



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 2  
*2015*

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

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2015

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**MELITA CLASSICA**

*Vol. 2, 2015*

Text © Malta Classics Association  
Design and layout © Book Distributors Limited

ISBN: 978-99957-847-37

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# The Serpent, the Moon, the Underworld

*Horatio C. R. Vella*

## Introduction

Mythology is the study of the mind of man who attempts to probe into truth without the possession of clarification derived from complete knowledge of facts. Hence, the imagination takes command of both the person and, often, the community. The stories created by man or received by him from his predecessors, often going back to generations and even centuries of oral tradition, will differ from those of his own people living across mountain barriers and across seas in distant islands. This is caused both by contortions in handling down the original story over the years, and by reinterpretations by the perpetrators of the same story. The very long existence of these versions of the story received the sanction of sanctity: if they existed for so long a time, if the ancestors preserved them, if they were sung by poets taken to be sacred for being divinely inspired, who were the ancient Greeks to eradicate them from memory?

This story told of the very existence of man on earth, his origins and what happened to him after death. The importance of this fact in man's life did not remain in his thoughts, but necessity compelled him to pass on his opinion to his children, an event which was repeated over generations and centuries. Because of the children's inability to understand the story of truth, the language had to be simple; its syntax had to be paratactic in presentation; its contents had to be reduced to episodes enjoyable to hear and difficult to forget; while its essence had to be preserved from disappearance by protecting it with a layer of ingredient-stories innocuously presented. The result of all this leads me to compare mythology to gold preserved, however, in a lump of stone which gathered round it and protected it over the centuries. The stone is hard and difficult to remove, but a shortcut into the gold

can be created, that of imagining the contents of the hidden but more valuable material from the layer outside.

Because of his awareness of his limitations in life, man looked at his environment which seemed superior and everlasting when compared to his own weakness and short span of life. Because of this, he imagined these natural phenomena, the sun, his own Earth and the moon in particular, as gods and goddesses. The many activities man performed on Earth were then imagined to have been regulated by these same phenomena; he then created successions of their generations, localities of their habitations and agents of their secrets and guardianship.

This short introduction, I hope, suffices for the title: the serpent, the moon, the underworld.

## **Mythological Beliefs of Divine Beings**

In this basic interrelationship between mythology and religion, man further developed an ethical code for the approach to these divinities. From the very fact that they were far superior to him in appearance, he learnt to control his behaviour and to respect them by making sacred his own talk about them and by legislating on the rites and rituals to be performed to each of them according to their celestial or terrestrial appearances. This is the origin of sacrifices according to solstices, equinoxes and moon phases, prayers, re-enactments, anniversaries, altars, shrines, processions, songs, orgies and image-making. In addition, he introduced dress-codes adapted for each different religious celebration and punishments to be applied on those who did not follow the ethical code of approaching these divinities. The exclusion of improperly dressed individuals from temples, the taking off the shoes outside the temple, the stoning of individuals to death and the expulsion of impious ones from the community have survived to this present day.

Man believed that he could not have been meant to exist for about ninety years only. Somewhere in his subconscious he knew of the contrast between a life span and eternity. He imagined that his life was a slow reawakening from temporary sleep before this life and

a return to eternity after it. His loss of knowledge of the past was caused by some foul an ancestor committed for him, consequent to which he suffered and purified then himself through the same suffering experience in order to regain the original bliss in Elysium. The foul could have been the unravelling of a secret as by Prometheus, the improper probing into forbidden truth as by Adam and Eve, or the possession of a forbidden divine element, like fire, by the same Prometheus. The result of this foul has been the suffering and death on this Earth, the eternal punishment of the original rebel and the craze of extracting oneself from this distressful situation on Earth by ever hoping for a return to Paradise. Now, there was only one path to Elysium, through death, burial into Mother-Earth and the journey to it in the Underworld. Yet, by some compensation, man could, while on Earth, foretaste the salient qualities of eternal truth, by means of spirits, dreams, and riddles which come from below, thanks to the tree, the serpent and the spring of fresh water bursting out from the rocks of Mother-Earth.

