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Malta Classics Association,

The Department of Classics and Archaeology,
Archaeology Farmhouse, Car park 6,
University of Malta, Msida

info@classicsmalta.org

www.classicsmalta.org

Lampas, the Island of Comino

*Horatio Caesar Roger Vella**

Scylax 111. (4th c. B.C.):

Πλοῦς δὲ ἀπὸ Ἑρμαίας ἐπὶ Κόσυρον ἡμέρας. Ἀπὸ Ἑρμαίας ἄκρας πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα μικρὸν ἀπὸ Ἑρμαίας εἰσι νῆσοι τρεῖς μικραὶ κατὰ τοῦτο, ὑπὸ Καρχηδονίων οὐκούμεναι· Μελίτη πόλις, καὶ, λιμὴν, Γαῦλος πόλις, Λαμπάς· αὕτη πύργους ἔχει δύο ἢ τρεῖς.

“A one-day voyage from Hermaea to Cosyrus. From the promontory of Hermaea towards the East, a small distance from Hermaea, there are three small islands in this order, inhabited by the Carthaginians: Malta, city and harbour, Gaulos, city, **Lampas**: this has two or three towers.”¹

For a long period of time scholars interpreted Lampas to mean Lampedusa, which island is far distant from Malta and Gozo about one hundred miles to the West. However, this cannot be so, both because the three islands are taken together by the author, and for the following reason.

Homer recounts that after leaving Circe’s island, Aea, identified as Ustica in the North of Sicily, Odysseus and his men in their only surviving boat out of twelve, visited the Sirens and passed through the Straits of Messina known as Scylla and Charybdis. This last landmark before they came to Thrinacia proved to be a shock to Odysseus, for later on, after leaving Thrinacia, Odysseus, having lost all his comrades in the sea, was much afraid that the South Wind would blow his raft northward precisely toward Scylla and Charybdis. In fact, he did approach the straits, but managed to steer his way away from them to North-East, till he came to Ogygia.

This account leaves no doubt where Thrinacia and Ogygia were situated, Thrinacia, South of Sicily, and Ogygia North-East of Taormina.²

1 Translation by the author of this article.

2 See Vella (2021).

In Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men, after visiting the entrance to the Underworld in North Africa, are helped by Circe both with provisions for one whole lunar month, and with directions how he will reach the island of Thrinacia. Circe told him that this island was the home of seven herds of cattle and seven herds of sheep, fifty in each. These did not breed or die, and their shepherds were the nymphs Phaethusa, Lampetia (and Phoebe), children of Helius and Neaera:

Hom. *Od.* 12.127–133:

“Θρινακίην δ’ ἔς νῆσον ἀφίξεαι ἔνθα δὲ πολλὰ
 βόσκοντ’ Ἡελίοιο βόες καὶ ἴφια μῆλα,
 ἑπτὰ βοῶν ἀγέλαι, τόσα δ’ οἰῶν πῶεα καλά,
 πενήκοντα δ’ ἕκαστα. γόνος δ’ οὐ γίγνεται αὐτῶν,
 οὐδέ ποτε φθινύθουσι. θεαὶ δ’ ἐπιποιμένες εἰσὶν,
 νύμφαι εὐπλόκαμοι, Φαέθουσά τε Λαμπετίη τε,
 ἃς τέκεν Ἡελίω Ὑπερίονι δῖα Νέαира.

But according to Ovid and other Classical writers, the mother of Phaethon, Phaethusa, Phoebe and Lampetia was not Neaera, but Clymene, whom Hesiod in the *Theogony* mentions as one of the many daughters of Oceanus and Tethys, and whom also Vergil in the *Georgics* describes as an Oceanid.

Hes. *Th.* 337, 346, 351:

Τηθὺς δ’ Ὀκεανῶ Ποταμοῦς τέκε δινήεντας,
 Τίκτε δὲ θυγατέρων ἱερὸν γένος, WW
 Ἴππῳ τε Κλυμένη τε Ῥόδειά τε Καλλιρόη τε

Verg. *G.* 4.341–346:

Clioque et Beroe soror, **Oceanitides** ambae,
 ambae auro, pictis incinctae pellibus ambae,
 atque Ephyre atque Opis et Asia Deiopea
 et tandem positis velox Arethusa sagittis.
inter quas curam **Clymene** narrabat inanem
 Volcani Martisque dolos et dulcia furta,

Ov. *Met.* 2.333–337:

At **Clymene** postquam dixit, quaecumque fuerunt
 in tantis dicenda malis, lugubris et amens
 et laniata sinus totum percensuit orbem
 exanimisque artus primo, mox ossa requirens.

