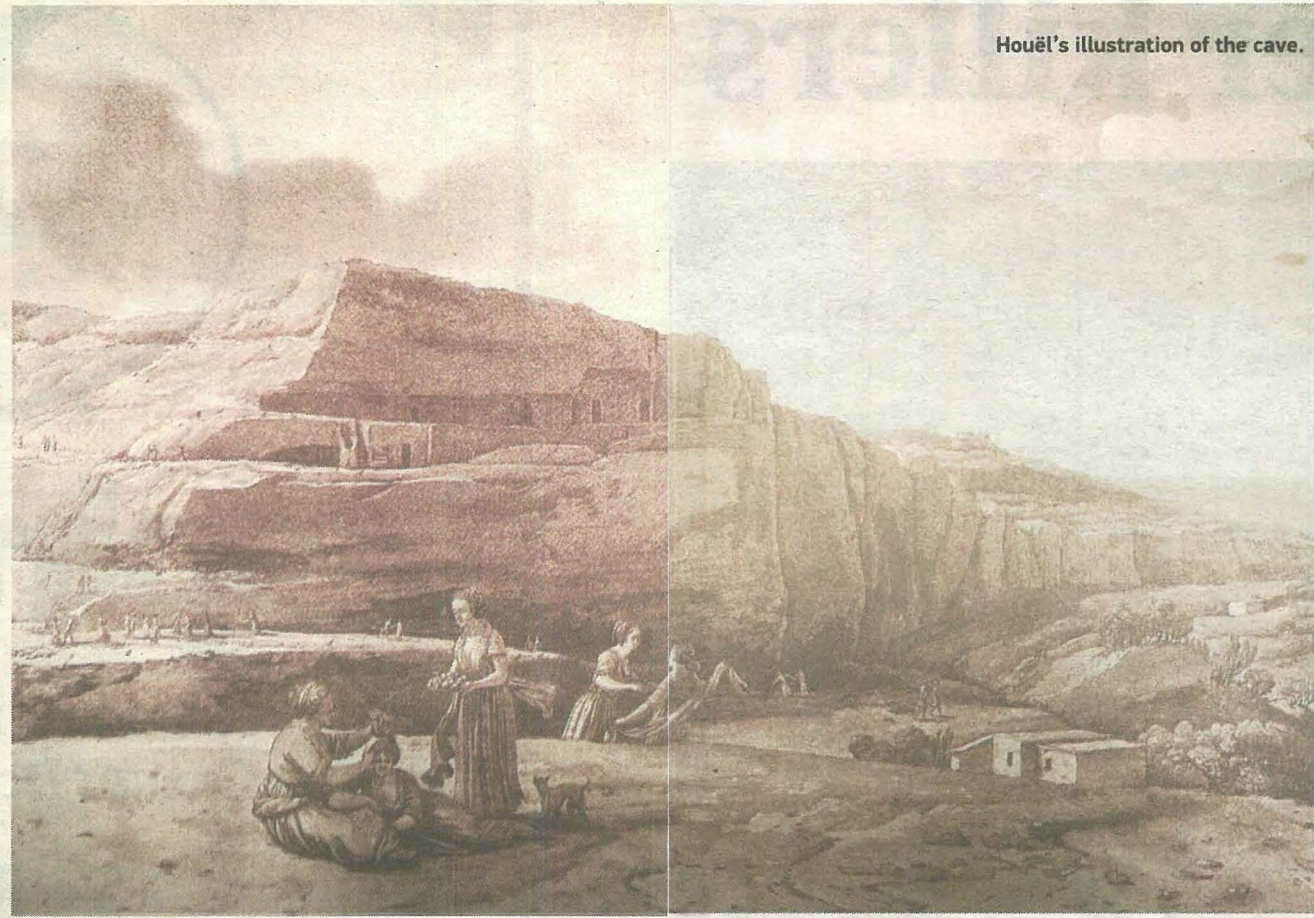


The view from the cave of Calypso in Mellieħa. The valley is verdant even in summer, due to the freshwater spring.



Houël's illustration of the cave.



One of Calypso's caves overlooking Ġnien Ingraw.

The cave of Calypso... in Mellieħa

JEFFREY SAMMUT

Most of us remember reading *The Odyssey* or listening fascinated to our teacher relating how Ulysses managed to evade mythical monsters, outwit witches and sail through stormy seas despite being hampered at all times by the gods who did their best to delay his arrival in his homeland Ithaca.

It was after a storm that Ulysses was shipwrecked on the island of Ogygia, where he was to spend seven years with the nymph Calypso. There was much controversy about the actual location of Ogygia, but by the 19th century, most scholars had agreed that the island was either Malta or Gozo.

