



The MCA Newsletter

Editorial – The Malta Classics Association

The Malta Classics Association was founded in May 2010, with the express aim of promoting the study and appreciation of the Classics in the Maltese Islands. This aspiration arose of the genuine belief that the lessons taught to us by the study of the Greek and Roman civilisations, their learned writings and their history are as relevant today as they were a hundred or two thousand years ago. Their thoughts, their philosophy and even their way of life as it has come down to us through the studies of hundreds of historians and through the writings of these people themselves remain as important and valuable now as they have ever been.

Since its inception, the MCA has pursued its aims through a variety of projects and initiatives. It has organised free and regular public lectures on a variety of subjects and sought to assist prospective and actual students of Latin, Greek and the Classical Cultures with their studies in whatever way possible.

It has encouraged academic research and is now in the process of compiling the fourth edition of its

own academic journal, the *Melita Classica*. The MCA has also sought to lay the foundations for international cooperation between Classicists through its membership of the Euroclassica. In fact, in 2014 the MCA, in collaboration with the University of Malta, hosted an international conference to mark the twenty fifth anniversary of the reintroduction of Classics at the Maltese University, and in 2015, the MCA was proud to host the annual pan-European Euroclassica Conference in Malta.

This newsletter is just one other way in which the MCA hopes to reach out to you, the reader, and introduce you to the beauty of the Classical Languages and Cultures. This newsletter shall keep you updated about the work of the MCA Executive Committee, the MCA's upcoming events and hopes to introduce you to some of the more exciting aspects of Classical Culture, such as mythology, through monthly instalments.

May you enjoy this issue, and may it spark within you the wish to learn more.

Samuel Azzopardi

Contact Us

If you'd like to become a member of the Malta Classics Association, please visit the MCA website at <http://www.classicsmalta.org/>. There you will find even more information about the MCA and its work.

Alternatively, if you'd like more information about the MCA and what it does to promote the Classics in Malta or even why it seeks to do this, email us on classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com or look us up on our Facebook page.

For information on upcoming courses in Latin, Greek, Sanskrit or Classical Culture please email the Education Sub-Committee on classicsmaltasoc.educ@gmail.com.

Chapter 1

The World as They Knew It

The first attempt to systematize the Greek myths was made by Hesiod, Europe's first religious thinker. In his poem, the *Theogony* or 'Birth of the Gods', he says he was inspired by the Muses: *'they breathed a voice into me, and power to sing the story of things of the future, and things past'*.

In this work, Hesiod speaks not only about the origin of the gods but also recounts how the universe was created. Before going into the origin of the world as he relates it, however, it is worth going through a description of the ancient world as it appeared to the Ancient Greeks.

The World as the Greeks Saw It

Zeus determined the centre of the earth by releasing two eagles, one from the east and the other from the west. They met at Delphi where an *'omphalos'* meaning 'navel', the most sacred of stones, marked the central point of the world.

The ancients believed that the earth was on a flat plane around which flowed the great river Oceanus (*Gr. Okeanos*) or Ocean, *'the source of all rivers, every sea, and all the springs and deep wells that there are.'* (Homer, *Iliad*, Book XXI).

To the north lived the griffin, a powerful and majestic animal with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. In *'Prometheus Bound'* by Aeschylus (the father of Greek tragedy c. 525 – 456 B.C.) the griffins are called *'the sharp-toothed hounds of Zeus that have no bark'*. We are told by Pausanias, a Greek traveller and writer of the 2nd cent. A.D., that the griffins hoarded gold, over which they stood guard, ready to pounce on and tear to pieces those who dared approach with thoughts of plunder, such as the one-eyed Arimaspians of Scythia who often engaged with the griffins in their constant attempts to steal the griffins' gold (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.24.6).