To concretize this thought, that of returning to a better place of origin, man looked to Mother-Earth for his inspiration. Seeing that from earth grow many good things that give him nourishment, and that these things grow according to the cycles of the superior celestial bodies that bring cold, heat, natural control of pests, regeneration of seeds and livestock; as well as to the fact that every living being returns to Earth; seeing further that these superior celestial bodies travel West and underneath the Earth to return next morning in the East, it was not difficult for man to imagine that he too had to journey to the West, into the bosom of *Ge* and *Oceanos*, from where he hoped to emerge again. It was there, in the Underworld, that he would rediscover in full the meaning of his past and temporary existence on Earth, and it was from there that he was to provide to his descendants above the fertility both in nature and inspiration and from where he hoped to come back to Earth, but after crossing Lethe, after, alas, forgotten this truth having just been acquired.

## Mother-Earth

This thought was then further concretized by the construction of the mound over the corpse, to indicate the existence of a life once spent up here, but also to indicate symbolically the place of origin. Mother Earth was Pregnant Earth, pregnant of life. She that gave birth to man from the mound, will likewise receive him into her bosom. The source of real life, the eternal truth, was linked with the cord of knowledge through the *omphalos*, the hole into Earth, the link between the underworld, the place of original eternal bliss, and life above. This mound covered the dead and produced the living, and because of the importance of this truth, the various entrances into Earth had to be safeguarded by an animal, formidable indeed to chase away intruders, hence monsters, but knowledgeable of things underneath, hence serpents (*drakōn* in Greek meaning both monster and serpent).

## Egypt

Mother-Earth was fertilized by fresh water. Hence, water, a spring or a lake was imagined to have existed in localities where Earth was close to its *omphalos*, guarded by the serpent. Egypt is a desert except for the very fertile passage of the river Nile southward towards the infertile Mediterranean. Its name is itself derived from *Aia*, that is, *Gaia*, meaning Mother-Earth, and *gyps* (gen. *gypōs*) meaning “vulture”, that is, “rapacious” as is, or was, its river *Neilos*. Because of the common root of *Aea*, that is Colchis in today’s Georgia, and *Aigyptos*, Herodotus was quick to conclude a connection of peoples between the two countries. In Egypt, contrasts were created by necessity between fresh water (Osiris) and salt water (Seth), as between benign sun (Osiris) and aggressive sun (Seth). But both benign sun and fresh water fertilized Egypt in its river banks (Isis). The banks’ colour of soil, the six-months contraction of the river before the building of the Aswan Dam and its subsequent six-months expansion, and the effect of all this cycle on Egypt’s fertility in a desert country made the primitive Egyptian think of the moon, its red colour when rising, its waning and waxing processes and its regulation of women’s sexual behaviour. For this reason, and for the fact that the cow was considered to be the

most fertile animal on earth, the Egyptians called the Moon, the Cow, the River Banks and the throne of Pharaoh, which symbolically gave birth to him, by the same name of Isis. Hence comes the association of the crescent moon with the horns of the cow as symbols of fertility.

The Egyptian calendar, unlike the Babylonian, the Greek and the original Roman one, was a solar calendar of  $(12 \times 30) + 5$  days. Nevertheless, the Egyptians also had a lunar calendar which for them was visible both daily in the sky, unhindered by clouds in a desert country, and in the changing width of the river Nile. In 365 days, the river returned to the previous years' width, and the length of that extremity from its narrowest width was divided into six equal measures and a half of that measure. By looking at the moon in the sky which lasted for 12 lunations of 29.5 days each and an extra 11 days within the solar year of 365 days, and by measuring the width of the river which changed by day and month, they also regulated their own agricultural, economic and sexual behaviours. Thus, the monthly waning and waxing of Moon-Goddess, Isis, reminded the Egyptians of the yearly contraction and expansion of the River-God Osiris by the holy banks of Isis. Their lunar calendar was then adjusted to the solar one by the heliacal rising of the star Sirius sometime in April, when coronation of the Pharaoh could take place.<sup>1</sup>

But the important thing to note in Egyptian mythology is the fact that Earth and Moon were considered to be one and the same divinity. Although the Greeks distinguished the two both by names and by myths, the connection remained both through the sinking of the Moon into Mother-Earth or Oceanus, and by the close genealogical link between the Moon, Oceanus and Ge, as will be shown shortly.

