

THE PERIPLUS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

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THE first reference to the Maltese Islands (Malta and Gozo) occurs in a passage of the Periplus – (an account of a coasting voyage) – of the Inner Sea. This coastal survey bears the name of Skylax of Caryanda¹, perhaps the namesake of the navigator who sailed for Darius the Great over the North Indian Ocean; but the author is usually dubbed Pseudo-Skylax to distinguish him from the old Indian voyager. From internal evidence scholars conclude that the Periplus must have been written in the middle of the fourth century B.C.²

This coastal description of the Mediterranean – the first of its kind which happens to survive fairly complete – is little more than a 'sailor's handbook' of places and distances all round the coast of the Mediterranean³. It is divided into three big sections: Europe (ΕΥΡΩΠΗ), Asia (ΑΣΙΑ) and Libya (ΛΙΒΥΗ).

In the third section of the work which deals with Libya the author treats of Carthage, indicates its geographical position and includes all the Islands (Pontia, Cossura etc.) which lay in its geographical and political domain. Then he goes on to mention the Maltese Islands and Lampedusa.⁴

This is the passage which mentions the Maltese islands:

Ἀπὸ Ἑρμαῖας ἄκρας πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα [μικρὸν ἀπὸ Ἑρμαῖας] εἰσὶ νῆσοι τρεῖς μικραὶ κατὰ τοῦτο ὑπὸ Καρχηδονίων οἰκούμεναι. Μελίτη, πόλις καὶ λιμὴν, Γαῦλος πόλις, Λαμπάς.

In this interesting passage the author gives the geographical position of the Maltese islands; he then states that they are inhabited by the Carthaginians, and finally he gives useful information about the islands themselves.

The author lays down the position of the islands by giving the distance from a fixed point on the African mainland. In this case the point de départ is the Hermaean promontory which lies in the gulf of Carthage. The Romans called it *Mercurii promuntorium*, modern Europeans know it by the

¹ The full title of this work is: ΣΚΥΛΑΚΟΣ ΚΑΡΥΑΝΔΕΩΣ ΠΕΡΙΠΛΟΥΣ ΤΗΣ ΘΑΛΑΣΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΟΙΚΟΥΜΕΝΗΣ ΕΥΡΩΠΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΣΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΛΙΒΥΗΣ.

² Cf. Muller, *Geographi Graeci Minores*, Vol. 1, p. XVIV, 62, Hildesheim, 1965; Dict. of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology, pp. 758, 759, London, 1849; Thomson, *Hist. of Ancient Geography*, p. 88, London, 1949; Woodburn Hyde, *Ancient Gk. Mariners O.U.P.* p. 135, 1947; R.E., Vol. 111A, p. 639, 1927.

³ Cf. *Encyc. Brit.* Vol. XXI, p. 573, 1886.

⁴ Müller, *op. cit.* Skylax, 111.

name of *Cape Bon*, whilst the Arabs refer to it as *Ras Addar*. Having chosen his starting point, the writer gives the bearings of these islands in a rather vague manner based on the direction of the sun. Using a Herodotean phrase, he says that they lie in the direction of the rising sun. In other words they lie away from Cape Bon and to the east of the same cape. The author in fact says: 'Away from (ἀπὸ) the Hemaean Cape in the direction of the rising sun (πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα) there are three small islands.'

After having given the geographical position of the islands, the author goes on to say that they are ὑπὸ Καρχηδονίων οἰκούμεναι. Here a difficulty arises: how is one to render the word οἰκούμεναι? The verb οἰκέω, of which οἰκούμεναι is the present participle passive, could mean either (a) I inhabit, or (b) I govern. Were these islands inhabited by the Carthaginians or were they merely governed by them?

It is clear that in the fourth century before our era Malta and Gozo belonged to the Carthaginian sphere of influence. This explains why they are included in that section of the Periplus which deals with Libya. It also explains why they are mentioned, together with other islands, along with Carthage and why the bearings are taken from Carthage.