*Figure 1 – A satyr, a griffin and an Arimaspus,
Mid 4th cent. BC Attic red-figure Calyx-Krater from Eretria
Now at the Louvre Museum, Paris, France [Louvre CA491]
Height: 18.3 cm., Diam. 16.3 cm.*

Next to the land of the griffins, lived the Hyperboreans, literally those *'beyond the north wind'*, whose caverns emitted the chilling blasts of the north wind. The land of the Hyperboreans, according to Pindar in his *Third Olympian Ode* (Greek lyric poet c. 518 - 438 B.C.) was a paradise, free from all ills on account of their virtue. The Hyperboreans spent their days in song and dance and worshipped the god Apollo who wintered in their land.

Only a very privileged few, such as the great heroes Heracles and Perseus, had ever visited the land of the Hyperboreans. Croesus, of legendary wealth and king of Lydiaⁱ between 560 B.C. and 546 B.C., was one such fortunate mortal. After Croesus was defeated by the Persians, it was said that his flaming pyre was quenched by the rain sent by Zeus and then he was spirited away by Apollo to the land of the Hyperboreans as a reward for his devoutness.

On the shores of Oceanus were other lands, *'the land and city where dwell the Cimmeriansⁱⁱ, shrouded in mist, sunken in endless dark clouds. The sun never looks down upon them.'* (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI).

The land of the Ethiopians was at the ends of the earth. We are told in Books I and XXIII of the *Iliad* that the Ethiopians, like the Hyperboreans, were an upright people so that they too enjoyed the gods' favours.

And far away, according to Plato beyond the Straits of Gibraltar - or the Pillars of Heracles as they were called - was the legendary island of Atlantis, which name was derived from Atlas, the Titan and mountain range in Morocco (*Timaeus* 24e-25d, *Critias* 108e-109a).

To a great extent, Europe and North Africa had come under the rule of the Atlanteans but still they hungered for power. The Athenians formed themselves into an alliance against the empire of Atlantis and defeated the Atlanteans but immediately after, the island was visited by violent earthquakes and Atlantis and its people and their treasured possessions were washed away to the depths of the sea.

Over time, speculation as to the location of Plato's legendary island has been rife. Several sites have been suggested. However, the most popular theory that has prevailed as yet is that the island of Atlantis was the volcanic island of Thera, now known as Santorini, which vanished beneath the waves as a result of an immense eruption that was believed to have occurred in circa 1550 B.C., but in 1991 was established as having taken place in 1630 B.C. This may well have been the cataclysm which inspired the story of Atlantis – a name which has since become proverbial upon the discovery of any advanced civilization lost to the world in a bygone age.

The Primordial Beings

'Sing all this to me, Muses, you who dwell on Olympus:

from the beginning tell me, which of the gods first came to be.'

Hesiod's *Theogony*

In the beginning was Chaos, a 'gaping void'. Chaos was vast and dark. Out of Chaos arose two gods. The goddess Nyx was 'night' personified while Erebus (*Gr. Erebos*) was the personification of the gloomy shadows of the underworld. The first sexual union was the mating of these two children of darkness. From Nyx were born Aether (*Gr. Aither*, Bright Air) and Hemera (Day).

Nemesis, another child of Nyx, was the goddess of divine retribution who punished those who committed a moral offence and those guilty of self-pride and haughtiness.

At the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.) the Persians had brought with them a block of marble out of which they planned to sculpt a trophy, fully confident of a resounding success. However, it was the Greeks who vanquished their enemies and they commissioned Pheidias, a well-known sculptor, to carve a statue of the avenging goddess Nemesis out of that same marble. Thus were the Persians punished for their arrogance.

The Physical World

Then out of Chaos three more primal deities came forth – Tartarus (*Gr. Tartaros*) Gaia, who in the *Homeric Hymn 30 to Earth the Mother of All* is described as the oldest entity of all who nurtures and enriches the human race through her produce, and Eros. At this early stage, Eros represents the magnetic energy and spontaneous drive that draws beings together to procreate. Gaia, as the earth was called, although not having a mate, brought forth the Hills, ‘haunts of the Nymphs’ (Theogony) Pontus, the personified Sea, and Uranus (*Gr. Ouranos*, the Sky) ‘to be an ever-sure abiding place for the blessed gods’ *Theogony*.