## The Hero

These serpents or dragons, guardians of the entrances to the Underworld, to the innermost bosom of Earth, from where truth could be gained, and, therefore, guardians of the truth itself and of things not to be revealed, barred the way to all from entering the Underworld without experiencing death, burial and transport across

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1 See also H.C.R. Vella (1995), 110-111, 114-122 and 137.

Styx. That knowledge could not be gained by mortals, and when gained after death, it was forgotten on rebirth. There were only two ways for human beings of acquiring knowledge of that truth while still alive: either through communication with the serpent itself, as in the conversation of Eve and the serpent, and through the oracles at Delphi, or through subjugation of that serpent by the hero.

This hero in Greek mythology was so called because he was the “only” person in his community to have successfully taken up the challenge of some important and almost impossible task. Such tasks were the search and capture of the golden fleece by Jason, the entrance into the labyrinth and death of the Minotaur by Theseus, the marriage with a princess, after beating almost impossible conditions, as by Jason, Pelops and Theseus, and the return home from a world of fantasy as by Odysseus. This impossible task included, on very rare occasions, the descent into the Underworld either for a show of mere strength and defiance to the greater powers above or below, as in the case of Theseus and Pirithous, or for some noble cause, as the rescue of a woman from death, as in the case of Eurydice and Alcestes by Perseus and Heracles respectively, or as the acquisition of some important truth, as in the case of Odysseus and Aeneas. The difference of Aeneas from Odysseus was that, while Odysseus was concerned with his return home in Ithaca and the situation there in his absence, Aeneas was concerned with his arrival at his new home in Italy, the philosophy of Mind, Body and Spirit, and the progeny of his future descendants. Both Odysseus and Aeneas penetrated into the heart and depths of Earth: Odysseus twice, once at the entrance of the Underworld, and once into the depths of the harbour of Thrinacia. Even more, Aeneas actually traversed the whole extent of the Underworld, the only way to regenerate oneself, as the moon regenerates when it disappears into Oceanus, the river of Death, within fourteen days.

The hero died, often heroically. He consequently was remembered in his own locality by annual commemorations, and his cult often spelt over the borders of his own town or village. Sometimes, his cult was so great and important, that he could have been considered as a god after his life on Earth. This was the clear case of Heracles,

and could have been the case of the other gods and goddesses like him who shared with us human beings all characteristics, good and bad, except mortality. Some of these gods and goddesses returned to Earth, as in the case of Hestia and Demeter; others, who returned, assumed full qualities of mankind, as in the case of Helen.

The mention of Theseus and Aeneas above is significant. Theseus went “down” (*katabasis*) twice: once into the labyrinth, and another time into the Underworld. Aeneas was to follow his example.

## The Labyrinth

The word “labyrinth” is derived from two Greek root-words: *lábros*, meaning “furious”, “violent” and “greedy”, a word which reminds us of the meaning of *gyps*, one of the two roots which make *Aegyptos*, and the pre-Greek word *ánthos*, meaning “flower”, or *ónthos*, meaning “dung”, or a combination of the two. The complex meaning of labyrinth can be explained by “the story of the hero who defied furious and greedy death, death being associated with fertility symbolized by flower or dung, dung being the fertilizer especially when derived from the cow, itself a symbol of fertility, or by both”. As such, “labyrinth” is related to “Hyacinth”, meaning “raining” (*hýō*) and, therefore, fertilizing the flower (*ánthos*), thus causing “a remedy”, “a means of obtaining a thing” (*ákos*), or a “summit”, “silence”, “a healing” (*aké*); “labyrinth” is also related to “Olynthus”, a word derived from *óllymi*, meaning “to perish”, and *ánthos*, “a flower”. *Ólynthus* itself means “a winter-fig which seldom ripens”, a complex of fertility, symbolised elsewhere by the fig with its seeds, and death, expressed by perishing and loss of fertility.

This labyrinth was dug into the bosom of Earth, and was excavated in such a way that no way out was possible (*unde negant redire quemquam*, says Catullus when he refers to the Underworld in 3.12). Inside this labyrinth one met with death, change from life to death, as seen in the death of the seven youths and the seven maidens in the labyrinth in Crete, the Minotaur, a monster, and the clue to the riddle of return (the thread of Daedalus and of Ariadne). Daedalus, who built the labyrinth to hide from view of the living the Minotaur,

the result of the sin of Pasiphae committed with the bull, represented it again in one of the four panels of the door leading to the Temple of Apollo before the entrance to the Underworld itself at Cumae in Italy.<sup>2</sup> This hero was Athenian and an exile from Crete, and possessed the clue of return from the labyrinth.

