

## Recenzija

### A SCHOLARLY MONUMENT TO MALTA'S HISTORY

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**Busuttil, Joseph; Fiorini, Stanley; Vella, Horatio Caesar Roger (eds.). *Tristia ex Melitogaudo: Lament in Greek Verse of a XIIIth-century Exile on Gozo*. Transcribed, translated and edited by Joseph Busuttil, Stanley Fiorini, and Horatio Caesar Roger Vella. Malta: Farsons Foundation, 2010; pp. CXXXVI, 471; 4 plates. ISBN 978-999320833-4.**

The small island nation of Malta has an exceptionally rich and diverse history. The wise and courageous people of the Maltese islands can be proud not only of their adamantly strong Christian faith, the mystery of Neolithic temples, the stunning beauty of magnificent sky-wide church domes and lofty medieval castles, but also of their own Ovid and their own Boethius in the person of an unknown poet who is the author of the lengthy Greek poem which survives as MS. 4577 at the National Library in Madrid. This poem, which now consists of 4043 iambic trimeters in dodecasyllabic verses, was originally longer, but even what remains of it now (and there remains the major part of the original text) is a creation of outstanding artistic beauty and great his-

torical importance. The Madrid manuscript consists of 119 sheets of paper, labelled in Arabic numerals, and four initial sheets, labelled in Roman numerals, and among these initial sheets there is a title page with a Latin title describing the contents of the manuscript as *Expositiones Spirituales Incerti Authoris*. Yet in the process of the manuscript's scholarly investigation the poem has acquired a conventional title, the *Tristia ex Melitogaudo*, which is reminiscent of the titles of the two masterpieces of Ovid, the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*.

The manuscript was in preparation for publication for a long time during which period it was thoroughly investigated by three outstanding Maltese scholars, two classicists and a medieval historian. The work done by Joseph Busuttil and Horatio Caesar Roger Vella, who rigorously analysed the textual, lexical, metrical, and stylistic aspects of the poem, was complemented by historical research conducted by Stanley Fiorini, the mathematician and medieval historian. At the beginning of this year, after more than three decades of painstaking scholarly research, the critical edition of the manuscript was published by the Farsons Foundation in Malta.

This long-awaited publication of the *Tristia ex Melitogaudio*, a Byzantine poem that sheds new light on Maltese history of the late XIth and early XIIth century, is without doubt a very significant contribution to the history of Malta and the entire Mediterranean region. In the pages of this ground-breaking edition, the historians of the Christian Church and those interested in the cultural history of the Mediterranean will find a treasure-trove of unique information about the contact of two grand civilizations, Christian and Muslim, which took place in the Middle Ages on the tiny island of Melitogaudos, or Gozo. Many details of the poet's description of this interaction (sometimes on the verge of clash) between Christian and Muslim cultural worlds are still obviously relevant today, in our global era, in the age of cultural and religious conflicts and earnest search for peace.

The editors of the poem are of the opinion that the poem is a mid-XIIth-century work: it must post-date 1135 (or even 1140) and it could not have been written after 1151 (see *Dating the Document*, p. XIII, esp. n. 10). It is most likely, in view of the author's erudition and poem's literary excellence, that the author of the *Tristia ex Melitogaudio* is Eugenius of Palermo, also known as Hugo Falcandus (see *The Identity of the Poet*, pp. XLIII-LIX; on the possible identity of the figures of Eugenius of Palermo and of Hugo Falcandus, see esp. p. LIII). The original manuscript of the poem (which is now lost) was completed around 1155 by the poet himself and authenticated by various Gozitan witnesses (p. XCVIII). According to the research conducted by the editors, a copy was made sometime in the XIIIth cen-

ture: that was the same manuscript which is now in Madrid. It stayed on the island of Gozo till the onslaught by Sinan Pacha in 1551 when it was carted away, together with all the other archives of the island, by the Turkish invaders. The editors argue that it is possible that this manuscript was part of some section of booty sold by the Turks to the French who disposed of it in Palermo, and then it was possibly acquired therefrom by the Messina Cathedral (precisely in 1551 there was trading in Greek manuscripts going on at Messina). The Viceroy De Uceda in the 1690s acquired this manuscript together with other Greek manuscripts that once belonged to Constantinos Láscaris and transported all to Spain where they were acquired by the *Biblioteca Real* in 1712 (*ibid.*).

The poem contains a lot of very interesting information about the island of Melitogaudos, or Gozo, the place of the poet's confinement. The author, whoever he might be, was a native of Sicily and belonged to the entourage of King Roger, but for uncertain reasons fell out with his king and was sent to exile on Melitogaudos where he created a long lament in Greek verse. The poet addresses himself to the Vizier of the realm, George of Antioch, and pleads with him to intercede on his behalf with the king, asking for permission to return to his homeland. The author not only laments but also speaks of his king's military exploits, among which is Roger's attack on Gozo in 1127. The poem gives many important and unique details about the status of Christianity in both Maltese islands, especially Gozo, because the period of Arab rule of Malta prior to and post Count Roger's invasion in

