

THE LETTERS OF PHALARIS TO THE MALTESE

By REV. J. BUSUTTIL

IN 1427 Francesco Filelfo, the celebrated Italian humanist, brought with him from Constantinople, where he had been living since 1419 acting as secretary to the Consul-general of the Venetians, among other Greek manuscripts covering the whole area of Greek literature, also one containing the collection of the Letters of Phalaris.¹

The 148 letters which make up this collection may be divided into two classes: one class comprising letters addressed to private citizens, the other those written to whole communities. Among the latter there are two addressed to the Melitaiοι (τοις Μελιταιοις) and the same people are referred to in a third letter sent to the inhabitants of Segesta (τοις Ήγεσταιοις).²

These letters are known as the letters of Phalaris because their author claims to be the tyrant of the Sicilian city of Akragas, modern Girgenti.³

Who was Phalaris, the tyrant of Akragas?

Fewer names were more widely spread in antiquity than that of Phalaris. Pindar, Aristotle, Polybius, Diodorus Siculus mention him. Cicero has many references to him scattered in his different works; while Propertius, Ovid, Silius Italicus and Claudian make allusions to his activities in their poetic writings. Very little, however, is really known of him. He became tyrant of Akragas within a remarkably short time after the foundation of the city.

He was born perhaps on the Dorian island of Astypalaea near Cnidus, or perhaps at Akragas itself,⁴ the son of a certain Laodamas. Whilst most of the Siceliot tyrants, according to Aristotle, belong to that class who were damagogues prior to their being tyrants, Phalaris was one of those

¹ Cf. Tudeer, *The Epistles of Phalaris*, Helsinki, 1931, p. 114.

² Cf. R. Herscher, *Epistolographi Graeci*, Amsterdam 1965, pp. 419-420 and pp. 432, 442.

³ Cf. Herscher, *op. cit.* p. 409: ἔγω γὰρ ὡς περ ἑμαυτὸν οἶδα Φαλαριν Λευδομαντος υἱὸν Ἀστυπαιαεῖα τὸ γένος, πατριδος ἀπεστερημένου, τυραννον Ἀκραγαντίων.

⁴ Cf. Letter to Likinus, *Epistolographi Graeci*, p. 409; Freeman, *Hist. of Sicily* Oxford 1891, Vol. 1, p. 64; E. H. Banbury, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, Vol. III, p. 234-236, London 1849.

who rose to power through offices of honour (ἐκ τῶν τιμῶν) and Polyean informs us that he was the treasurer (ὁ τελωνης) of the city.⁵

Akragas (Latin Agrigentum, modern Girgenti) was founded by the neighbouring city of Gela in 580 B.C. In 570 it was still without a wall and without a temple. Phalaris, as a leading man of the city, was entrusted with the building of the temple of Zeus Polieus on the height (Modern San Gerlando), and with the 200 talents at his disposal he not only laid in a store of wood, stones, and iron, he also bought slaves and hired mercenaries for his own purposes, among whom there were many prisoners of war (δεσμῶται). Whilst the foundations of the temple were being dug, Phalaris declared that thieves had stolen the wood and other supplies ready for the building, and asked the people for permission to be allowed to surround the Acropolis with a wall. When the wall was built and the Acropolis was ready to be used as a fortress, he freed his slaves and armed them and the mercenaries with axes. On the feast of the Thesmophoria, in honour of Demeter, he and his followers attacked the worshippers and, after a bloodbath, he became the undisputed master of Akragas.

Under his rule Agrigentum seems to have attained considerable external prosperity. His influence reached to the northern coast of the island where the people of Himera elected him general with absolute power. He conducted wars against the native Sicans, and succeeded in extending his territory eastwards to Econmus and Phalarium. He is said also to have conquered Leontini (modern Lentini). Suidas asserts that he ruled the whole of Sicily (Σικελίας ὅλης τυραννησας).