Theseus, also an Athenian and an exile from Crete, went down both into the Labyrinth with his new wife, Ariadne, went down both the labyrinth and the Underworld. Likewise, Aeneas, who founded a settlement of Trojans in Crete, the country where the labyrinth was, and who travelled through the labyrinth of the seas (*errores*, meaning “wanderings”), saw the labyrinth of Daedalus on the door of the Temple of Apollo at Cumae next to the entrance of the Underworld, built by Daedalus himself, before he himself, Aeneas, like Theseus and Heracles, actually went down into the labyrinth of the Underworld, where Cerberus was the guardian-monster, where Minos of Crete was Judge, where the perpetrators of sins were to be found, including Pasiphae, where change took place, the dead reincarnated, and where return was impossible except either through rebirth, as seen in the vision Aeneas received, or through some special divine help, as Aeneas received from the Sibyl and the spirit of his dead father, Anchises.<sup>3</sup>

The labyrinth with its coils of wanderings and the Underworld with its nine coils of the river Styx are both associated with the monster, the dragon, the serpent who coils up into several circuits. The coils in the labyrinth, the wanderings in this life (*errores*) and the meandering paths in the Underworld impose a challenge to the hero who, alone, can enter and leave again these circuitous wanderings, as a better man, either simply as victorious, or as a changed person after experiencing a baptism of revelation, as in the case of Aeneas. In each of these wanderings, generally at the beginnings or entrances, one encountered monsters, as the Minotaur in the labyrinth, the Cyclopes and Laestrygonians in Sicily in the *Odyssey*, the Harpies in the Adriatic

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2 H.C.R. Vella (2010), 78-92.

3 See also H.C.R. Vella (2006), 1-7, and H.C.R. Vella (2008), 668-677.

in the *Aeneid*,<sup>4</sup> and Cerberus in the Underworld. All these monsters prevented entrance or progress of the hero's journey in arriving at the truth, being life entrapped at Cnossus, the return home to Ithaca, the arrival at one's new destination in Italy and the experience of the meaning of life from among the dead, respectively.

## The Serpent

When *drágōn* appears in the form of the coiling serpent, we can then appreciate why the serpent is connected with death and the afterlife. The serpent is known for his protective qualities against undesirable pests. He avoids capture: he easily slips away, silently. He protects himself by coiling up and narrowing the space his long body can cover. He has got venom in his mouth, a substance that can kill an enemy. He is quick in action, and reads fast the thoughts of his enemy. He changes forms, from a long reptile into coils: he even changes his colour and his own skin. Above all, he guards the entrance to his domicile: the hole in Earth, where he shares life with those below.

Because of these qualities, the serpent, understood to have knowledge of life on earth as well as of life underneath, was imagined to be the most privileged from among the animals. Knowledge of the Underworld, in particular, was knowledge of the source of life and fertility, knowledge of the dead, knowledge of the unknown, and of the entrance or entrances into the Underworld. This is the serpent in the Garden of Eden which, because of its connotation for cleverness, was imagined to have spoken, to have had venom in his words, to have revealed truth unknown to Man. This was the dragon at Nemea by the spring of water, who killed Opheltes, the child of Lycurgus and Eurydice, at the coming of the seven generals marching against Thebes, but whose own death and that of Opheltes resulted in the foundation of the funeral games at Nemea. This was the Sphinx of Thebes who possessed the clue of the riddle, known only to the hero, Oedipus, and who claimed death to the common man who dared to challenge it. This was the Python of Delphi, the guardian of

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4 See accounts of the wanderings of Odysseus and Aeneas in the Mediterranean Sea and their interpretations in H.C.R. Vella (2012), 7-36.

