



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

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Malta Classics Association*

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## From the Editor

Four years ago, the Malta Classics Association was founded with the aim of disseminating and furthering Classical Studies, and especially, the Greek and Latin languages – a daunting task, indeed, considering that the Classics Studies were only limited to University courses, and stood completely outside the curriculum of pre-tertiary education. Ever since its inception in 2010, the Association has successfully striven and has been instrumental in raising awareness of such an important aspect of Education, and its efforts are now bearing fruit. Moreover, the general public's response has been encouraging – membership has steadily increased, the web-site frequently accessed, Classical Studies introduced as a new subject in post-secondary education at the Junior College of the University of Malta, Naxxar Higher Secondary School and Gozo Higher Secondary School, and the public lectures held under the auspices of the Association have always been well-attended.

Inspired by that famous Latin proverb, *verba movent, scripta manent*, the Malta Classics Association has now taken this additional initiative of publishing its own annual Journal, *Melita Classica*, in which both local and foreign Classicists can find an appropriate forum wherein the fruit of their literary endeavours and their researches can be published. In this wise, no constraints are being made on contributors, save that the material submitted pertains generally to Classical Studies and Languages. Contributors are thus most welcome and are encouraged to submit original articles or material for future publications – writing guidelines are printed at the end of this journal.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, I wish to thank all the contributors to this first issue of *Melita Classica*, and earnestly hope that our readers would find the studies offered profitable and enjoyable.

**Fra Alan Joseph Adami O.P.**

**Editor**

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## Myths: Some Greek and Oriental Types

*Prof. Horatio Caesar Roger Vella*

What seems to be, according to G.S. Kirk, peculiarly Greek and not eastern is the heroic type of myth, not ruling out the existence of a few heroes in the Mesopotamian mythology such as Gilgamesh, Etana and Adapa, or the pharaoh and wise man in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is this inclusion into Greek mythology, adding to its complexities, that make its myths so impressive.<sup>2</sup> The qualities of a hero consist of a personal and often lonely combat against odds (for example, death, fulfilment of oracle, contests),<sup>3</sup> although C. Kerényi earlier does not think that even heroism is an essential feature of the hero, but basically an almost historical and tragic quality.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to his martial qualities, the Egyptian hero, in A.B. Lloyd's interpretation of Herodotus' affirmation in Book II that heroes have no place in the religion of Egypt, is non virile, but wise and clever in magic.<sup>5</sup>

Since, according to F.O. Hvidberg-Hansen, there is a lack of Phoenician or Punic mythology,<sup>6</sup> one cannot compare with or deduce importation from that part of the East, at least by the 9th c. B.C. However, Kirk refers to the fertility aspects of Canaanite myths from Late Bronze Age tablets at Ugarit.<sup>7</sup> These myths are shared with those of Sumeria, Babylonia, Egypt, Crete and parts of pre-Dorian Greece in that the male god *paredros* disappears or is sacrificed annually in combination with

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1 Kirk (1970) 178, 225-226.

2 Kirk (1972) 80. See also Kirk (1970) 205-206.

3 Kirk (1970) 186.

4 Kerényi (1959) 1-2, 14.

5 Lloyd (1976) 50.

6 Hvidberg-Hansen (1986) 185.

7 Kirk (1970) 221.

the dry summer season and reappears or is reborn with the new rains.<sup>8</sup> We also remind ourselves of the importance of Herennius Philo's translation of the Phoenician History of Sanchuniathon for Phoenician mythology,<sup>9</sup> while the myth of Minos' bull, as T.M. Klein sees it, is a garbled version of Tor El Abika in Canaanite mythology.<sup>10</sup> Biblical mythology had virtually no influence on the Greek, according to G.S. Kirk.<sup>11</sup> Before him, the two Frankforts tell us that while the Egyptians and Mesopotamians share in their belief that their gods were immanent in nature, both the Hebrews and the Greeks, reflecting upon their traditions and mythology respectively, broke away from this mode of speculation.<sup>12</sup> This break took place for the Greeks in prehistoric times, as our earliest knowledge of Greek religion from literature comes to us at its dawn with Homer and Hesiod, and we see there already that the Greeks separated morality from cosmogonic issues,<sup>13</sup> and this is shared with the religion of the Hebrews. So, although we cannot talk of influences here, we cannot avoid important common issues that must go back to another common and more ancient origin, as the question of the genealogies in Genesis and Hesiod's *Theogony*;<sup>14</sup> the omphalos of the world and its association with paradise, earth and the Underworld; the earth-goddess and the solar deity; the Underworld waters or river; the cosmic tree that joins heaven, earth and the Underworld; and the serpent (or dragon) that is always close to these waters and the dead.<sup>15</sup> S. Terrien discusses these issues by comparing Jerusalem with Delphi in all of them, including as well the aspects of female and male prostitution and bisexual elements, such as Dionysus at Delphi and the

