication of his *Descrittione* in 1647 Abela had taken note of various other archaeological objects and remains of buildings scattered throughout the island. He acquired some of the objects for his own collection of antiquities. The items which he listed as Greek and as evidence of a Greek domination were: several coins with Greek legends;<sup>62</sup> the temple of Juno 'in Ionic architecture' which he, following Quintinus and others, placed near Castel St. Angelo;<sup>63</sup> ancient remains of a 'Castello' at Gorghenti (Girgenti, near Rabat); certain coins then occasionally found in the Maltese countryside and called *Fallari* by the Maltese (perhaps in connection with the money allegedly lent to the Maltese by Phalaris);<sup>64</sup> the Greek inscription mentioned by Quintinus, of which he reproduces also the second line;<sup>65</sup> a clay pot with a short Greek inscription;<sup>66</sup> the much longer Greek inscription on a bronze tablet discovered in Rome in the sixteenth century, which recorded a decree of *proxenia* awarded by the Maltese to a certain Demetrios from Syracuse.<sup>67</sup> Abela does not specify his reasons for illustrating two statues found in Malta (a Mercury and a Harpocrates) in this context,<sup>68</sup> but he ends this chapter on the Greeks in Malta by reporting another short inscription in Greek found inside the monastery of S. Pietro in Mdina.<sup>69</sup>

After Abela, with the increasing interest in Maltese antiquities, archaeological objects with a Greek content continued to augment in number. The well-known bilingual candelabra were included in Abela's collection within forty years of the date of publication of the *Descrittione*.<sup>70</sup> We find them described and illustrated in Ciantar's re-edition of Abela's work in which he repeats the original list of 'Greek' objects and inscriptions without adding any new ones even though he

61. Cluverius, pp.432-433.

62. Abela, pp.169-183; Ciantar pp.487-512.

63. Abela, pp.171; Ciantar, p.493.

64. Abela, p.185; Ciantar, p.514. Both items are connected with the alleged friendly relations between the Maltese and Phalaris.

65. Abela, pp.185-186; Ciantar, pp.515-517.

66. Abela, pp.186-187; Ciantar, pp.517-518.

67. Abela, pp.187-190; Ciantar, pp.518-523.

68. Abela, pp.191-193; Ciantar, pp.533-536.

69. Abela, pp.193-194; Ciantar, p.526.

70. See A. Bonanno, *Quintinus* (in the press). Cfr. Ciantar, p.527: "in 1732"; and V. Borg, "Tradizioni e documenti storici", *Missione* 1963, pp.41-51: "before 1655".

claims to have seen other 'idoletti di terra cotta con cifre Greche' and other relics of that nation found in the island.<sup>71</sup>

After Ciantar most of the historians and antiquarians who dedicated sections of their writings to the island's ancient history, like Bres, De Boisgelin, Saint Priest, Navarro and Vassallo, supported the existence of a Greek period by referring to some, or all, of the objects and monuments listed in his *Malta Illustrata*. Of these the French traveller Jean Houel deserves a special mention because in his beautiful plates he sometimes illustrates objects which have never been known to exist in Malta.<sup>72</sup> Houel also considered the square tower inside the village of Zurrieq part of a Greek house.<sup>73</sup> Another building labelled Greek by A.A. Caruana was the one he himself had excavated between Luqa and Mqabba in 1888.<sup>74</sup> Caruana gives the most extensive and exhaustive list of 'Greek' architectural monuments, tombs, sculpture, pottery, coins and inscriptions in his *Report* of 1882.<sup>75</sup> His contemporary A.E. Caruana justly criticizes him and Houel for their lack of sound critical judgement in distinguishing Greek from Roman antiquities.<sup>76</sup>

In the early twentieth century, as a result of the greater sophistication of archaeological research, archaeological data started to be sorted out in ever more correct and precise chronological compartments. Mayr in 1909 made the Roman period follow immediately upon the Phoenicio-Punic domination, excluding a Greek colonisation, and placed the archaeological monuments of a Greek typology in their proper historical content.<sup>77</sup> Ashby followed suit only a few years later.<sup>78</sup> After Ashby the history and archaeology of the Classical period in Malta was almost completely neglected and no comprehensive study of it has been published since then.