Mother-Earth at the *Omphalos*, whose death gave life to the riddles pronounced by its namesake, the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo who sat on the Thrinax, the three-legged stool, while interpreting the oracles of Apollo, Python's death also resulting in the funeral Pythian games of Delphi.<sup>5</sup>

Although the reptile needs the sun for its own energy, it also seeks the shade of a tree to mitigate the sun's excessive heat, particularly in summer. Often, the serpent's hole in the Earth is not far from the tree. Also, the tree needs a spring of fresh water, itself symbol of life, in the vicinity for its own survival. Thus, a complete mythological picture is formed: the serpent, the tree and the river. The tree served not only for a protection from the harmful rays of the sun, but also for a communication with Earth and underneath it. Man therefore developed the concept of the tree as a link with the Underworld through its roots and its leaves underneath (Verg. A. 6.283-284: ... *quam sedem Somnia vulgo / vana tenere ferunt, foliisque sub omnibus haerent.*), expressing its fertility derived from the Underworld and the spring nearby, whose water eventually led to Oceanus itself, producing life-giving fruit with seeds of regeneration, exemplified especially through the fig and the pomegranate, as known in mythological gardens as in the Hesperides, imagined to have existed by the exit of *Oceanus* by the Pillars of Heracles by the exit of Oceanus, the river of Death that flowed to the West. It is then not difficult to understand why the serpent or the dragon is found close to the tree, as at Colchis, guarding the truth symbolized by the golden fleece, a challenge for the hero to get, or at the Garden of Eden, guarding the truth symbolized by the forbidden fruit which opens Man's eyes.

## Oceanus

If the Underworld, the place of Death, provided fertility to life above; if man was obsessed with the idea that everything and everybody dies and is buried underneath, then he constantly lived with the hope of participating in the cycle of death and life, and of life and death, of his

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5 On the Thrinax and its etymological relationship with the name of Thrinacia, see H.C.R. Vella (2012), 18-23, and H.C.R. Vella (2015).

own resurrection or reincarnation, of the importance of burial and its ritual, and of the commemoration of the dead through anniversaries and funeral games. These rituals were preserved not just for dead human beings, but also for the celestial phenomena which died every day when they sank into Oceanus, the River of Death which returns soon. In fact, the word *ōkeanós* is derived from two Greek words: *ōkýs*, meaning "fast", and *heanós*, meaning "sail", that is "fast sailing" to the West, the destination of Death. Of the mentioned phenomena, the moon in particular reminded man of Death every day. It died not only every day, but also in the course of half a month, when it even disappears for three days.

## The Moon

The Moon provided ancient man with symbolic numbers which passed on from Babylon to Greece and Israel, from the Classical World to Western Civilization, and from Israel to Christianity.

The Moon, we saw, disappears for three days before it is regenerated. It also appears in three major phases: first quarter, full moon and last quarter. For three days, Jonah lay hidden in the fish's belly to be regurgitated on Nineveh; for three days Christ lay hidden in the bosom of Earth to be resurrected in the first hours of a Sunday. Also, for three days, Earth enjoys full light from the Moon, full-moon day, the preceding and succeeding days. For those three days, the Athenians celebrated the feast of the Moon in summer through the re-enactment of Death dramatized by heroic deaths and the tragic challenges the hero faced. God Dionysus, the beardless god, the patron god of changing circumstances and personages in drama, of viticulture and the changing effects of wine on man, and of internal change, like Adonis for Cybele in Asia Minor, represented the changing goddess to whom he was her minor paramour; for those three days, the Greeks celebrated orgies at moonlit nights on mountain tops, as at Cithaeron in Euripides' *Bacchae*, when the women, not men, behaved ecstatically and unpredictably, as unpredictable is the moon in its anomalous course during the month, as unpredictable is the movement of the goat which was sacrificed to the god during the

dramatic performances in the theatre, the goat which represented the god and which gave its name to tragedy (Gk *trágos*).

The moon's cycle lasts for c.29.5 days, but its visibility for 28 days. Consequently, the Babylonians divided their lunar month into four weeks each of 7 days each, 7 becoming the most important sacred number for those who believed in the Moon-Goddess, and for those cultures and religions, including ours, was influenced by the Babylonians over the period of millennia of years. 14 was important because full moon occurs then in the lunar month, while the importance of 28 is derived from the moon's total brightness and appearance. Other lunar sacred numbers are made from the composition of numbers 3 and 7, and these include 10, made up of  $3 + 7$ , 30 ( $10 \times 3$ ), and 40 ( $10 + 30$ ). 50 is ( $40 + 10$ ) and  $(7 \times 7) + 1$ , the additional day symbolizing the day of success, completion and rest. 70 is  $7 \times 10$ , 490 is  $7 \times 70$ , the Jewish infinite number, and 700 is  $7 \times 10 \times 10$  or  $(7 \times 50) \times 2$ . 12 was another lunar sacred number, for there are 12 full lunar cycles in a solar year, while the moon travels through 12 full zodiac signs also in a solar year. 9, 13 and 21 were negative lunar numbers. 9 symbolized the missing day from 10, 13 signified the 13th uncompleted lunar cycle within the solar year, while 21 clearly showed the moon at its waning stage.