In 1647, Gan Frangisk Abela wrote that "the passage of Ulysses in Malta, also known as Ogygia or Calypso, has been clearly demonstrated by many authors... P. Manduca, in his manuscript... described an ancient building in the vicinity of the cave of the Virgin (of Mellieħa), constructed with massive boulders, and being exposed to the sea, near the port of the salt pans, which he supposed to be Calypso's home". This cited megalithic building could have been the temple at Ghajn Żejtuna, whose remains were discovered in 1934 or possibly some other ancient building, of which no traces remain.

The book *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, published in 1699 by the Bishop of Cambrai, François de Salignac de la Mothe, who was known as Fénelon, helped put the Maltese islands at the forefront as Calypso's abode. Many who read the book came to the conclusion that the cave was somewhere on the islands of Malta and Gozo.

Many travellers started to look for this famed cave because of the 'Grand Tour'. From around the 1660s to the 1900s, wealthy young Europeans, mainly Englishmen, started taking a trek through France, Italy, Egypt and other countries in search of art, culture and the roots of Western civilisation. No one knows who came up with the name, but their adventures were called the Grand Tour.

These travellers soon met locals who were happy to provide concrete locations and answer any questions from these inquisitive visitors about Polyphemus, Circe or Calypso.

As Bradford explains, "Your Mediterranean dweller, be he Italian, Sicilian, Maltese, Greek, or what you will, is only happy to oblige inquiring visitors with tales appropriate to their demands... had I walked about in Trapani asking for the Grotto of Polyphemus, I have no doubt I should have been shown a number of caves, and that my dark-eyed guides would have soon deduced from my questions what kind of monster had lived there, and all the rest of the story. They would then have been ready for the next visitor who might have quoted them in evidence of the continuation of traditional folklore."

Places like the cave of Calypso quickly gained fame with the locals when they saw the large number of foreigners who were interested in them and when they requested to view these places, they found many guides who were willing to show them around in exchange for a few coins.

Jean Pierre Laurent Houël was a French artist who, between 1776 and 1779, travelled to Sicily, Lipari and Malta. He left his impressions of what he saw in his book *Voyage pittoresque des îles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari*. It was in his book that he described the cave of Calypso in Mellieħa: "The grotto itself consists of two floors of chambers, one above the other. At the bottom of this rock, there is a cave which serves as a sort of ground floor. On the foot of the rock... starts the alley up to the caves... The passengers have to climb up some small stairs hewn in the rock... (The caves), with their shape and age... carry the spirit of the remotest of times."

"There are two flights of steps which lead from the first to the second floor. (There is) a large cistern to collect water. The shape of this rock-cut cistern is round. It continues under the stairs. On its side there is a square basin, also hollowed out of the same sort of rock. On the side of this basin, there is a round hole through which the rainwater can enter, which is collected through various

channels hewn into the rock. The walls (on the second floor), which had once been part of the rock, have tumbled down because of their great age. These chambers are quite comfortable and very dry. (There are also some) cave tombs.

"The cave at the foot of the rock is mainly the work of nature. At its bottom there is a spring which provides the place with abundant fresh water of good quality. Most presumably it was this spring which – besides the advantage of its elevated position – made the people come to this place as it gave the whole area fertility and life."

Houël also comments that "I also consulted verses 57 to 73 of the fifth book of Homer's original *Odyssey*. I have to admit that the location (near Mellieħa) carries some remarkable similarities to this place..." A lot of what Houël described still exists today.

"Unfortunately, the historical caves lie abandoned and in disrepair"

In 1789, Vivant Denon, a French artist, archaeologist, author and diplomat, visited the cave. After climbing up a flight of steps cut into rock, he entered three chambers, "cut out of rock without either care or embellishment, resembling neither the baths nor reservoirs of a palace, still less the elegant apartments we might expect in the enchanting abode of this voluptuous deity". Everything resembled more like "a prison than the apartments of a nymph".

Interestingly enough, many were compelled to visit both the cave at Mellieħa as well as Calypso's cave in Xaghra, Gozo, which lead to some interesting comparisons.

MacGill, in 1839, wrote: "Near the chapel of the Madonna of Mileħa [sic] is a very fine grotto, and near to it, a spring of icy cold

water. Some insist that this is the famed grotto of Calypso whilst others assert that the fabled grotto is at Gozo. The only way to reconcile this discrepancy is to suppose that her Nymphship had, what might be called, a town and country residence; and that the miserable hole called her grotto at Gozo, was where she retired to, during the summer months: which may probably have given rise to the custom of the present day, of leaving fine airy houses in town, to be stewed up in confined mosquito traps in the country, during the hot season."