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8 Vella (1986) 317-319.

9 Hes. *Th.*, ed. by (M.L. West, ed. {1966} 19).

10 Klein (1981) 58.

11 Kirk (1970) 220.

12 Frankfort (1964) 237 and 241.

13 Vella (1991) 68.

14 Hes. *Th.*, (M.L. West, ed. {1966}, 3). See also Frankfort(1964) 249.

15 Vella (1991) 61.



Cherubim.<sup>16</sup> The cosmic tree in Greek mythology is the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, the Egyptian Field of Reeds and the Hesperides, often associated with life-bestowing rivers and the serpent. These trees are either apple trees or pomegranate, golden and rich in colour. Also, orchards of such trees were often associated with female-goddesses.<sup>17</sup> West, in another work of his, discusses this aspect of the tree of life and its leaves upon which names of moribund people and their destinies were written in Egypt and Greece, referring to echoes in literature in both Homer and Vergil.<sup>18</sup> Sacred prostitution is not completely unheard of in prehistoric Greece. Klein considers both Medea and Ariadne to be such, and I would add Ion, but his comparison of Nausicaa and Rahab as prostitutes giving shelter to travellers is unacceptable.<sup>19</sup> Still, his reference to Dt. 23, 18-19, forbidding cultic prostitutes, confirms their existence among the Hebrews.

The omphalos of the world for Egypt was the primeval hill that arose from the waters of chaos and which Frankfort assimilates with the pyramid reaching heaven from the earth and being the abode of the dead king.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as Kirk affirms, most of the Egyptian myths revolve around the king's divinity and his soul after his death,<sup>21</sup> which aspect of myth had its influence, according to P. Walcot, upon the divinity aspect of the Mycenaean king.<sup>22</sup> Though Egyptian myths had less influence upon the Greek than the Mesopotamian did,<sup>23</sup> still, the Sphinx myth confirms early Greek contact with Egypt.<sup>24</sup> Indian mythology shares with Egyptian in its influence upon the Greek, in

16 Terrien (1970) 315-338.

17 Kerényi (1959) pl. 37.

18 West (1971) 56, 58-60. I add Verg., A. (Hirtzel, ed. {1963}).

19 Klein (1981) 55-58. For a different view on Greek cultic prostitution, see Cornelius (1976) 182-184.

20 Frankfort (1964) 30. For further significance of the pyramid in religion, see Lobell (1986) 43 and 48.

21 Kirk (1970) 207-208.

22 Walcot (1967) 53-62.

23 Kirk (1970) 213.

24 Vella (1991) 62-63.

Kirk's view, both for the introduction of the solar deity and for abstract allegory in myths, Greek and Indian languages being derived from common Sanskrit.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, allegory is also present in Sumerian and Akkadian myths.

Oriental influence upon Greek mythology is much more represented by the Mesopotamian (being Sumerian and Akkadian), Anatolian (being Hurrian and Hittite), and the Phoenician referred to above than the Egyptian or Indian.<sup>26</sup> Common aspects in these myths and the Greek ones are: fertility,<sup>27</sup> the dead and the snake,<sup>28</sup> the disappearing male god,<sup>29</sup> anthropomorphism,<sup>30</sup> ritual,<sup>31</sup> cosmogony, theogony and the Underworld. A word is necessary on the last three.

In a comparative study of cosmogonical and theogonical myths of Mesopotamia, Greece and, to a lesser extent, Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean coast, Kirk notes some great similarities, such as the existence of a succession of three or four supreme gods, the last of whom remains victorious following his defeat over a monster; a golden age period; the coming of man; and deluge. A few differences can be expected to exist. For example, the Babylonians were more astrologically minded, while man appears later than in Greek myths, which are devoid of eastern blood-baths initiated by Inanna / Ishtar, Anath and Hathor.<sup>32</sup> Heroes of floods include Deucalion and Themis for Greece, Xisuthros for Armenia, Parnapishtim for Babylon,<sup>33</sup> and Noah for Palestine.

