large scale in India, Syria and Egypt. Our country, being so small, could not possibly compete with such large producers. Then, of course, the invention of the spinning jenny revolutionized the trade. On the one hand, the men-in-the-street demanded machine-produced goods which appeared more attractive than the hand-made article; and, on the other, the aristocrats encouraged the expansion of luxury textile manufactures by slaves. But these are not the only causes. On the 7th November, 1810, the Maltese Government abolished the regulation already referred to, that the bales of local cotton had to be clearly marked by customs officials as a guarantee of the first class, pure quality of the contents. Now, the dealers themselves did the “stamping”. Moreover, on the 18th November, 1822, a Government proclamation allowed every kind of linen and cloth to be imported into our Islands. On the 3rd November, 1837, every tax on imported cotton was removed. The Government had issued these regulations on the advice of the merchants themselves who thought that this would be of benefit to the trade of the Island. But they were proved wrong; foreign cotton of the worst quality was imported and nobody wanted to buy flabby, ragged, low-priced clothes made from such inferior material.

Counter measures were taken: the merchants were asked to import Brazilian cotton; the Government greatly reduced the price of local cotton and customs duty on it was almost totally removed. These steps to re-establish our cotton trade however, proved fruitless. A number of excuses were brought forward, mainly that Maltese cotton was found unsuitable when processed by machinery. But, we must honestly mention that our merchants were really following a get-rich-quick policy and no longer provided their customers with the pure product; instead, they mixed local cotton with inferior type.

The result of all this was that the remarkable cotton produced here which had been acclaimed as “a wonder of nature” is no more, and the most important industry of our land was allowed to dwindle into extinction.

THE MALTESE TEXTILE INDUSTRY IN ANTIQUITY

by


Ancient writers, both Greek and Latin, refer to their works to a Maltese textile industry. Not only do these writers mention the existence of this industry but they also speak of the finished articles. Varro, the writer of Roman Antiquities, refers to a Maltese ‘mitra’; Diodorus Siculus, the Historian, speaks of ‘spindries’ which the ancient inhabitants of Malta used to produce; Cicero mentions ‘verreae melitensis’ and alludes to a ‘puilvisus melitensis’; Silius Italicus speaks of the Maltese ‘tela’ and Novius of a Maltese ‘supparus’.

It is not known when this industry was first introduced in Malta. Apparently it had already been in existence in prehistoric times. It is clear that the industry must have existed well before the third century B.C. Callimachus (died 266 B.C.) is the first Greek poet who refers to the Maltese textile products. He simply calls them ‘Malteria’ which shows that these articles had already been well known before Callimachus’ time. Apparently it was still flourishing in Hesychius’ time, i.e. in the seventh century A.D.

It has been commonly held that the ancient Maltese textile articles were made out of spun cotton. The reason why several scholars have been of this opinion is that up to the eighteenth century the Maltese islands were renowned for their cotton crop and their cotton industry. It has, however, been shown that the cotton industry was first introduced in Malta and in Sicily by the Arabs in the ninth century.


2. Varro, Sat. Men.: mitrae melitensium. (Apud Non. 34, 146; Cf. Also Lucr. 1.420): et bene parta patrum sunt anatanae, mitrae intedum in pollinum atque alimenia Clauque vertunt. Labimos emendas meaningless alidens into Melitensis.

3. See Above, Cl. also HESYCHIUS 1027: οἱστα τοιαύτας ἢλεγχις καὶ Μαλτίας τοῖς γοργοῖς. In Fere, 2.4.108: plurima vestem melitensem; 2.5.27: in qua puilvisus erat periculo melitensis.


Sir T. Zammit in his work *Prehistoric Malta* relates how incinerated specimens of calcined textile going back to prehistoric times were obtained from debris. These specimens were examined in a laboratory and it has been established that the material is most likely flax or a fibre of that type. Flax or linen, of course, is the material from which linen, not cotton, is produced. So, if there was a textile industry in Malta in prehistoric times, it must have been a linen industry.

Although those ancient writers who mention the Maltese textile industry have never referred explicitly to the material out of which the finished articles were produced, nonetheless, since they have used certain particular words to denote these articles, it is evident that it was linen, not cotton, they had in mind.