Phalaris was tyrant of Akragas for sixteen years — from 570 to 554 B.C.⁶ The story is told that once he saw a single hawk chasing a flight of doves. He turned to his companions and told them of the cowardice of the many who allowed themselves to fly before one whom, if only they had courage enough they might overcome.⁷ He was at last overthrown apparently by a combination of the noble families, headed by the rich and distinguished Telemachus the ancestor of Theron, another tyrant of Akragas, and was burned along with his mother and friends in the brazen bull. According to another story he was thrown into the sea. A decree was carried that no one was thereafter allowed to wear a blue dress, as blue had been the tyrant's livery.

⁵ Arist. Pol. 5, 8; 1310, G28; Polyæn, V. 1, 1.

⁶ For a discussion of this date Cf. Holm, *Geschichte Siciliens im Altertum*, Leipzig, 1870, Vol. 1, p. 149f; Freeman, *op. cit.* p. 64; Pauly-Wissowa's article on Phalaris.

⁷ Diod. Sic. IX, 30, 1.

In the history of Sicily his importance lies in the fact that he was the first tyrant who, by extending his influence over a large part of the island, deterred the Phoenicians from taking hold of the whole island.⁸ In the history of Agrigentum, he was responsible for the sudden power and glory of the city.⁹ Finally the growth of a tyranny so soon after the foundation of a city is remarkable.¹⁰

Ancient writers, however, saw in Phalaris a prototype of the ferocious and beastly tyrant. Pindar (522-443) speaks in terms which already prove that his reputation as a barbarous tyrant was then already fully established, and all subsequent writers allude to him in terms of similar import.¹¹ Cicero says of him: '*crudelissimus omnium tyrannorum*' and in another passage, taken from Heraclides Ponticus, Cicero writes how Phalaris's mother dreamt that her son had dedicated some images of the gods in his house among them a statue of Hermes holding a patera in his hand. Out of this patera the gods were pouring out blood on the earth; the blood was bubbling up and filling the whole house, '*Quod matris somnium*', concludes Cicero, '*inmanis filii crudelitas comprobavit*'¹²

Phalaris is said to have thrown men into boiling cauldrons and vessels filled with fire, and that he had the habit of eating sucklings. But it was mostly on account of the brazen bull that his name became a household name for cruelty. Without the bull, as Freeman avers, Phalaris would be no more than a hundred obscure tyrants in other Greek cities.¹³ This is the account Polybius gives of the bull (XII, 25): There was a brazen bull which Phalaris made in Agrigentum, and in it he shut up his victims; afterwards, having lighted a fire beneath it, he used to take such terrible revenge on his subjects that, as the brass grew red and the men inside perished roasted and scorched, when they screamed in the extremity of their agony, the sound, when it reached the ears of those present resembled, owing to the way the thing was constructed, the roaring of the bull. Diodorus Siculus gives a shorter account of the same story: 'The Carthaginians', he writes, 'occupied the hill Ecnomus, which people say had been a garrison (Φρουριον) of Phalaris; in this place it is said the tyrant had set up a brazen bull which has become famous and which served as a punishment for those people that were tortured inside it, by having a fire applied beneath the monster. For this reason the place as well is called

⁸ Cf. Bayet, *Sicile Grecque*, Paris, 1930, p. 13.

⁹ Cf. A. Schenk Graf v Stauffenberg, *Trinakria*, Oldenburg, 1963.

¹⁰ Cf. Freeman, *op. cit.* p. 66.

¹¹ *Pyth.* 1, 85.

¹² *Verr.* 4, 33; *De Div.* 1, 23.

¹³ *Op. cit.* p. 64f.

