

ANNA AND MALTA

by

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In the third book of the *Fasti* — a work in chronological order on the Roman Calendar — Ovid (43 B.C. — c. 8 A.D.) describes the *festum geniale* or the jovial feast of Anna Perenna (1). The poet explains how the Anna Perenna, whom the people of Rome venerated on the Ides of March with revelry and ribald songs, was originally Anna, Queen Dido's younger sister.

After Aeneas's departure from Carthage and after the tragic death of the Carthaginian Queen Dido, Anna was forced to seek refuge in the kingdom of Battus. There she stayed for more than two years until she learnt that her brother Pygma'ion was sailing to those parts. On Battus's own advice she left for Camere. She was subsequently washed onto the Laurentine shore where she was welcomed by Aeneas, her sister's paramour. Unable to withstand Aeneas's wife Lavinia and driven by poignant sorrow for her sister's sad fate to the point of madness, Anna threw herself into the river Numicius. Thereafter she became a nymph (2) — *Anna Perenna* — the feast of whom was celebrated by the Romans on the fifteenth of March.

Such is the story of Anna as related by Ovid. Silius Italicus (26-101 A.D.) in the *Punica* (3) recalls Anna's escape from Carthage, her voyage to king Battus's land and also her subsequent departure. The two stories, the one told by Ovid and the other by Silius Italicus, are identical save in one detail. The two poets mention Anna's flight from Carthage because her life was threatened; both relate how she went to the kingdom of Battus; both refer to her two-year sojourn there; in the two accounts Anna is again forced to leave because Pygmalion was sailing thither. The only difference between the two lies in that Ovid makes Battus King of Melite, or Malta, whilst in Silius Italicus's story Battus is King of Cyrene.

It is not known from which source or sources Ovid drew his material. Silius Italicus, on the other hand, seems to have read Ovid's account (4). What is certain is that the Battus mentioned by Ovid and by Silius Italicus is one and the same person. Battus is represented in both accounts as a close contemporary of Aeneas; in the two stories Anna is said to have

1. Cf lines 523-656.

2. Cf. l. 653-654: *ipsa loqui visa est "placidi sum nympha Numini:
Amne perenne latens Anna Perenna vocor."*

3. Cf VIII, 50 f.

4. For example see how both authors express the idea of the time Anna spent

taken refuge in his kingdom; in the two poems he advises Anna to leave his kingdom because of Pygmalion; finally, he is presented as a rich and hospitable king.

Battus is the historical name or nickname of the first Greek king who founded the colony of Therians in Cyrene in 631 B.C. There were, at least, three other Greek kings of Cyrene who bore the same name (5). There was also a legend amongst the Greeks according to which the founding of the Greek colony in Cyrene took place at some time after the Trojan War and that the leader of this colony was the same historical Battus (6). There is no other source, literary or otherwise, linking Battus with Malta.

It seems possible, therefore, that Ovid transported, so to speak, Battus from Cyrene to Malta. If this is correct, it is not difficult to see why. Ovid in the *Fasti* wants to demonstrate that Anna Perenna and Dido's sister were one and the same person. So he makes Anna, the future Anna Perenna, (7) cross the Libyan Sea. She is then made to seek refuge on the island which is lashed by the Libyan waves. As presumably a legend said that Anna had sought refuge in Battus's land, he transposed Battus and his kingdom to Malta. In so doing he might also have availed himself of the opportunity of displaying his knowledge of Mediterranean geography. Ovid spent some time in Sicily and on his frequent cruises from that island he might also have visited Malta (8).

The opinion expressed recently (9) that Ovid's account indicates that there was a legend concerning Malta according to which the island was ruled by a Phoenician king named Battus and that the legend shows a Phoenician substratum in the Maltese population prior to Malta's becoming a part of the Roman Province of Sicily is not to be taken seriously. Even if one were to accept that Battus was a legendary king of Malta, it would not follow that Battus was a Phoenician king or that there was a Phoenician substratum in the population of Malta. Ovid does not mention Phoenician kings or Phoenicians in Malta. The word itself *Battos* if we accept the interpretation given by Herodotus and by the scholiast of

in Battus's kingdom: Ovid l. 575:

signa recensuerat bis sol sua, tertius ibat (annus)

Silius: atque ea dum flavas bis tondet messor aristas l. 54

5. Cf P.W. on Battus; also Francois Chamoux, *Cyrène sous la Monarchie des Battiades*, Paris 1953, passim.
6. Francois Chamoux, id, p. 72-73.
7. Probably Anna Perenna is derived from *annare*, *perannare*, to complete the circle of the year. Macrobius says that a sacrifice was offered in March to Anna Perenna *ut annare perannareque liceat*. Cf. W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals*, London 1899, p. 51.
8. Cf. *Ex Ponto*, ii, 10, 21-44.
9. Cf *Missione archeologica italiana a Malta, Rapporto preliminare*, Roma, 1964

Pindar, is not a Phoenician but a *Libyan* word (10); if we accept the interpretation of other writers it is the common Greek word for "one who stammers" (11).

It seems more reasonable to accept Silius Italicus's account that Battus was the king of Cyrene. Silius was not interested in connecting Anna Perenna with Dido's sister and, therefore, saw no reason why she should make such a long voyage from Carthage to Latium. Moreover, Silius echoes the legend which made Battus contemporary with Aeneas.

Reference has already been made to Ovid's cruises from Sicily, which he mentions in the Letters from Pontus. It is possible that he visited the island. Be that as it may; one is entitled to say that he knew a few things about Malta.

Ovid calls the island *Melite* not *Melita*. He does so for metrical purposes. The first two syllables have to be short the last long. Silius Italicus in another passage refers to Malta as *Melite* (12) for the same reason. Arator used the same form *Melite* (13) but scanned it differently.

Ovid knew where Malta lies. It is near Cosyra or Pantelleria, and is lashed by the Libyan waves. The word 'lashes' or *verberat* indicates rough seas, which are not uncommon around Malta. (14) Ovid also knew that *Melite* is, unlike *Pantelleria*, fertile. This must indicate that in Ovid's time Maltese agriculture was in good shape. It is interesting to note here that a corn-stalk appears on one of the Maltese coins (15) and that a temple of Proserpina — the Goddess of Corn — is referred to in a Maltese inscription. Although the island is very small (16) and the inhabitants unable to defend themselves (17), still king Battus is very rich, which might suggest, though not necessarily, that the island was doing well economically.

Malta nelle Letterature Classiche, p. 34. The feast of Anna Perenna was held at the *Via Flaminia ad lapidem primum*, near the present Porta del Popolo, and not far from the Tiber. Cf W. Warde Fowler, *op.cit.*, p. 50. Anna was forced into leaving Carthage by king *Iarba*, the Moor, not by king *Juba*.

10. Herod. IV, 155.

Schol. Pind. 11, p. 93.

11. Cf Suidas Lexicon.

12. Cf Punicæ, XIV, 250: *Lanigera Melite et litus piscosa Calacte*.

13. Cf Arator, *De Actibus Apostolorum*, A 11, 1135:

Sicanio lateri remis vicina Melite

14. The Libyan sea is that sea which washes the southern region of Sicily.

15. Cf A. Mayr, *Die Antiken Munzen der Inseln Malta . . .*; Munchen 1895, p. 9.

16. Cf Ovid, *Fasti*, 572: *haec, inquit, tellus quantulacumque . . .*

17. *Id.*, 578: *nos sumus imbelles, tu fuge sospes, ait*.