1091 is very poorly known. The poet speaks with great admiration and warmth of the pious followers of Christianity who then lived in Melitogaudos with their bishop. According to the poem's author, the Gozitan Christians worshipped „the Holy Trinity from ancestral times“, so it is possible to draw a conclusion that Christianity there survived from Byzantine times throughout the entire period of Arab occupation. In view of this we may fully appreciate the beautifully composed dedication, written by the editors, which we find at the beginning of the book: „*To the memory of the Bishop and his community found by Roger II surviving on Gozo: a Faith isthmus linking two millennia of Christianity in the Maltese Islands.*“ The editors have also expressed the opinion that in the XIIth century the church dedicated to the Virgin which was situated on the acropolis of Gozo was almost certainly the Cathedral Church not only for Melitogaudos, but for both Maltese islands, and it also seems very probable that this church was an Arab mosque converted into a Christian shrine. There is some reason to think that the steeple of the old *Matrix Church* of Gozo built in 1424–1427 has replaced the old minaret of the Arab mosque. If it turns out to be really true that, during the period of the poet's exile, the Christian community of Gozo had the opportunity to worship in a shrine which had formerly been an Arab mosque, that would speak a lot about the tolerant attitude of the Arabs towards the Christian minority on Gozo. It is also important to note that some very accurate and insightful observations made by the editors of the poem may be viewed as a very significant contribution to the

topographical and especially architectural history of Gozo.

Quite apart from its unquestionable historical significance, the poem is also a rather outstanding literary creation. The poet succeeds in creating a very vivid impression of his life on the island: his confinement in the tower infested with insects of various kinds which are described as real monsters, his wanderings on the cliffs and headlands of the island wherefrom he could occasionally have a glimpse of Sicily, his native island. The moments of painful longing, suffering, and hope are rendered in the poem with an utmost artistic skill and force.

On the historical level, the poem might be viewed as a testimony of the contact and the dialogue (or, one might say, an exercise in tolerance) between representatives of Christian and Muslim cultural worlds. And on the poetical level, the *Tristia ex Melitogaudo* creates a sophisticated and very organic interface between the idioms of Biblical and Classical poetry. As I have already mentioned, the poem is reminiscent not only of Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, but also of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*, a masterpiece of Roman literature which skillfully combines poetic and prose elements. Yet the author of the *Tristia ex Melitogaudo*, whose confinement in many respects was very similar to that of Boethius, finds consolation not in philosophy but in his Christian faith, although many themes taken not only from the Bible but also from Classical Greek and Roman mythology, literature and history, and employed here to express the poet's situation and his feelings, form a uniquely interesting and spiritually vigorous blend

of Biblical and Classical symbols which emerge in the poem as perennially relevant signs of suffering, misery, temptation, and hope. Therefore, the poem that so vividly and emphatically shows us the common spiritual and existential denominator uniting the Christian tradition with the tradition of Classical Antiquity is very relevant in the face of the political, social, and spiritual situation of contemporary Europe, for now and then we hear the influential voices of quite numerous European intellectuals who, *pace* Nietzsche, speak of the essential incommensurability or even incompatibility of Christian values with the values of Classical Antiquity, and some of the so-called postmodern thinkers who are very fashionable and influential in today's Europe even dare to speak of the need, in order for us to attain unlimited „freedom“, to discard both our Christian and Classical roots altogether. Literary creations such as the *Tristia ex Melitogaudio* clearly show the shortsightedness of this militantly secular vision of Europe's future and give us an example of wise and powerful harmony between Christian and Classical elements. Moreover, the poem gives us a general idea of how such harmony might be possible in the spiritual landscape of contemporary Europe.

Another lesson of the poem which is also very relevant in the face of the so-called clash of civilizations is that of the peaceful coexistence of Christian and Muslim religions and cultural traditions. The *Tristia ex Melitogaudio* quite unexpectedly shows us the face of a rather tolerant Islam, for we see in the poem that the small Christian community of Melitogaudos which survived the Arab conquest was allowed by victorious

Arab invaders to practice their religion in view of a „pact of old“. It is interesting to note that the poet who frequently speaks of his spiritual alienation in foreign and even hostile linguistic, cultural, and religious environment, sometimes also finds opportunities to learn from the Arabs, especially when it comes to their experience of survival in harsh Gozitan summers and winters. Therefore, the poem may also be viewed as the testimony of a dialogue, however difficult, between Christian and Muslim cultural worlds. Such testimony as well as experience is very important, even invaluable, in the context of our global reality.

The scholarly precision and the sophistication of critical apparatus are the hallmarks of this edition: the translation of the poem into English with parallel Greek original (*Tristia ex Melitogaudio sive „Expositiones Spirituales Incerti Authoris“*, pp. 1–239), a lengthy, very exhaustive and multi-faceted *Introduction* which makes evident the scope of research effort behind the restoration of the text and its translation (pp. XI–CXXXVI, with two *Addenda* and extensive bibliography, followed by four plates which give a visual impression of the manuscript), a very informative and well-balanced running *Commentary* (pp. 241–407), as well as three meticulously compiled indexes (*Index of Reordered Sheets*, p. 240, *Index and Glossary of Names in the Manuscript*, pp. 409–440, and *Index of Key Words and Phrases in the Manuscript*, pp. 441–458) all significantly add to the value of this outstanding work which by all standards is a remarkable scholarly feat.

The literary, especially structural and stylistic, analysis of the poem done mostly

by Professor Horatio C. R. Vella is very illuminating and crucial in showing the literary, historical and philosophical merits of the poem and proving its high literary status. Professor Vella's penetrating insights into the formal texture of the poem beyond doubt establish him as one

of the leading authorities in this kind of analysis of both Classical and Byzantine poetical texts.

For decades to come, this major edition will remain a pleasure to read, an invaluable historical tool, and a shining scholarly monument to Malta's history and culture.

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