Ecnomus after the outrage perpetrated against those unfortunate ones'.¹⁴

The inventor (πλοστης) of this monster was a certain Perilaus of Athens, who is said to have been the first 'to groan inside the instrument of his creation'.¹⁵ According to Diodorus Siculus, when Akragas was sacked by the Carthaginians, Himilcar robbed τὰ ἱερὰ and took the plunder together with the bull of Phalaris to Carthage, from where it was taken away by Scipio and given back to the Agrigentines after the Third Punic War.¹⁶

It is difficult, in view of the evidence at our disposal, to accept Pareti's sweeping judgement that *le notizie stessee sul famoso strumento di tortura in forma di toro cavo di bronzo, sono del tutto inaccettabili*¹⁷ Pindar is the first Greek who mentions the brazen bull in connection with Phalaris. Pindar was born about 522 B.C. that is, thirty-two years after the downfall of Phalaris, and hence he could have heard the story about the bull from eye-witnesses. Furthermore, if it is true, as Polybius and Diodorus Siculus allege, that the bull was removed from the city of Agrigentum in 406, when the Carthaginians invaded the city, then Pindar could have seen the monster with his own eyes.¹⁸

Bayet in his *Sicile Grecque* seems to suggest that the brazen bull was nothing else but the Phoenician Moloch which Phalaris introduced in the city of Akragas. Bayet writes that Phalaris was unpopular *peut-être aussi pour avoir introduit dans la ville le culte de Moloch le Taureau*.¹⁹ There are two points which seem to lend support to this view. In the first place the city of Agrigentum was founded by the people of Gela, and Gela, in its turn, was a Rhodian colony. The people of Rhodes worshipped Zeus Atabyrius, who was none other than the Phoenician Baal: when misfortune threatened Rhodes the brazen bulls in his temple bellowed. The throwing of people into vessels filled with fire and the eating of sucklings on the part of Phalaris fit well into the same story.²⁰ Secondly, according to Diodorus Siculus when the Carthaginians sacked Agrigentum in 406, Himilcar took the statues and paintings together with the bull of Phalaris to Carthage. Now the word Diodorus uses to express the booty Himilcar succeeded in carrying away is ἀναθηματα, which means objects intended as offerings to the gods. Hence the bull might have had some connection

¹⁴ XIX, 108. I.

¹⁵ Cf. Claudian, In Eutropium, 1, 163; Propertius, 2, 25, 11; Ovid, *Tristia*, 3, 11, 51; 153; Ibis, 435; Silius Italicus, XIV, 212.

¹⁶ XIII, 90, 2.

¹⁷ *Sicilia antica*, Palumbo, 1945, p. 108.

¹⁸ *Pyth.* 1, 85.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* p. 13.

²⁰ *Ency. Brit.*, 1885, Vol. 18, p. 730.

with the Phoenician religion.²¹

From what we have said, it follows that Phalaris, the ancient tyrant of Akragas, is the reputed author of the Letters of Phalaris. Two of these letters are addressed to the Melitaiοi, and the same Melitaiοi are referred to in a third one. Who were the Melitaiοi?

The ending -aiοs, an extended form of the Indo-European -yo, is normally used in Greek as a designation of a person according to his native town or country. So Ἀθηναίος is an inhabitant of Athens, Σιφναίος is a native of Siphnos. Likewise Melitaiος designates an inhabitant of Μελίτη on the analogy of -δικαίος -δικη.²²

There were at least five Melite known to the Greeks:

- (a) The island of Malta, first mentioned by Scylax in 335 B.C.;
- (b) The island of Mljet or Meleda in the Adriatic;
- (c) The island of Samothrace, modern Samothraki, in the northern part of the Aegean;
- (d) A lake dividing Acarnania (Carnia) from Aetolia;
- (e) The Athenian deme.

The designation Melitaiοi was never applied to the inhabitants of the island of Samothrace, which, according to Strabo (X, 472) was called Melite in ancient times. The people living by the lake which separates Acarnania from Aetolia were never known as Melitaiοi. The demotai or the people living in the Athenian deme of Melite were called Melitei (Meliteus), according to Stephanus Byzantinus.²³ That leaves us with Malta and Mljet or Meleda.

Appian, who lived in the time of Trajan and Hadrian, refers to the inhabitants of Meleda as Μελιτιηνοί; and Ptolemy, the Geographer, a contemporary of Appian, calls Meleda, Μελιτινη.²⁴

²¹XIII, 90,2.