Being a fertile area, the caves in the cliff face overlooking the valley were inhabited by the locals, as described by Badger in 1838: "About half a mile to the west of the church of Mellieħa is the supposed Grotto of Calypso, the spot so enchantingly sung by Homer and dilated upon by Fénelon in his *Aventures de Télémaque*. It is situated at the foot of a hill, in which are many other grottos of different dimensions, the greater part of which are still occupied by the peasants of the neighbourhood. A spring of clear water runs through the cave of the goddess, and from thence flows forth into a large basin, from which it is let out to fertilise the delightful garden just below."

Many travellers, having conjured a fantasy world in their minds where Calypso lived with her nymphs, remained disappointed with what they saw. The Spanish visitor Lacroix, in 1840, remarked: "Heading to the port of Mellieħa [sic], to the northeast, we arrive to the Palace of Calypso. Sad palace, judging from what exists! Two-storey, dark and damp caves, open to the elements, complementing a pointed crag, without order, symmetry nor ornament. The bathroom of the goddess, who one would imagine be a seductive, charming place, a sanctuary of love, was not so! It was only different from the other caves by an opening seven feet high."

Borzesi, in 1830, after visiting the caves of Calypso in both Mellieħa and Gozo, commented that "if the nymphs of that time selected such habitations, we shall be induced to believe that it was only the penitent among them".

Disappointment oozes out of Winthrop's words, who in 1851 wrote: "There are no limpid fountains now, and no streams to supply them if any were built. There are no poplars, alders or nodding cypresses now, nor any soil in which they could flourish, if a stranger should be tempted to plant them. All is changed. A little low dark recess in the shores of Malta is now called Calypso's grotto which, to see from the outside, is quite sufficient, for few if any of the travellers who go to its mouth can have a wish to enter. Tradition may carry its weight with it but surely the dirty cave, which we have often seen in the bay of Mellieħa [sic], is not the grotto that Homer, in his poetical language, has so well described..."

Nor did the cave in Gozo impress him much. "Calimachus has written that Gozo, the ancient Gaulos, which is only three or four miles distant from Malta, is the isle of Calypso and that the dismal cavern in its shores is the place where the goddess resided. An idea which possibly originated in the poetical fancies of this author and for the truth of which, we can find no other foundation."

George Angas in 1842 met three ragged boys from Mellieħa who volunteered their services as guides. They took him to the caves, "which commanded an extensive view of the sea and the places towards Marfa. The most distant of these holes they described as being the Calypso; but what was my astonishment on finding, instead of the cave of the goddess so enchantingly sung by Homer, only a miserable hovel, a complete pigsty!"

"To serve still further to dispel the poetical illusion, our approach was signalled by the exit of three or four pigs, and a black donkey. I managed, however, to get clear of the livestock and with the aid of my pencil and sketch book, I endeavoured to make the best sketch of it I could; though I must confess to having suffered a terrible mortification in finding the sacred cave employed for so unpoetical a purpose."

"I made one of our youthful guides sit on a stone whilst I introduced him into my picture, a circumstance which was the cause of no little merriment to him. I rewarded