Like Homer, Ovid leaves out the name of Phoebe, but at least he refers to her as the third (*tertia*) sister of Phaethon:

Ov. *Met.* 2.345–351:

Illae more suo (nam morem fecerat usus)
plangorem dederant: e quis **Phaethusa**, sororum
maxima, cum vellet terra procumbere, quæta est
deriguisset pedes; ad quam conata venire
candida **Lampatiæ** subita radice retenta est;
tertia, cum crinem manibus laniare pararet,
avellit frondes;...

Hyginus, in the second century A.D., does mention Phoebe as the sister of Phaethon but, on the other hand, leaves out Phaethusa:

Hyg. *Fab.* 154.4:

Harum lacrimae, ut Hesiodus indicat, in electrum sunt duratae; Heliades tamen nominantur. Sunt autem Merope, Helie, Aegle, **Lampetiæ**, **Phoebe**, Aetherie, Dioxippe.

Thrinacia, the archipelago of the three islands, South of Sicily, which Odysseus and his men visited and stayed there for 35 days (28 {lunar month} + 7 {lunar week}), were therefore named after these three nymphs, daughters of Helios and Clymene, who looked after the seven herds of sheep of fifty each, and the seven herds of cows also of fifty each. These were sacred islands uninhabited by men, but by these nymphs and a total of 700 animals ($\{7 \times 50\} = \{7 \times 50\}$), nymphs and animals described by Homer as immortal. The sacred numbers of 7, 50 and 700 are all derived from the phases of the moon-goddess. 7 is the quarter of the length of the lunar month (28), 50 is 10 ($\{3 + 7\} \times 4$ [lunar weeks] = 40 + 10) = 50 = ($\{7 \times 7\} + 1$), while 700 is (70 {7 x 10} x 10). This moon-goddess was Phoebe of the triple faces, first quarter, full moon and last quarter: hence Thrinacia.

Thrinacia, the only uninhabited island South of Scylla and Charybis, is therefore identifiable with the islands of the Maltese archipelago. Malta has its name derived from Melite, one of the 50 daughters of Nereus and Doris as narrated by Hesiod in the Theogony:

Hes. *Th.* 240–242, 247:

Νηρήος δ' ἐγένοντο μεγήρατα τέκνα θεάων
πόντω ἐν ἀτρυγέτῳ καὶ Δωρίδος ἠκυόμοιο,

κούρης Ὠκεανοῦ, τελήεντος ποταμοῦ,
καὶ Μελίτη χαρίεσσα καὶ Εὐλιμένη καὶ Ἀγαυή

Both Melite and the three daughters of Helius were, therefore, granddaughters of Oceanus, the river that poured into Death in the West. Malta, Gozo and Comino were also the sacred islands of death in prehistoric times, death characterized by the burial places found in the great temples and hypogeum of Neolithic times and by the disappearance of the population before the Bronze Age period. This was the death experienced by Odysseus' men who, against the warnings of both Circe and Teiresias in the Underworld, ate from the meat of the immortal animals at the complete waning of the moon-goddess (the 28th day of the lunar month) and suffered death at sea as soon as they left Thrinacia.

Odysseus' ship was destroyed except for the heel, to which Odysseus, sole survivor, tied up the mast with a rope, and floated on it. Following the West wind came next the South wind, which drove Odysseus back northwards exactly to Scylla and Charybdis. This point is crucial for our appreciation of Homer's detailed references to geographical matters; for to go to Messina from Malta, one has first to sail East and then North! Having survived also from this place, Odysseus was driven for nine days, and on the tenth came to the Island of Ogygia.

Hom. *Od.* 12.303–428:

ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ τὴν νῆσον ἐλείπομεν, οὐδέ τις ἄλλη
φαίνεται γαῖαν, ἀλλ' οὐρανὸς ἠδὲ θάλασσα,
δὴ τότε κυανέην νεφέλην ἔστησε Κρονίων
νηὸς ὑπερ γλαφυρῆς, ἤχλυσε δὲ πόντος ὑπ' αὐτῆς.
ἠ δ' ἔθει οὐ μάλα πολλὸν ἐπὶ χρόνον: αἴψα γὰρ ἦλθε
κεκληγῶς Ζέφυρος μεγάλη σὺν λαίλαπι θύων,
ἰστοῦ δὲ προτόνους ἔρρηξ' ἀνέμοιο θύελλα
ἀμφοτέρους: ἰστός δ' ὀπίσω πέσεν, ὅπλα τε πάντα
εἰς ἄντλον κατέχυνθ'. ὁ δ' ἄρα πρυμνῆ ἐνὶ νηὶ
πλήξε κυβερνήτεω κεφαλὴν, σὺν δ' ὅστε' ἄραξε
πάντ' ἄμυδις κεφαλῆς: ὁ δ' ἄρ' ἀρνευτῆρι εἰοικῶς
κάππεσ' ἀπ' ἰκριόφιν, λίπε δ' ὅστέα θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ.
Ζεὺς δ' ἄμυδις βρόντησε καὶ ἔμβαλε νηὶ κεραυνόν:
ἠ δ' ἐλελίχθη πᾶσα Διὸς πληγεῖσα κεραυνῶ,
ἐν δὲ θεεῖου πλήτο, πέσον δ' ἐκ νηὸς ἐταῖροι.
οἱ δὲ κορώνησιν ἴκελοι περὶ νῆα μέλαιναν
κύμασιν ἐμφορέοντο, θεὸς δ' ἀποαίνυτο νόστον.
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ διὰ νηὸς ἐφοίτων, ὄφρ' ἀπὸ τοίχους
λύσει κλύδων τρόπιος, τὴν δὲ ψιλὴν φέρε κύμα,