Diodorus Siculus and Hesychius mention the Maltese *chlamys.* Now according to Hesychius himself, the word *chlamys* has two senses: *linen garments,* and in Latin *vestimentum scutare linenum.* Novius employs the word *supparus.* The grammarian Nonius says that *supparus* is *vestimentum scutare linenum* and according to Festus *velum omne, quod ex lino est, dicunt suparum,* Cicero has *vestis melitensis.* *Vestis* is a general word used to designate any kind of dress made out of any kind of material. It is known, however, that Verres blackmailed those merchants who came to sell their wares in Sicily into giving him, among other things, *vestem linenum* or linen garments. It is also known that Verres took out of Sicily a large quantity of Maltese garments. It does not seem improbable that some of the linen garments which Verres took to Rome were the "linen garments" which he obtained from the merchants, some of whom, might have been Maltese. Furthermore Cicero mentions a Maltese "pulvinus" or "cushion." He says that this *pulvinus* was *periclinus* or transparent. The adjective *transparent* suits more a linen material than a cotton one.

Silius Italicus says that Malta was proud of its "*tela lanigera.*" *Tela lanigera* stand for *woolen fabrica.* This could mean that there was in Malta a woolen industry side by side with the linen one — which is most unlikely as the existence of this second industry is not supported by any other evidence — or it might be that the word originally employed by Silius was *lanigera* (woollen) but *linigera* (linen) in *Reform.*

We can rightly conclude, therefore, that all the evidence — historical, archaeological, and linguistic — points to the existence in Malta of a linen industry. Mayr maintains that this industry did not die out with the coming of the Arabs and that in his own days linen was still woven especially in Gozo.

The textile industry was the most important one in ancient times. Diodorus Siculus says that there were craftsmen of all sorts in Malta, but the most important ones (known as *artifices*) were engaged in the production of *chlamys.* During Verres' governorship (71-68) the principal town of the island was one large factory producing women's clothing. Cicero accuses Verres of having helped himself to very large quantities of Maltese textiles. This shows that in the first century B.C. the industry must have been prosperous and that many workers were employed in it. In ancient times women usually worked in the production of Othonia, sometimes, however, the *artificia* were also men.

Since a great supply of water is needed to cultivate flax, it is not unlikely that flax was not actually grown on the island but imported from abroad. The raw material would then be woven into Othonia, mitrae, suppari, etc., by the local *Othonopoioci.* When Malta was in the hands of the Carthaginians the finished articles would in all likelihood be sent to Carthage from where they would be exported to all the ports of the Mediterranean. When the Romans took over the administration of our islands the woven products would be exported to Sicily and from there taken to Rome. Individual drapers (known as *thoracophoi*) would cross to Sicily and sell their goods there.

The ancient textile industry was mainly geared to the production of women's clothing. The word *Othonia* is normally used in Greece to denote a certain type of feminine dress. Cicero tells us that the town *Melita* produced *nulidebrum vestem,* and he charges Verres with having stolen large quantities of Maltese garments in order to give them as presents to the wives of his friends. The *supparus* was similarly worn by women.

Apparently Maltese textiles were highly appreciated abroad and they seem to have been firmly established in African and Italian markets. Hesychius quoting Callimachus refers to the Maltese garments simply as *Melitae*/*the Maltese,* which means that they were well known in Callimachus's days. Likewise Cicero speaks of the *Melitenses,* the "Maltese," which shows that in the first century B.C. these garments had made great headway in the Roman markets.

What made these manufactured articles famous was their quality. They are distinguished," says Diodorus, "for their fineness and for their softness." Hesychius calls the Maltese Othonia *notex* (remarkable) and Silius Italicus says that Melite is proud of its woolen cloth. It is not known what prices these garments fetched. Presumably they were luxury goods and so they must have sold pretty well.

So far we have treated of the existence, importance and quality of the Maltese textile industry in antiquity. Now we shall go over the different textile articles one by one and try to say something about each one.

13. *In Ferr.* 5.56.
14. *ib.* 2.2.376: *Divo te ... plurinum vestem melitensem ... Syracusae exportasse.*
15. *NACHR.* *Flachs* in *L.C.* p. 2560.