²²Cf. H. Champion, *Traité de Grammaire comparée des Langues Classiques*, Paris 1953, p. 391; C.D. Buck, *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin*, Chicago, 1948, pp. 318, 347.

²³Εκ τῶν ἑθνικῶν Graz, 1925, 436: ὁ δημότης Μελιτευς.

²⁴Appian III, 16; Ptolemy, I, 319.

Stephanus Byzantinus, who lived four centuries after Appian and Ptolemy, writes in his *Πανεθνικῶν*: Μελιτη νησος μεταξυ Ἑπειρου καὶ Ἰταλίας, ὅθεν τὰ κυνίδια Μελιταια θασιν ὁ ὀικηταρ Μελιταιος ἔστι καὶ πολίς ὀπολιος καρχηδονίων 'Melite', an island (lying) between the mainland (of Greece) and Italy; the Melitaeans dogs are called after it; the inhabitants are called Meletaiοi, there is also a city, a colony of the Carthaginians'. After the word Ἰταλίας (Italy) some manuscripts have ἔστι καὶ ἄλλ' ἡ πλησιον Εὐκελίας; 'there is another (island) (called Melite) near Sicily'. This seems to make better sense. For surely Stephanus would not mention a city without mentioning the island on which it stood. Furthermore, he would be at variance also

By elimination, therefore, the designation Melitaiοi refers only to the inhabitants of Malta.

Then there is positive proof that the inhabitants of Malta were called Melitaiοi by the Greeks. Strabo writing about Malta says: Μελιτη, ὅθεν τὰ κυνίδια ἃ καλοῦσι Μελιταια; Maltese coins bear the words τῶν Μελιταιων (of the Melitaiοi), and in all the Greek inscriptions the inhabitants of our island are called Melitaiοi.²⁵

We have then established who the alleged sender of these letters is and the people to whom these letters were sent. In plainer language: Phalaris sent two letters to the Maltese and alluded to them in a third one.

The 148 letters of Phalaris, which were brought by Filelfo from Constantinople were first translated into Latin by Francesco Accolti of Arezzo in 1470. The original Greek text was published in Venice in 1498; it was then corrected and re-edited by Van Lennep and Valkenaer in 1717 in Groningen, which was in turn published with corrections by Schaefer in Leipzig in 1823. R. Herscher published the letters in Paris in 1873 together with other Greek letters of other authors under the title of 'Epistolographi Graeci'. Herscher's work has been reprinted in Amsterdam last year.

The translation from the original Greek has been based on Herscher's text which is derived from two manuscripts found in the Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris.

There is the translation:

TO THE PEOPLE OF SEGESTA.

Stop giving asylum to refugees who are escaping from my country; for neither by fair nor by just means has anybody succeeded in overthrowing Phalaris. You would be aware that what I am saying is right if you were to consider what happened to the Melitaiοi and the inhabitants of Leontini: I was partly responsible for the independence of the Melitaiοi and for the enslavement of the Leontines: the latter because they sank a trireme of Mine, the former because they wanted to save it when it was sinking.²⁶

with Strabo, according to whom, the Melitaeans dogs were so called after Malta: So the reading which is reasonable to accept would be: 'Melite, an island (lying) between the mainland (of Greece) and Italy; there is another island near Sicily the Melitaeans dogs are called after it and a city, a colony of the Carthaginians'.

²⁵Strabo (69-20) 230, 32; Cf. Kaibel, *Inscr. Gr. No. 953*; Mayr, *Malta im Altertum*, 1909, p. 23: *Die Einwohner werden zuerst auf einer maltesischen Inschrift genannt, als Μελιταιοι bezeichnet*; Ebert, *Σικελίων Konisberg*, 1830, p. 77.

²⁶Cf. R. Herscher, *Epistolographi Graeci*, Amsterdam 1965, p. 419-420.