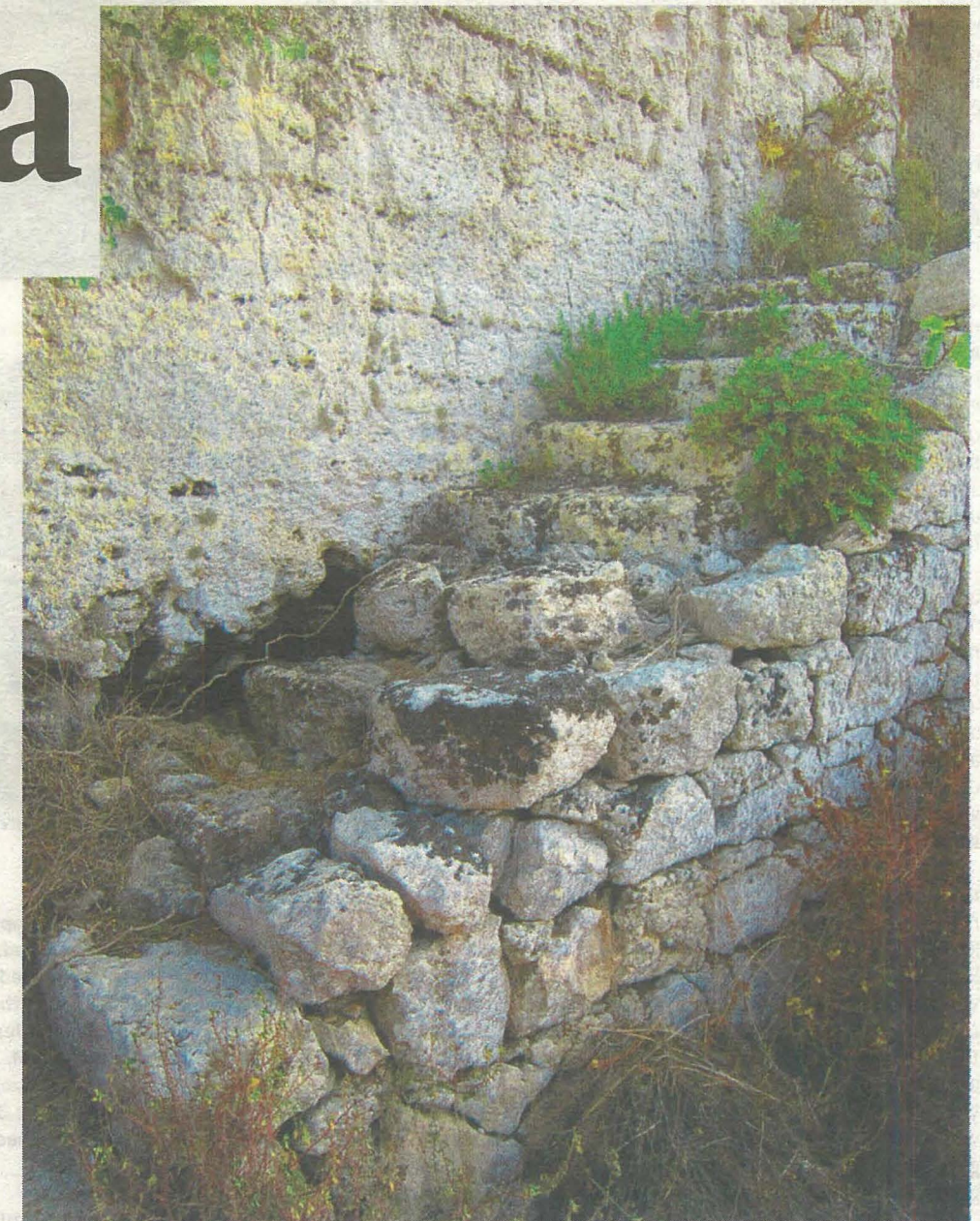
this 'sitter' with a penny, upon which the other two immediately came forward, and very civilly gave me to understand that they wished to have their portraits also taken in a similar manner. This was an honour which I respectfully declined and the 'douceur' of one penny each satisfied all their lingering scruples."

"Many travellers... remained disappointed with what they saw"

Evans, in his *Guide to the Islands of Malta and Gozo*, published in 1900, explained how one can reach the caves: "Calypso's caves are situated behind the village of Mellieħa, and can be reached by ascending one of the streets running off the main road to the left. You can join the path crossing the wied [valley] and follow it till it bends round the high rock above the cave. The rocks have broken away and blocked up and destroyed several of the chambers. But the entrance stairways still remain, and two or three compartments are intact. Below in the gorge are some pretty gardens and a clump of fruit trees. As Gozo is traditionally Calypso's island, the name given to the caves, which are probably of ancient origin, may not be inappropriate."

Albert Mayr, a German archaeologist, also inspected the caves, and in his book published in 1909, observed that: "To Byzantine times obviously belong also the caves known as Calypso on the rugged cliffs facing the sea to the west of Mellieħa [sic]. They have already been described by Houël but now they are heavily destroyed. The most important part left is the two open terraces, located in the upper part of the slope... while the two terraces themselves are linked by stairs as described in the plan of Houël... there are four rectangular spaces, two of which are provided with arched niches..."

Rev. Loreto Zammit, in his booklet *The Cave of Calypso Mellieħa - Malta*, published in 1972,



The steps leading to the higher caves.

painstakingly compared the description of the cave in the *Odyssey* with different areas in Malta, and came to the conclusion that Calypso's cave was the one overlooking Ġnien Ingraw as it "tallies exactly with... the description by Homer in his *Odyssey*... With much industry and the sacrifice of a mass of research, I succeeded... on fixing the cave of Calypso at Malta on a cliff face west of Mellieħa. Thus with conclusive evidence, I succeeded to put right what was wrong."

Today, there are few visitors, if any, to the caves of Calypso in Mellieħa. This tradition has slowly been forgotten, and unfortunately, the historical caves lie abandoned and in disrepair.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Daniel Borg and Veronika Novotná for their help with the article.