ἐκ δέ οἱ ἰστὸν ἄραξε ποτὶ τρόπιν. αὐτὰρ ἐπ' αὐτῷ
 ἐπίτονος βέβλητο, βοὸς ῥινοῖο τετευχῶς:
 τῷ ῥ' ἄμφω συνέργον, ὁμοῦ τρόπιν ἠδὲ καὶ ἰστόν,
 ἐζόμενος δ' ἐπὶ τοῖς φερόμην ὀλοοῖς ἀνέμοισιν.
 ἔνθ' ἦ τοι Ζέφυρος μὲν ἐπαύσατο λαίλαπι θύων,
 ἦλθε δ' ἐπὶ Νότος ὤκα, φέρων ἐμῷ ἄλγεα θυμῷ,
 ὄφρ' ἔτι τὴν ὀλοὴν ἀναμετρήσαιμι Χάρυβδιν.

Homer here says that when they left Thrinacia, nothing was seen except the sky and the sea (οὐρανὸς ἠδὲ θάλασσα). Then he describes how the west wind blew first (αἶψα γὰρ ἦλθε/ κεκληγῶς Ζέφυρος μεγάλην σὺν λαίλαπι θύων), and then the south wind (ἦλθε δ' ἐπὶ Νότος ὤκα...). Hence, Odysseus knew that this south wind would blow his raft northward toward the dreaded Scylla and Charybdis (... φέρων ἐμῷ ἄλγεα θυμῷ,/ ὄφρ' ἔτι τὴν ὀλοὴν ἀναμετρήσαιμι Χάρυβδιν). Now around the eastern and southern coasts of Sicily there is no such island so cut off from it, except for the Maltese islands, which are just further down southwards beyond Pachynus. Pantelleria, Linosa and Lampedusa are not possible alternatives for Thrinacia, because a South Wind, which they feared most bringing them back to Scylla and Charybdis, would have led them from those islands in the direction of Lilybaeum instead, that is, Marsala.



We finally come back to Scylax's three islands, Malta, Gozo and Lampas, which he said were inhabited by the Carthaginians. Scylax ignored the fact that these islands were also inhabited simultaneously by the Greeks who gave these islands Greek names.³ Nevertheless, he gives the third island, Comino, the name of Lampas. Scylax, then, has preserved the Homeric name of Comino, that is, Lampas (λαμπάς) for the Homeric Lampetia, which root is akin to that of Lampas. According to Ovid in the passage quoted above, Phaethusa was the greatest of the three nymphs (*maxima*), and so it would represent the largest island, Malta (Μελίτη), which would leave Gozo (γαῦλος) as the second largest island with the other name of Phoebe. Scylax also said that the island of Comino (λαμπάς) had two or three towers, no doubt needed to protect an island of such a small area and probably uninhabited by either Greeks or Carthaginians who we know lived on both Malta and Gozo.

Conclusion

Thrinacia, the triple-faced moon-goddess, is represented by Homer in his *Odyssey* through the islands of Phaethusa, Phoebe and Lampetia. All these three islands' names signified the splendour of the moon and its sacredness, distinguished by its size and light from all the other constellations at night. Malta, Gozo and Comino are three islands geographically cut off from the mainland, next to which only "sky and sea" are visible. Phaethusa (Melita), the largest according to Ovid, Phoebe (Gaulos) and Lampetia (Lampas according to Scylax) were three adjacent islands as sacred for Homer at the dawn of History writing on the Bronze Age period as they had been for prehistoric times.

Horatio Caesar Roger Vella is a Professor of Latin and Greek at the University of Malta.

3 See Vella (2019).

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