When one examines carefully the other passages in the Periplus where the word οἰκέω occurs, one is led to the conclusion that it must mean *I inhabit*. The author, when dealing with the islands of the Mediterranean, takes great pains to point out whether or not they are inhabited. He tells us that Aethalia is inhabited,⁵ that the middle part of Sardinia is uninhabited,⁶ that there live no people on the Echnides, that Greeks dwell in Crete etc.⁷ Therefore in the fourth century B.C. Malta and Gozo were not only in the Carthaginian sphere of influence, they were also inhabited by Carthaginians; there was, that is, a Carthaginian settlement on these islands. This is, incidentally, borne out by archaeological remains.

One should guard, however, against drawing general conclusions. Since Phoenician and Carthaginian colonies were nothing more than mere commercial depôts or 'rest and repair stations on as small a scale as possible'⁸ the presence of a Carthaginian settlement or trading station in Malta and Gozo does not rule out the existence of other groups of different

⁵Id. p.18: Καὶ νῆσος ἐν μέσῳ τῶ πλῶ τούτῳ οἰκουμένη, ἧ ὄνομα Ἀιθαλία, καὶ ἄλλαι ἐρημοὶ νῆσοι.

⁶Id. p.18: καὶ νῆσος ἐρήμη ἐν τῶ μεταζύ.

⁷Id. p.42: οἰκοῦσι δὲ ἐν κρήτη Ἕλληνας.

⁸G. and C. Picard, *Daily life in Carthage*, p.26, London 1961; R. Pietschmann, *Storia dei Fenici*, p.306-307, Milano 1899; Dimitri Barambi, *Phoenicia and the Phoenicians*; p.37, Beirut 1961: "When Esarhaddon invaded Cyprus he found one Phoenician, as well as nine other Greek kings ruling different parts of the island".

nationalities.

The author does not tell us when the Carthaginians came over to Malta. Presumably they had been here long before the fourth century.⁹ It is not clear who occupied these islands before their arrival.

There is still another minor difficulty: how is one to translate the expression *κατὰ τοῦτο*? The usual meaning of this expression is 'in this view, according to this view' which does not make sense in this context. Müller renders it *de regione illius* which hardly improves on the sense. The only plausible meaning seems to be 'on account of this, for this reason'. Herodotus employs the expressions *κατὰ ταῦτα*, *κατὰ τοιόνδε* in this sense¹⁰. The meaning seems to be this: there are three small islands, and because they are small and because they are islands they are inhabited by the Carthaginians. It is well known that the Carthaginians preferred small islands and places where they could withdraw and which could easily be defended.

One concludes, on the strength of this passage, that there was a city in Malta and another in Gozo during the fourth century B.C. Later writers call these cities by the names of Melita and Gaulos respectively, and probably these cities bore the same names during the fourth century. The author of the Periplus says of Carthage that it is a city and a harbour;¹¹ and it is well established that Carthage was the name of the city. The same holds good for Malta and Gozo: the writer says Melita, a city and a harbour, Gozo, a city. We can infer also that the harbour of Malta – perhaps the best in the Mediterranean – was already well known by navigators in the fourth century B.C.¹²

This passage is extremely important for our knowledge of the ancient history of Malta and Gozo. In the fourth century before our era Malta and Gozo belonged to the Carthaginian sphere of influence. Furthermore this passage sheds light on the ethnology of the Maltese inhabitants during the fourth century. Finally the cities of Malta and Gozo are mentioned for the first time together with the harbour of Malta.

We can end this short study on the Periplus of the Inner Sea in its relations with Malta and Gozo by giving the translation of the passage. It runs as follows:

Away from Cape Bon to the East there are three small islands and, for this reason, they are inhabited by the Carthaginians. Melita, a city and a harbour, Gaulos, a city, Lampedusa.

⁹ S. Moscati, *Il Mondo dei Fenici*, Il Saggiatore, p. 242; 'In ogni caso, è ragionevole presumere che i cartaginesi occupassero le isolette (Malta e Gozo) almeno dal VI secolo.' Milano, 1966.

¹⁰ Cf. Liddell and Scott, *κατά*; *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, *κατά*.

¹¹ Cf. Müller, *op. cit.* Skylax, 111.

¹² Cf. Thomson, *Hist. of Ancient Geography*, London, 1949, p. 68.