An analysis of the archaeological data which may, or may not, provide evidence for some sort of Greek presence in ancient Malta should start chronologically with the late Maltese Bronze Age since it is to that time (around 1200 B.C.) that three of the literary sources seem to date the plantation of a Greek colony in Malta. Although these literary allusions are the least reliable from the historical point of view they might possibly constitute a vague recollection of a real historical situation.

Prior to the Dorian migratory invasions of the twelfth century B.C. we do not normally speak of Greeks in the Aegean area, but of Mycenaean. But, mostly owing to the decipherment of the Mycenaean 'Linear B' script, the Mycenaean are now considered to have been proto-Greeks, of the same Indo-European stock as the later Dorians. So, it could be that the memory of a Mycenaean settlement,

---

71. Ciantar, pp.532-533. The three Greek inscriptions documented in pp.530-532 belonged, as Ciantar declared, to Late-Roman times.

72. Houel, pp.103-104, 107-110, pl.CCLXI.

73. *Ibid.*, pp.97-98, pl.CCLIX; A.A. Caruana, *Frammento Critico*, p.222.

74. A.A. Caruana, *Remains of an ancient Greek Building Discovered in Malta in February 1888*, Malta 1888; also in *American Journal of Archaeology*, 11 (1888) pp.450-454.

75. A.E. Caruana, *Report*, pp.77-164.

76. A.E. Caruana, *Origine*, p.167.

77. Mayr, *Insel Malta*, pp.65-105, especially pp.80-81.

78. Ashby, pp.24-27.



3. A *kotyle* (cup) produced in Corinth and an East Greek 'Bird' bowl probably produced in Rhodes in the second half of the VIII century B.C. found in a tomb at Ghajn Qajjet, near Rabat.





4. Front and rear views of a red-figured bell-krater produced in Attica, Greece, in the fourth century B.C. and attributed to the Louvre Painter. (National Museum of Archaeology)



or trading post, in Malta survived in the oral tradition of the Homeric lays and was then transmitted to us by Hellenistic scholarly literature.

The surest 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 B.C.<sup>79</sup> On its own the cup to which it belonged could be merely an ordinary import, albeit of a relatively high value, which may have found its way to Malta indirectly via Sicily. With Sicily, in fact, precisely in the Borg in-Nadur phase (c.1450-800 B.C.), Malta had strong trading relations, and Maltese ceramic products were exported to that island.<sup>80</sup> Even for Sicily there is a strong literary tradition of Mycenaean contacts as well as settlements, and archaeology has provided corroborative evidence to it.<sup>81</sup>

Whether Malta was on a direct Mycenaean commercial route or whether Mycenaean 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 had some cultural aspects in common with the Mycenaean centres. The Tarxien Cemetery people venerated discoid clay idols which occur also in Mycenaean contexts.<sup>82</sup> The Borg in-Nadur people lived in strongly fortified villages the defence works of which were built of massive, polygonal blocks of stone forming a structure traditionally called Cyclopean which is characteristic of Mycenaean defensive works.<sup>83</sup> It only means, however, that the island was not unaffected by this civilisation which flourished in the Aegean area but influenced the prehistoric cultures of lands beyond.