TO THE MELITAIQI

The members of your delegation have succeeded in persuading me to give you money on loan, though, for the moment, I cannot dispose of large sums on account of the recurrent expenditure on my wars. But there is no need for excuse where friends are concerned, as they say. Please, do not do as most people do who while they make the most lavish use of compliments when they are borrowing money use the most unpleasant words when they are asked to pay it back, thereby showing their unfairness and ingratitude. For he who receives money should consider those that have lent it to him, and until he has restored it, he should treat his creditors alike and discharge his debts, irrespective of whether his creditor is honest or mean. For it is only fair that one should return the money to one's creditor, be he just or otherwise. To be sure Melitaiqi, I remain one and same individual both when I lend money and when I demand it back; whilst those, on the contrary, who borrow money alter their attitude with the time like chameleons, which, as the saying goes, change their colour when they change their habitat: when they get the money they call their creditor a 'benefactor' and a 'god', but when they are asked to return it they stigmatize him as a 'tyrant' and a 'blackguard'.

I am well aware of this fact too that it is far better for a creditor not to be paid back by a private individual than by a city. For if he is cheated of his money by a private person, he merely makes one new enemy, and a weak one at that, whilst if he is cheated by a city his losses are not any smaller and on top of that he makes many enemies – not just one. Of course I would not harbour any suspicion that you could do any such thing: I give you the money without these misgivings: I know that on other occasions you have not forgotten (your creditors) and that as regards contracts you are very fair and besides all the rest you are completely aware of this truth: it is rather the many that are in a position to injure one individual than one individual to injure the many. For it is unlikely for one person to treat many people with contempt; it is more reasonable for many to look down upon a single individual.²⁷

TO THE MELITAIQI

I have dismissed your representative, Melitaiqi, not because I do not appreciate the tokens of your esteem which he carried back still sealed up, but your conduct is not complimentary to me in any way. You perhaps, thought that others think I am such a man as you yourselves wish me to look like; but I am perfectly aware that I have the reputation of a wicked man among the others, and that even if you consider me a decent fellow,

²⁷ Cf. Herscher, *op. cit.* p. 432.

I am unable to extend thereupon this reputation to the others; it is far more likely that I would harm you in the slanderous eyes of them; because unless you yourselves were wicked as I am (people would say) you would not have praised the most wicked of men. Therefore you would be unjustly considered wicked, and I in no way more respectable, and so I thought I should not accept them.²⁸

Are these letters authentic? Is Phalaris the real author of these letters?

The first Greek writer who quotes parts of these letters (38,67,72) is Stobaeus – the compiler of a series of extracts from Greek authors, who lived in the latter half of the fifth century or in the beginning of the sixth A.D. Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, writing in the ninth century (820, 5-891), refers to these Letters in one of his Epistles (207). The author of one of the great Greek Lexicons, Suidas (second half of the tenth century) writes that Phalaris ἔγραψε ἐπιστολάς πανυ θαυμασίας. John Tzetzes (twelfth cent.), the voluminous Byzantine writer, includes many a large extract out of them.

We have already said that Filelfo introduced these Letters to Italy in 1427. Poliziano (1454-1494), the Italian poet and scholar, attributes them not to Phalaris but to Lucian, the Greek essay-writer of the second century A.D. Menagius (1613-1692) doubts the Phalarian authorship of these Letters. In 1695, the Hon. Charles Boyle, published at Oxford Φαλαριδος Ἀκραγαντινων τυραννου ἑπιστολαι. Bentley wrote a 'Dissertation on Phalaris' in 1697 to prove that these Letters are forgeries and a second work in 1699 in answer to Boyles' defence of 1698.