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25 Kirk (1970) 209 and 214.

26 Kirk (1970) 84.

27 Kirk (1970) 223.

28 Barrett (1979) 10.

29 Kirk (1970) 220.

30 Dietrich (1973) 43.

31 Frankfort (1964) 16; Kirk (1970) 220.

32 Kirk (1970) 224-225.

33 Graves (1955-57) 141, n. 3, 142, nn. 4-5, 244, n. 7.

The cosmogonical myths are similar in their aspect of life and vegetation, and their birth and development, as Dietrich explains,<sup>34</sup> while West discusses similarities in the myth of the marriage between heaven and earth and the related wedding presents.<sup>35</sup> In theological myths, Kirk, West, Dietrich and S.G. Pembroke agree that some details and complexities in all these myths leave us with no doubt that Hesiod was ultimately depending upon oriental sources.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Alalu, Anu, Kumarbi, Teshub correspond to Elun, Uranus, El, Demarus and to Oceanus, Uranus, Cronus and Zeus. A comparative study on the Underworld in Indian, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Greek myths has been done by West and Kirk,<sup>37</sup> and the common aspects are: the river, ferryman, monster (often a serpent), and a dialogue.

Elsewhere I have already discussed the importation of foreign heroes and heroines from the East.<sup>38</sup> Dionysus, elsewhere from Phrygia, is said to have been born of Zeus and Semele, daughter of Cadmus. Semele's name has a Semitic ring, while Cadmus meets a dragon guarding a spring, elements also already discussed elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> Also later, seven Argive generals fight against seven Theban ones, seven being a quarter of the lunar month, the non-solar reckoning of eastern peoples. In that myth, the Argive seven at Nemea meet another dragon as they search for water.

Achilles and Odysseus are not imported heroes, but both remind us of the Babylonian Gilgamesh. Kirk refers to Achilles' and Gilgamesh's divine mothers and their loss of friends whose ghosts appear to them.<sup>40</sup>

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34 Dietrich (1973) 64.

35 West (1971) 53. See also Kirk (1970) 224.

36 Kirk (1970) 214 and 224; B.C. Dietrich (1973) 54; Hes., Th., (M.L. West, ed. {1966}, 19, 21, and 23-24); Pembroke (1981) 321. West (1971) 49, compares Atlas with Upelluri in Hurrian-Hittite succession-combat myth. See also M.K. Wakeman (1969) 313-320.

37 West (1971) 47 and 64-65; Kirk (1970) 224. See also D. Granados de Arena et al. (1982) 67-100. Gilgamesh has his equivalent in Greek mythology through Rhampsinitus, Heracles and Odysseus.

38 Vella (1991) 64.

39 Vella (1991) 61.

40 Kirk (1970) 223.

Dietrich, after T.B.L. Webster, compares the travels of Odysseus and Gilgamesh, even to the Underworld.<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, one can say that myths can be heroic, divine, cultic, ritualistic, natural, allegorical, cosmological, cosmogonical, and theogonical. Most of these types of myths are common to ancient Greece, Anatolia, the Near East, Egypt and India, and this may very well point to cross-influences among different cultures in prehistoric times of Greece.

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41 Dietrich (1973) 47; T.B.L. Webster (1964) 67ff.

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**ABSTRACT**

Although the hero stands out in mythology as typically Greek and not Oriental, one can trace some common elements in the Greek hero and Gilgamesh, Etana and Adapa of Mesopotamia. One can also see similarities in various concepts through Greek mythology and Hebrew sources, such as the serpent, the garden with its tree of life, the omphalos of the world, and the Underworld with its river. Egypt and India share with Greece the concepts of life after death, the Sphinx and allegorical myth. Anatolian and Near East influences upon Greece are much greater than Egyptian and Indian, and these concern anthropomorphism, the serpent, the Underworld, fertility and death. In addition, one notes cosmogonical and theogonical similarities in these countries, which include the deluge and the succession of gods in three generations. Individual gods and heroes share common traits and incidents.

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