The Moon's name and epithet is *Phoebe*, meaning "bright", and it is referred to the Moon-Goddess over a number of generations in Greek mythology, reflecting the several generations of Man all honouring the same goddess and accommodating them in one and the same family tree.

Thus, Uranus and Ge, "Heaven" and "Earth", produced the 12 Titans (12 of all numbers), among whom we mention Hyperion and Theia, Cronus and Rhea, Coeus and Phoebe, and Oceanus and Tethys, all brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. This reproduction represented different expressions of the origins of Sun and Moon, the name "Phoebe" here applied for the first time to Coeus' wife and sister. If Phoebe was the Moon personified, then it would not be difficult to see her qualities in the mythological lives of Theia, Rhea and Tethys.

Hyperion and Theia begot Helios, Selene and Eos, the first two being different names for "Sun" and "Moon". In addition, their sister, "Dawn", is mentioned for the first time here. By his mating with Clymene, Helios begot Lampetia, Phaethusa, Phoebe and Phaethon in the fourth generation, all names signifying "brightness", Phoebe *par excellence*.

Cronus and Rhea begot Zeus and Hera, the only couple becoming husband and wife in the third generation from among their brothers and sisters, Hades, Poseidon, Hestia and Demeter. With his mating with Leto, daughter of Coeus and Phoebe and his own first cousin, Zeus became the father of Apollo and Artemis, brother and sister but not husband and wife any more, being "Sun" and "Moon" for the fourth generation, confirmed by their epithets *Phoebus* and *Phoebe*.

From the above reconstruction of the generations of the celestial phenomena, it will be observed that the Moon appears from the second to the fourth generation as an offspring of Heaven and Earth. But the Moon does not always rise from the terrestrial horizon. For half a year the Earth tilts northwards or southwards, and this might have caused Man, positioned in one and the same place, to see the Moon rising at one time during the year from a terrestrial horizon, at another time from a maritime one. Alternatively, landlocked people always saw the Moon rising from behind land, maritime people always saw it rising from the sea, and the origin of the Moon differed to the two peoples.

For this reason, the Moon received derivation also from the Sea. It has to be pointed out here that both Oceanus and Pontus mean "Sea", while both Ge and Gaea mean "Earth". Mother-Earth, Ge, was the mother of both Heaven (Uranus) and Sea (Oceanus and Pontus). By mating with the Sea as Pontus, she begot Nereus, and by the mating of the Sea as Oceanus with his sister Tethys came Doris and Clymene. Doris became the wife of her cousin, Nereus, and mother of the 50 Nereides, including Thetis, mother of Achilles, and Melite, while Clymene, as we said, became the wife of her cousin, Helios.

## Melite and Thrinacia

The fact that Melite was the second cousin of Lampetia, Phaethusa, Phoebe and Phaethon, and the fact that all these names were significantly attributed to residents of the same archipelago, Thrinacia, the islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino, the name of Thrinacia itself an epithet of the Moon-Goddess, “she of the triple phases”, has already been discussed.<sup>6</sup> Then it was shown how Thrinacia, the sacred island of Death, counterpoised the Underworld itself in Odysseus’ journey: for from the Underworld in western North Africa, Odysseus sailed back to Aea, Circe’s island, that is, Ustica, and from there his crew landed nowhere except in Thrinacia, a desert island on the other side of Sicily, beyond the Straits of Messina; then it was shown how the last landfall of Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey* before he came to Ogygia, which existed by the south coast of Italy, therefore, not Gozo, receives archaeological support for Malta as its site precisely from the itinerary itself of Odysseus as described in Homer with appropriate direction of winds and the position of the remote and desert island south of Sicily, and by the description of its hollow harbour, be it the Grand Harbour, then penetrating as far inland as Qormi (Greek *hormoi*, pronounced in Byzantine times as “*ormi*”), at the confluence of Wied is-Sewda and Wied il-Kbir, Marsamxett Harbour leading to Wied l-Imtida, Salina Bay then penetrating into Burmarrad and Wied il-Ghasel, Xemxija Bay leading to Wied il-Pwales, or Ghadira Bay and its inner fresh-water lake, all five harbours facing the North-East towards Capo Passaro. Another archaeological support to this theory is the existence of Neolithic Temples in Malta and Gozo, two of which, the Hypogeum and the Tarxien Temple, are located in the vicinity of the Grand Harbour itself. The relatively large amount of these huge temples in two small islands, all equidistant one from the other, prove the past existence of sacred islands which form our archipelago.<sup>7</sup> These islands were the habitations of nymphs and immortal sheep and cattle,