The earliest Greek archaeological objects later than the Bronze Age found in Malta consist of a few ceramic importations none of which are cited by the upholders of the Greek theory since they have been unearthed in the twentieth century. The most remarkable of these are two Proto-Corinthian cups and an East Greek (Rhodian) 'Bird' bowl, all three of which were discovered in tombs accompanied by other pottery of typically Phoenician type.<sup>84</sup> They are closely datable and consequently their dates are used to date the burials and their furniture. The skyphos from Imtarfa has been dated to the middle of the seventh century B.C.<sup>85</sup> while the kotyle and the East Greek 'Bird' bowl have been assigned

- 
79. W. Taylour, *The Mycenaean Pottery in Italy and Adjacent Areas*, Cambridge 1958, pp.79-80, pl.8,5; J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: A Survey*, London 1971, pp.17, 227, fig.42, pl.32,6. Another Mycenaean fragment was reported in the excavations at Tas-Silg: F. Mallia, in *Missione 1965*, p.50, pl.35,20.
80. L. Bernabò-Brea, "Malta and the Mediterranean", *Antiquity*, XXXIV (1960) p.134; *Id.*, "Eolie, Sicilia e Malta nell'Età del Bronzo", *KOKALOS*, XXII-XXIII (1976-1977) vol.I, pp.67-82, 92-99.
81. W. Taylour, *The Mycenaean Pottery*, pp.149, 159-162, 168-169. Bernabò-Brea, *Eolie, Sicilia e Malta*, pp.33-99; Mycenaean pottery was found in the Thapsos tombs: Evans, *Survey*, p.226.
82. J.D. Evans, *Malta*, London 1959, pp.175-176; *Id.*, *Survey*, p.161, pls.56-57; Taylour, *The Mycenaean Pottery*, p.70.
83. Evans, *Malta*, p.185; *Id.*, *Survey*, pp.14-16, pl.1, 2-3; Taylour, *The Mycenaean Pottery*, pp.110-112.
84. *Report on the Working of the Museum Department 1926/27*, p.8; J.B. Baldacchino - T.J. Dunbabin, "Rock tomb at Ghajn Qajjet, near Rabat, Malta", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, XXI (1953) pp.32-41.
85. *Museum Report 1926/27*, p.8.

to the second half of the eighth century B.C.<sup>86</sup> Besides these, other early Greek vases, albeit in a fragmentary state, have come to light on other sites.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless the fact that these vases occur singly in tombs among the much more numerous Phoenician pottery signifies that they were not the ordinary domestic utensils but treasured imported luxuries.

As archaeological evidence these early Greek vases put into question the validity of Clüver's argument *ex silentio* derived from Thucydides' passage, irrespective of the Greek historian's authority. The evidence they provide in fact proves the opposite, namely, that the Phoenician settlement in Malta can be dated to the second half of the eighth century B.C. at the earliest and that it continued to exist uninterruptedly until the island was absorbed within the Carthaginian political sphere around the sixth century B.C.<sup>88</sup>

From the eighth century onwards one also notices local Maltese imitations, in shape and painted decoration, of indisputably Greek types of pottery.<sup>89</sup> Once more these imitations occur predominantly in rock-cut tombs. Meanwhile authentic Greek imports continue to appear thus rendering the Maltese ceramic repertory of the period, especially the funerary one, richer and less monotonous. These Greek imports occur also in excavated buildings, such as the Tas-Silg sanctuary.<sup>90</sup>

Greek, or rather Hellenistic, influence on Carthaginian Malta reached its peak in the Hellenistic period (late fourth to late first century B.C.) and it can best be appraised in the architectural building programme carried out in that period at the site of Tas-Silg.<sup>91</sup> This phenomenon, it should be remembered, was not peculiar to Malta, but is paralleled in most of the other Punic centres of the Western Mediterranean, including Carthage itself.<sup>92</sup>

The majority of Greek archaeological objects and inscriptions, however, which have been used from Quintinus onwards to prove the existence of a Greek colony in Malta belong in reality to the Roman period, that is after Malta was taken over for good by the Romans in 218 B.C.

The Ivory Victory and silver cups, which on Cicero's authority once formed part of Malta's artistic heritage, were indeed most likely of Greek manufacture, but historically they are assigned to the Roman period, more precisely to the first century B.C. Clüver was, consequently, in the wrong in using them to support his argument.

As to the Maltese coins with a Greek legend, it is now generally agreed that these and all the other Maltese coins were minted after 218 B.C. when Malta was

86. Baldacchino — Dunbabin, pp.40-41; W. Culican, "Aspects of Phoenician settlement in the West Mediterranean", *Abr-Nahrain* 1 (1961) pp.36-55.