Bentley proved his case on the grounds that:

(1) There are glaring anachronisms in these Letters:

(a) The city of Phintias is referred to in the Letter to Enna; but the city was founded 300 years after the death of Phalaris when the Romans were at war with Pyrrhus;

(b) Letter XV mentions the inhabitants of Tauromenium (Taormina) which was built after the neighbouring city of Naxos had been destroyed in 403, 150 years after Phalaris's downfall;

(c) There are quotations from Herodotus (484 B.C.) and allusions to tragedies and comedies; there are sentiments and expressions derived from later writers like Democritus and Callimachus.²⁹

(2) The Dorian dialect was generally written and spoken in Sicily, especially at Syracuse and Agrigentum. The language of the Letters is not only Attic, but New Attic, the current language of the learned in

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

²⁹ Cf. Bentley, *On the Epistles of Phalaris*, ed. by W. Wagner, Covent Garden, 1883, p. 92.

the latter ages of the Roman Empire.³⁰

(3) Sicilian talents are mentioned without specification, but there were many different kinds of Sicilian Talents.³¹

(4) Some of the subject-matter is absurd: Himera and Catane go to war for the ashes of Stesichorus.³²

After the crushing exposure of these letters at the hands of Bentley, all the scholars hold that the Letters are not authentic.

Why were these Letters written at all?

Rhetorical culture left a profound impression on all the manifestations of the Hellenistic spirit. Hellenistic culture was first and foremost rhetorical. The teachers of rhetoric, the σοφισταί or ρητορες would ask of their students to work out exercises on imaginary speeches called μελέται (declamations, in Latin). These exercises were of two main varieties; (a) *controversial* (ὑποθεσεῖς δίκανικαί, controversiae) in which the students of rhetoric would plead for or against a clearly defined case as laid down by the law; or (b) *deliberative* (συμβουλευτικόν γένος, suavioriae), in which the students would discuss subjects from a political or historical view-point taken from an imaginary historical or mythological background: Solon, for instance, would be imagined asking for the repeal of his laws after Pisistratus had adopted a bodyguard; or it might be the Athenian people discussing whether they should send reinforcements to Nikias during the Sicilian expedition. When Roman education was completely hellenized Roman students would discuss whether Hannibal should have invaded Italy by sea instead of by land.

These Letters seem to have been rhetorical exercises of the deliberative type. They are written in Attic, 'the learned dialect of the Sophists, in which all their μελέται or exercises were composed, in which they affected to excel each other, even to pedantry and solecism.'³³ The author of these Letters employs the usual rhetorical tricks: the proof by contrast and the refutation of the contrary opinion, the illustration by analogy, the illustration by anecdotes, the quotations from old authors in support of his contentions.³³

Therefore, probably, these Letters were written to serve as models for students of rhetoric, or as an intellectual pastime: the author showed how cleverly he could take on Phalaris's side. It was never his idea to deceive nor was it his fault if others were taken in completely.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 461.

³¹ Cf. Bentley, *idid*.

³² Cf. Bentley, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

³³ Cf. Marrou, *The History of Education in Antiquity*, Sarbonne, 1956, p. 202-203. *op. cit.* p. 202, 203.

In later ages of Greek literature there arose a different tradition concerning Phalaris. Phalaris, according to this tradition, is represented not as a beastly tyrant but as a man of a naturally mild and humane disposition and only forced into acts of severity by the pressure of circumstances and the machinations of his enemies. This tradition represents him also as an admirer of literature and philosophy and a patron of men of letters. In two 'declamations' attributed to Lucian, Phalaris is represented in this light. These Letters fit in perfectly with this tradition: he is shown as a humane individual interested in his wife and children, as a generous, mild and just person.

As Stobaeus is the first author who mentions the Letters and quotes from them they must have been written either in the first half of the fifth century or earlier.

To conclude: the Epistles of Phalaris were probably written by a sophist as an exercise in rhetoric before the first half of the fifth century A.D.³⁴

The author of these letters could have had materials now lost. While a spurious document is of no value for the points it seeks to establish, it may be of value for incidental points. Therefore also these Letters could accidentally preserve some scrap of truth.³⁵

Do these Letters throw any light on Maltese history?