18. *ib.* 2.2.188: *Unde tantum Melitensis ... id 2.2.176: plurinum vestem melitensem.*
20. *ib.* 11.4.180-104; 11.2.183: *sed tantum Melitensis, quis eliam aemurium uxores ... ornantur eas?"
A. MITRA


"A Maltese mitra".
The Roman 'mitra', (a loan-word from the Greek language) was a headband mostly worn by women to tie up their hair 22. It was a long and wide ribbon usually made of linen 23.

B. OTHONIA

Diodorus Siculus 5, 12: οἴοντος τι γὰρ ἔκει πεντάπλοες τὰς ὥρματας τῆς Ἀθήνας καὶ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἑαυτῷ.

"For the island has all sorts of craftsmen (working) in its workshops; but the most important ones are those who work on Othonia which are distinguished for their fineness and softness".

Hesychius, 1027: Μελίτης (Call. fr. 393) ὁδὲς τῆς διασκορπῖς ἐπὶ Μελίτης τῆς ἑμῖνος.

"Maltese (garments): certain remarkable Othonia from the island of Malta", where is the diminutive of οἶον — a piece of fine linen cloth. It is normally used in the plural and designates a linen garment worn mainly by women 24.

C. VESTES

Cicero, In Verrem, 2,2,176: Dico te ... plurimam vestem melitensem ... Syracusiam exportasse ...

"I maintain that you (Verres) have taken out of Syracuse a considerable amount of Maltese vestes".

Id. 2,2,188: Unde Tantum Melitensium ... sed tuntumse Melitensium, quasi etiam amicorum uxorum ... ornatorum esse.

"From where have you taken such large quantities of Maltese vestes ... but were such quantities really necessary? you give the impression that you wished to adorn your friends' wives as well (as yours)".

Id. 2,4,166: Insula est Melita ... in qua est eodem nomine opidum ... quod tam est tractum per triennium ad miliebrem vestem conficiendam fuit.

"There is an island, Malta, in which there is a city bearing the same name. For three years this city has served as a factory to produce women's vestes for the sake of Verres".

These vestes were a sort of transparent stolaes worn on top of the tunica interior by women in Rome. 25 Most of these vestes were exported to Sicily from where they were re-exported to Rome.

22. Cf. on Mitra in R.E.

D. PULVINUS

Cic. In Verrem, 2,5,27:

Nam, ut mos fuit Bithyniae regibus, lectica octaphorar ferebatur, in qua pulvinus erat perlucidus melitensis rosa furtus.

"Following the custom of the old kings of Bithynia Verres rode in a litter carried by eight men. In the litter there was a cushion of transparent Maltese cloth stuffed with roses".

The pulvinus mentioned here could either be the squab on which the traveller sat, or else the cushion on which the traveller rested his head 26. The pulvinus was in normal circumstances stuffed with algae, dried leaves or feathers. In Cicero's time, however, people like Verres who wanted to make an ostentatious display of their wealth, had their couches and cushions filled with roses or violets 27. If we read 'Melitensis' with the Oxford edition of Cicero's Orations, we have to conclude that these roses were not necessarily Maltese — most probably they were not. The pulvinus was usually made of ordinary cloth, sometimes, as in this case, it was made of very fine linen 28.

E. SUPPARUS

Novius: supparus melitensis lineus (Nom. 540,11; after Ribbeck).

"A linen supparus made in Malta".

A supparus or supparum (Συσσαρί) was a linen garment worn by women. It was introduced in Rome in the 3rd century B.C. It was a tunic worn over the tunica interior which reached to the feet.

It is reasonable to assume that the words Othonia, vestes and supparus mean one and the same object; they all designate in their contexts a feminine garment made of linen. Furthermore although it is not known when the textile industry was set up in Malta, it is evident that the Carthaginians influenced it considerably. The word othonian is closely connected with the Semitic word ʿetud; supparus, according to Naevius, was a punicum vestimentum or a Phoenician dress 29. Phoenician mitres were famous and Carthage exported a good number of cushions 30.

27. Id. Vol. VI, pulvinus; Cf. also Cic. Fin. 2,65; Tusc. 5,78; Horace, 1,1. Od. 5, 5,1.
28. Id. Vol. VI, pulvinus.
30. Cf. FEVIT, 310,15.
31. Cf. JUVENAL, 8,66; mitra solonia; Claudian, 20,185; mitra tyria.