Figure 2 – Eros as a Youth Making an Offering
Late 4th cent. BC Red-Figure Plate by the Ascoli Satriano Painter
Now at the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, US [Walters 482765]

Now the earth was separated from the heavens. The sky, imagined as a roof or dome made of iron or bronze sprang upwards while earth, being the heaviest, sank below the skies and the sea surrounded the earth. Tartarus, home to Nyx, was the region far below the earth. Later, according to the *Aeneid*, Book VI, of Vergil (the greatest of Latin poets, lived 70 – 19 B.C.) Tartarus was regarded as the dungeon of evil-doers.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was said that, in the beginning it was Hemera who brought with her the light of day while Nyx arose out of the Underworld each evening to bring darkness to the world.

The mountains surged upwards towards the blue heavens. Green valleys were hollowed out and rivers and streams flowed throughout the land. Eros gave the vitality of life to the earth and myriad crops and plants shot out of the fertile soil. Flowers of every hue dotted the rich plains and fruits of countless varieties hung heavy and lush on the trees standing tall while the cornfields shone bright yellow in the golden sunlight.

Earth was ready to receive man and his gods.

ⁱ The Lydians had been the first to strike true coins – tokens of standard weight and imprint – and in the 6th century B.C. money began to be widely used in both foreign and internal trade; only Sparta resisted its introduction. *The Penguin History of the World*

ⁱⁱ In history, the Cimmerians entered Asia Minor across the Caucasus in the late 8th century B.C. *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* by Michael Grant (Routledge)

ⁱⁱⁱ This had great influence on Christians who believed in the torments of Hell. *Cassell’s Dictionary of Classical Mythology*

Student Interview

There is no better way to show the relevance and beauty of the study of the Classics than through the real experiences of contemporary students and the advice of actual teachers. In every issue the MCA will feature the experience of one such person. For this instalment, the Newsletter team interviewed Ms Blossom Holland, a B.A. Classics and Librarian and Archive Studies.

For how long have you been studying the Classics?

I have just completed my first year studies at the University of Malta. I had been studying Classics alongside Librarian and Archive Studies, better known as Knowledge and Information Management.

What got you interested in studying the Classics at University?

I have always been interested in Greek and Roman culture and history, especially their mythology, and I always wondered why we didn't have the option to study Classical Culture in our secondary schools like in other countries. I didn't know we could sit for the CCC at O Level at the time. So when I was applying for University and I discovered I could sign up for this course along with my other subject I immediately signed up. I also knew that studying Latin would help me with my Librarian and Archival studies course anyway so that was a huge plus.

Would you say the study of Classics is still relevant today? How?

Of course! A better understanding of the past allows us to better understand the present: by considering the influence that men and women of the classical period have had upon the generation that followed them, by examining the ways in which the wisdom of the ancient philosophers, the skill of the ancient artists, the creativity of the ancient playwrights and the passion of the ancient poets, and how they influenced those who came after them we may start to better understand even ourselves. We discover, so to speak, our roots, and how our civilisation came to be what it is now.

So basically you feel that the study of the Classics has in some way changed your perspective on things. How, exactly?