Throughout ancient times the island of Malta kept the closest ties with Sicily, politically, socially and economically. In Roman times Malta was one with Sicily, with which it had been once joined also geographically.³⁶ This fact is well brought out by the German historian Holm who, in his *Geschichte Siciliens im Altertum*, writes: *Endlich haben wir noch einen Augenblick bei der Maltesischen Inselgruppe zu verweilen die, ... im Altertum wie im Mittelalter stets in politischer Verbindung mit demselben gestanden hat und auch unter der Herrschaft des Johanniterordens noch immer die engsten Beziehungen zu Sicilien bewahrte.*³⁷ The Letters of Phalaris confirm this well-known situation: the Melitai are addressed as any other city in Sicily, in a language other Sicilian cities could understand, in a manner familiar to the same Sicilians. The Melitai could receive money on loan from another Sicilian city. In reality Malta was considered, at one time, at any rate, a Sicilian city. This is the first general impression one gets on reading the Letters to the Melitai and it is a true impression in that it is in accordance with all the available

³⁴ Cf. Pace, *Sicilia Antica*, Roma, 1949, Vo. III, p. 154.

³⁵ Cf. Freeman, *op. cit.* p. 77.

³⁶ Bernabo Brea, *Sicily before the Greeks*, London, 1957, p. 25.

³⁷ Holm, *op. cit.* Vol. 1, p. 42.

evidence.

The second general impression is that Malta was on very good terms with Phalaris. The Melitaiοi help Phalaris in recovering a trireme, they send him tokens of goodwill; and Phalaris, in his turn, is ready to help the Melitaiοi by giving them money on loan and by praising them.³⁸ Whether these relations ever existed it is very hard to establish. It is possible, not to say probable, that the Maltese needed money to run the island and for their projects. It is possible too that they asked Phalaris to help them.

Now, going over the Letters in detail one can establish some more facts.

In the Letter to the people of Segesta Phalaris is said to have been partly responsible (παραιτιος) for the independence of the island because the Melitaiοi wanted to save a sinking trireme.

We can infer from Thucydides that Malta was in the hands of the Phoenicians at least until 735 B.C. Thucydides in fact says: 'There were also Phoenicians living all round Sicily.' The Phoenicians occupied the headlands and small islands off the coast. But when the Hellenes began to come in by sea in great numbers, the Phoenicians abandoned most of their settlements... The first Hellenes to arrive were Chalcidians from Euboea... They founded Naxos (735).³⁹ In the fourth century Malta was in the hands of the Carthaginians. Scylax, writing in 335 B.C. says in his Periplus: εἰσι νησοὶ τρεῖς μικραὶ κατὰ τοῦτο ὑπὸ καρχηδονίων οἰκουμέναι Μελίτη πόλις καὶ λιμὴν.⁴⁰ At some date Malta was independent as the bronze inscription found in Rome in the seventeenth century attests. Malta in fact had its own Senate (συγκλητος) its own magistrates (ἀρχοντες) and its popular assemblies. According to Dr. Caruana this bronze inscription is of the sixth century B.C. However that may be, this Epistle of Phalaris to the people of Segesta confirms the historical fact that Malta was once independent. Whether Phalaris had any part in granting the Maltese their liberty (ἐλευθερία) cannot be proved.⁴¹ If Dr. Caruana's contention is correct, in that case Phalaris might have played a part in helping the Maltese to get rid of their Phoenician overlords.⁴²

³⁸ Real-Enc. Vol. XVI: *Moglicherweise bezieht sich der Inhalt der fingerten Phalarisbriefe... habe in guten Beziehungen zu Malta gestanden und der Melitaiern die Freiheit verschafft, auf diese Zeiten und Vorgänge.*

³⁹ Thuc. Bk. VI, Chap. 1.

⁴⁰ Scylax, K. Muller, *Geographi Graeci Minores*, Vol. 1, Hildesheim, 1965.

⁴¹ In the same letter the author says that Phalaris reduced the people of Leontini to slavery. It is well known that Phalaris besieged Leontini and conquered it. Cf. Mayr. op. cit. p. 82.