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6 Public Lecture delivered by H.C.R. Vella at the Greek Embassy at Ta’ Xbiex, Malta, in January, 2011, and published in *Literatura* (2012) 54 (3), 7-36, with the title of “Thrinacia, the Island of Malta”.

7 On the theory of the equidistance between these Neolithic Temples, see H.C.R. Vella (2000), 7-10.

animals seen on relief at Tarxien Temple. All these temples were built or excavated, as in the case of the Hypogeum, in the shape of cavities, symbolizing both the cavities of the pregnant Mother-Goddess, the labyrinth and the Underworld, and the crescent Moon-Goddess. Of particular interest are the reliefs of dots and serpentine coils on sides of some of the huge boulders representing the labyrinthian cells and spiral paths leading to the Underworld. The Temples were sacred, were used for burial, were orientated, like those at Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim, towards the setting of the celestial phenomena, particularly the Moon,<sup>8</sup> towards the place where Oceanus, the river of Death, existed, and positioned on sacred islands, with a population mysteriously wiped out, as was the case with Thrinacia, the Island of Helius, the Sun, and of his three daughters, Lampetia, Phaethusa and Phoebe, the three epithets of the Moon. The elimination of Man from the sacred island reminds us of the Fall of Man from the Garden of Eden, the Classical Elysium, before he touched on forbidden soil or fruit or truth.

In Homer's account, the lunar symbolic numbers also come in here. Odysseus' men spent one lunar month (28 days) on Thrinacia before killing one of the sacred forbidden cows, and an additional one lunar week (7 days) before sailing off in a westerly wind beyond Pachynus and, afterwards for Odysseus alone, in a southerly wind towards the Straits of Messina. Also, on the island there were 7 herds of sheep and 7 herds of cattle, 50 in each (all lunar numbers). This means that there were 700 sacred animals on the island, that is,  $(7 \times 50) \times 2 = 700$ , the highest combination of sacred numbers seen above, the number of infinity in an island of immortal animals. The immortality of this cattle brought death to the intruders: hence the combination of Death and Immortality in the dying and ever regenerating Moon-Goddess. Here, in the episode at Thrinacia, we remind ourselves of the 7 youths and 7 maidens that were offered annually to the Minotaur in the labyrinth of Crete, and the 50 *Nereides* which included Melite, the

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<sup>8</sup> A colleague of mine, Prof. Chev. Charles Savona Ventura drew my attention to two statuettes, one found at Mnajdra, the other at Tarxien, with ten horizontal lines drawn on their back. The ten lines represent a combination of two lunar numbers, 3 and 7, and point to the lunar importance in the orientation of these temples.