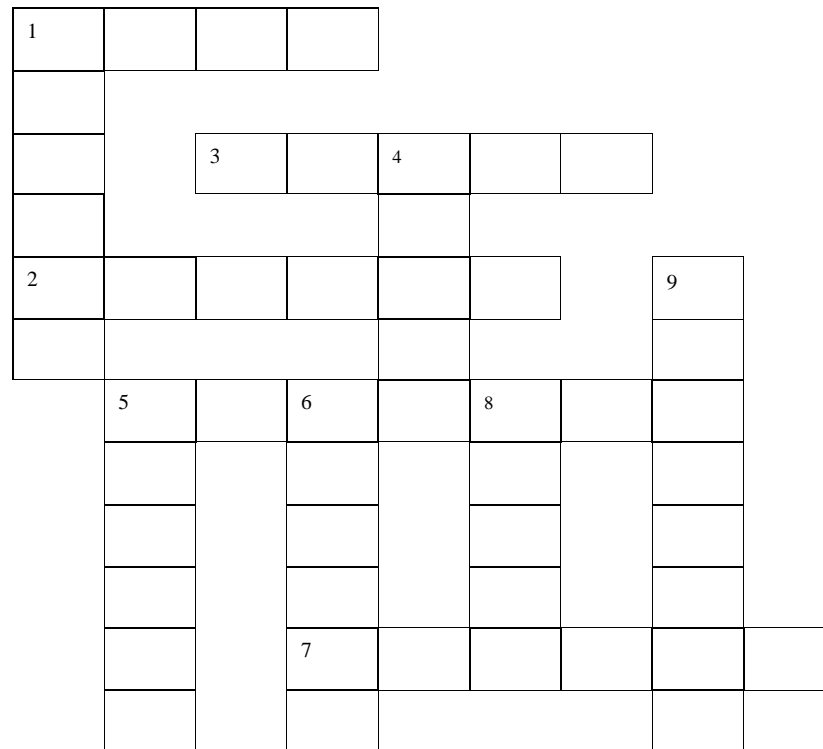
Apart from increasing my appreciation of such intellectually oriented cultures, I also began to realise that the influence of the Classical period and cultures can be felt in all aspects of modern life. It can be found not only in our languages, but also in our politics, our science, literature, even in our daily traditions and lifestyles. The "dead languages" and "dead societies" are not dead at all; they're simply alive, but differently. They live on, so to speak. And this should be shown, made clear. It would be a pity to live in ignorance of such a beautiful reality.



For more information about the Classics courses offered in Malta by the MCA and other educational institutions, check out our Courses page on the Malta Classics Association Pages. If you have any questions you would like to ask our contemporary Classics students and teachers, email them to newsletter.classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com. We'd love to bring you the information you want and need!

Mythology Crossword

With every issue, the MCA will be organising a small competition for the readers of the newsletter. The winner, who will be notified by email, will receive a small book related to the Classics. This issue's competition is a Mythology crossword puzzle. To participate, simply print this page and scan the completed crossword on newsletter.classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com or send it by post to *The Editor, 9, Gorg Zammit Street, Attard, ATD 2355* by Wednesday 19th December. The winner will be drawn by lot from among those who solve the whole puzzle correctly.

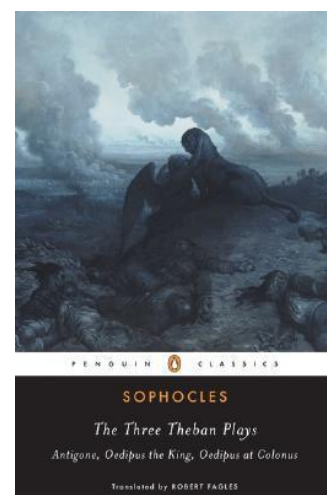


Across

1. Typhon's prison for all eternity (4)
2. Calypso's Island (6)
3. Demeter is said to have controlled their growth (5)
5. Goddess of the Hunt (7)
7. The oldest Achaean king at Troy (6)

Down

1. The Greek name for the Realm of the Dead (6)
4. The fruit of Athena's gift to Athens (5)
5. Sprung fully armoured from Zeus' head (6)
6. Ruled the Universe before the Gods (6)
8. Divine overseers of the arts (5)
9. Brother of Zeus, Lord of the Seas (8)



This issue's prize is Sophocles' Three Theban Plays as translated by Robert Fagles. This book is being generously donated to the MCA by Prof. Zammit.