Abela in his *Malta Illustrata* quotes these letters of Phalaris to prove that the Greeks settled in Malta. Abela never knew these letters were not authentic, and that therefore they cannot be taken as proof of one theory or other.⁴³

In the first letter to the Melitaiοi the author mentions three facts:

- (a) The Maltese persuaded Phalaris to give them money on loan;
- (b) Malta was a πόλις, or city; the author, as a matter of fact, says: 'I am well aware of this fact too that it is far better for a creditor not to be paid by a private individual than by a city';
- (c) Phalaris praises the Maltese for their honesty.

As far as the first and third points go, we have no means of proving or disproving them. It is possible, not to say probable, that the ancient inhabitants of our island needed sums of money to carry out their public projects. Malta was in no way wealthier then it is now.

As regards the second point, i.e. that Malta was a πόλις, it is interesting to observe that ancient writers stress the fact that Melite was not merely the name of our island but also of a city in the island:

Scylax says: Μελίτη, πόλις καὶ λιμὴν.

Cicero, in the *Verrines* (2,21,46), writes: *insula est Melita, iudices, satis lato a Sicilia mari periculosoque distincta, in qua est eodem nomine oppidum*'.

Ptolemy (2nd cent.) writes: μελίτη νησος, ἐν ἣ μελίτη πόλις
Stephanus Byzantinus (6th cent.) says: καὶ ἐστὶ πόλις, ἀποικος καρχηδονίων. Hence the letter to the Melitaiοi confirms this historical fact.

We have already said that the Maltese were once before not merely αὐτονομοὶ but ἐλευθεροί; and we have said too that this fact is known from a Greek inscription, which, according to Dr. Caruana is of the 6th century. If Dr. Caruana is right, then one can say that in the 6th century the πόλις Melite had also a Greek form of government. For according to the inscription the Maltese had an ἐπιεσροτος two Ἀρχοντες a συγκλητος I am reproducing here the translation of this inscription by Mgr. Brès (*Malta antica illustrata* p. 195):

Per pubblica ospitalità e benevolenza verso Demetrio figlio di Diodoto Siracusano e i suoi discendenti, essendo sommo sacerdote Iceta figlio d'Iceta arconti Daereo e Crateto.

Parve espediente al Senato e popolo maltese giacchè Demetrio figlio di Diodoto Siracusano dimostrossi in ogni tempo nostro ben affetto e ai pub-

⁴² Cf. Brès, *Malta antica illustrata*, Roma, 1816; Dr. Caruana *Rapporto* 1882, p. 126 127.

⁴³ Abela, *Malta Illustrata*, 1647, p. 164.

blici nostri interessi ed a ciascun dei cittadini fu sovente cagione di vantaggio.

Con felice auspicio abbiamo deliberato che sia Demetrio figlio di Diodoto Siracusano un ospite e un benemerito del popolo maltese e i suoi discendenti a cagione di sua virtù e della benevolenza che mostrò mai sempre verso il nostro popolo e che questo decreto di ospitalità sia scritto in due tavole di bronzo a diasene una a Demetrio figlio di Diodoto Siracusano.

In the second letter to the Maltese Phalaris is alleged to have dismissed the representative of the Melitaioi and rejected their tokens of goodwill. Here again the facts cannot be confirmed or discounted.

By way of conclusion we have to say that the Letters of Phalaris are spurious being probably written by a Sophist as an exercise in rhetoric. Their author, however, has made use of certain documents and left some incidentally true facts.

The importance of these letters does not lie in the new light they throw on Maltese history, with one possible exception, but in confirming historical events well attested elsewhere. They confirm the fact that Malta was once independent at one stage of her ancient history and the fact that there was a *πολις* called Melita on our island. The new fact that emerges from these letters is that the ancient Maltese may have possibly forged ties of friendship with the powerful tyrant of Akragas. Finally, these letters show once more how close Malta was to Sicily in the economic, social and political fields.

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