Greek name of Malta.<sup>9</sup> We are also reminded of the sacred cattle of Geryon in Cape Taenarus, an island like Thrinacia, which possessed a cave also leading to the Underworld. There, on Thrinacia, by the spring of fresh water, Odysseus slept, as he slept in the boat when his comrades were tempted to open his bag of winds and to penetrate into forbidden secrets and lost their chance of landing at Ithaca, an experience which recalls that of Eve; there, on Thrinacia, Odysseus experienced sleep, as Evenus did when he was supposed to watch over the sacred cattle of the same Helios in Apollonia by the river Chon. Sleep, with its visions, shapes and dreams, is the daughter of Death in its connotation of the unconscious, and so it is found both at the entrance of the Vergilian account of the Underworld (Verg. *A.* 6.278: *tum consanguineus Leti Sopor*), by the elm-tree at the centre with false dreams underneath its leaves (Verg. *A.* 6.282-283), as already seen, and at its exit, where Aeneas met the twin Gates of Sleep (Verg. *A.* 6.893: *sunt geminae Somni portae*). Thus, Sleep, the closest to Death, marks the beginning and end of the Underworld; Odysseus' sleep marked the beginning of the slaughter of Helios' cattle and their own death. Finally, Death hides man from Life. This is why a veil covers Persephone's face on Roman coins minted in Malta: she lived for six months of the year in a world of gloom, and hence her beauty, which captivated Hades, is covered. Immortality and concealment are met together both in the Underworld and in remote places of the mythological world, as in Ogygia in the figure of the nymph Calypso, whose very name is derived from *kalýptō*, meaning "to hide", "to cover", even "to kill" and "to bury", and therefore "to send into the Underworld", but also "to protect" and "to guard", as she protected Odysseus for seven years, the significant lunar number used here, as the serpent out of concealment guarded the tree. Persephone's own veil was in Greek *kalýptra*.

## Women

The role of woman in Greek mythology also came into the picture of the Serpent, the Moon and the Underworld. The very duration of 29.5

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9 H.C.R. Vella (2002), 7.

days common to both the moon's cycle and the woman's menstrual period made the ancient peoples believe that the Moon was a goddess (not male, as for Semitic peoples), a goddess of fertility and a clear regulator of when a woman could be approached or avoided. The three days of fertility and the three days around full moon, the fourteen days from the beginning of the cycle to those three days, the three days of absence of moon, the colour of blood in the rising full moon, are all important natural common qualities in the moon and the woman, unnoticed only by those whose minds are ever bent on modern technological gadgets. Man originally lived, as the Roman expression went, *sub divo*, under the protection of the divine sky and participated in the changing aspects of the celestial phenomena much more actively than we do today.

It is because of this connection of women with the moon, also with regards to its anomaly in its apparent random speed around the earth in apogee and perigee periods, bringing about different sizes and brightness of our satellite, and different effects on fertility for the primitive man, gravity for the modern, that made them inseparable one from the other in ancient literature, religion, painting and iconography, include the Christian one. *Dianae sumus in fide*, sings Catullus in C. 34. Artemis, the equivalent Greek goddess, aggressive, a virgin (for every month, it, like a fertile and untouched woman, mates with no other planet in the vicinity and turns red at its rising), a huntress at night which she illuminates by her full disc (hence connection between the Moon-goddess and hunting), whose name is derived from *artaméō*, "to cut into pieces", as the month is cut into pieces by the changing phases of the moon, becomes rather for the Romans the benign and protective goddess, Diana, originally Divana, the female of Dijovis, original of Jovis, Jupiter, becomes Lucina, goddess of childbirth, precisely because Lucina, derived from *lux*, "light", leads the child out from the darkness of the womb into the light of the world and the sun. Also, as the moon dies monthly to give birth to a new one, a woman, who also monthly regenerates herself and sees blood, the colour of the rising moon, almost dies to give birth to her new offspring. She was the aggressive Anath of the ancient Syrians precisely for defending her virginity against gods who were tempted by her beauty, as Artemis did against Actaeon, Callisto and

Orion. Lucina's virginity came from the apparent lonely course she took in the sky when contrasted to the other much smaller stars and planets. Her daily sinking into the Underworld, the residence of the serpent, made her associated in Jewish and Christian literature with the Woman and the serpent, the former representing a divine person, the latter, Satan, the clever trickster.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that we all share with those personages mentioned in Greek and Babylonian mythology and early Biblical episodes an attempt at understanding truth which we once lost on birth and which we hope to regain after death. Meanwhile, we seek different measures in probing into that truth. The serpent, the moon and the Underworld provided primitive man with the repertoire of the origin and residence of that truth, Man communicating with them in his deeper penetration into that mystery. It may be that modern man still seeks that truth, perhaps in deep meditation, in the Bible, in scientific observation; but a great difference remains between primitive man and modern man in this, that while the latter often seeks to bury his head in the soil of modern technology, the former often used his head to read further than the apparent.

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