87. *Museum Report 1916/17*, p.9; T.E. Peet, "Two early Greek vases from Malta," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, XXXII (1912) pp.96-99.

88. A. Ciasca, "Malta", *L'Espansione Fenicia nel Mediterraneo* (Relazioni del Colloquio in Roma, 4-5 Maggio 1970), Roma 1971, pp.63-75.

89. See, for example, *Museum Report 1960*, pp.7,8, pl.VI; 1961, p.6, pl.VII.

90. For a few examples see *Missione 1963*, p.67, pl.17,1-2; *Missione 1964*, pp.41-47, pls.23,4, 41,1; *Missione 1965*, pp.25-45, pls.41,12-13, 27,1-5.

91. See sections on Tas-Silg in *Missione 1963-70*.

92. D. Harden, *The Phoenicians*, London 1963, pp.84-85, 199-208.



already under the Romans.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, none of the Greek inscriptions are dated prior to the Roman conquest of 218. Without mentioning those clearly referring to Imperial homage (first-third centuries A.D.) it should be observed that the decree of *proxenia* awarded to Demetrius of Syracuse by the Maltese people is dated, along with a similar decree from the people of Akragas, to the years immediately following 218 B.C., and that the bilingual inscriptions dedicated to Hercules are dated to the second century B.C.<sup>94</sup>

These and other monuments of Greek typology or character that occur within this chronological context are explained by the fact that when Malta was annexed by the Romans it was, quite logically, attached to the province of Sicily. As a result of which Malta's culture and way of life after that date was heavily influenced by the Greek element which was deeply rooted in the culture of that island due to the intensive social, cultural and commercial connections which must have existed between the two islands.<sup>95</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

This brief survey shows that the assertion that a period of Greek domination existed in Malta prior to the Roman conquest is untenable.

The archaeological evidence, supported by explicit statements of authoritative and reliable ancient writers, such as Pseudo-Skylax, Diodorus Siculus and, to a lesser degree, Cicero, proves an uninterrupted Phoenician colonization from the late eighth century to the late sixth century B.C. followed by the natural passage of the Maltese islands under the political hegemony of Carthage which lasted, again uninterruptedly, until the Roman occupation of 218 B.C.

As to the pre-Phoenician period, there appears to be a connection with the Aegean world in Mycenaean times which is suggested by the archaeological evidence and possibly corroborated by Homer's *Odyssey* and Lycophron's *Alexandra*. But this period falls under the Prehistory of the islands and within that context this connection should be regarded as a working hypothesis which offers much scope for further research on the already available material and on other data that might turn up in future field exploration.

---

93. E. Coleiro, "Ricerche numismatiche", *Missione 1964*, pp.117-127; *Id.*, "Maltese coins of the Roman period", *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 7th series XI (1971) pp.67-91; T. Gouder, "Baal Hammon and the Iconography of the ancient bronze coinage of Malta", *Scientia*, (Malta) XXX-VI, no.3 (1973) pp.1-16.

94. See *supra*. See also *I. G.*, XIV, no. 953; M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia Greca*, Roma 1967, pp.435-436, pl.226; *C.I.G.*, III, no. 5753; *I.G.*, XIV, no.600; *C.I.S.*, I,1, nos.122-122bis; M. Guzzo Amadasi, *Le Iscrizioni Fenicie e Puniche delle Colonie in Occidente*, Roma 1967, pp.15-17.

95. Ashby, pp.24-26; E. Colerio, "Rapporti di Malta con la Sicilia nell'età repubblicana: testimonianze numismatiche e letterarie", *KOKALOS XXII-XXIII* (1976-1977):pp.381-384; F.P. Rizzo, "Malta e la Sicilia in età romana. Aspetti di storia politica e costituzionale", *KOKALOS XXII-XXIII* (1976-1977) pp.196-202.

---