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## Preface

Fifteen years ago, while hunting for fantastic beasts in records of Maltese lore to include in my rendition of *The Maltese Bestiary*, I came across ‘Précis de Mythologie Maltaise par E. Magri’, an article that had been presented to the International Congress of Orientalists in 1905. I realised that ‘E. Magri’ could only have been Manuel Magri, the collector of *Hrejjef Missirijietna*, but until then I was under the impression that he had simply recorded fairy tales. What did he mean by ‘Maltese mythology’? Some of his descriptions of the entities, including *l-Imlejka*, I had read in other books, and I knew about *il-Kawkaw* from my childhood, but what about ‘*ir-Rajjes tal-ħorsien*’ — the chief of spirits, ‘*l-Għarus*’ — the bridegroom, and the mysterious ‘*la Femme*’? And why did he mention the epic of Gilgamesh, various Semitic deities, and the legendary Mount Baris? Magri’s categorisation of folk entities into gods, lesser spirits and heroes seemed to come from the perspective of comparative mythology. His summary indicated that he had written much more about the subject elsewhere, so I searched for his original publications in collections of rare Melitensia. When I did find them, however, I was rather disappointed, for his discussions were very confused by his obsession to prove that Maltese folklore was purely of Phoenician origin. And yet, there appeared to be a real mythology that shone through his clouded historical misinterpretation. The concepts of a Maltese genesis, a link to other worlds, ancient deities, wind demons, giants who preceded humans, an immortal sibyl, and a resurrected superhero were apparently still quite alive in oral traditions at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the meantime, I have also long harboured questions regarding the background of certain Maltese words that we still use today, such as *qawsalla*, *ferħ ta’ ġenn*, *qabdu riħ* and *boxxla xjaten*, all of which now have a meaning that is different from their literal translation. Had these also formed part of a Maltese mythology? I started to explore seemingly unrelated motifs in Maltese folklore and attempted to reassemble them, much like a jigsaw puzzle, based on similar models of comparative mythology. Thus, the myths about the creation of the islands, the first inhabitants, the degradation of deities into demons, and the doom of Malta are here categorised and presented systematically.

Not every scholar will accept that Maltese lore can be interpreted in this way. Neither will everyone agree with the illustrations, but my representation of Maltese mythology only serves to exemplify the text and does not close the door to other visualisations. So please keep an open mind, use your imagination, and draw your own conclusions while reading: I invite you to reconsider a Malta that has long been forgotten ...

*Stephan D. Mifsud*



*Ix-Xhur (Hrafa 24)*

There was originally one god, represented by the full year. From the One a pantheon of twelve gods developed, represented by the zodiac and the stars. They were the siblings (*L-Ahwa*) also known as the Months (*Ix-Xhur*).

They brought rain, warmed the land and regulated the bounty of the land and waters, and so determined the fate of humankind. (Magri, XM p.96)



# MALTESE MYTHOLOGY?



The title of this book may seem somewhat peculiar even to those familiar with Maltese folklore. Many would understand and relate the subject of mythology not with Malta, but with the classical myths and legends of ancient Greece, Scandinavia and Egypt. However, an in-depth look at the traditional Maltese folktales, sayings and beliefs, from the perspective of comparative mythology, reveals that they are peppered with entities<sup>1</sup> and accounts that were typical of ancient myths and legends.

We shall explore Maltese lore of the Victorian era and compare it with that of other countries and periods, searching for similarities and origins, while attempting to understand the undercurrent beliefs and rituals in Maltese culture. In the process we shall see if these individual themes and elements can be organised into a structure that can be defined as Maltese Mythology.

## ***Myth in Maltese Folklore***

Few scholars have attempted to regard Maltese folklore from the perspective of comparative mythology. The notable exception was Father Emmanuel Magri S.J., the eminent ethnographer of the early twentieth century. Anyone with a basic knowledge of Maltese lore knows that Magri collected and published several stories, frequently referred to as *Hrejjeġ Missirijietna*<sup>2</sup>, at the turn

of the century, and that these tales have been reprinted over the years. However, his original books are now very rare and so his interpretations of the tales are not well-known.

It is not possible to understand the reason why he had collected the folktales and sayings in the first place, without reading his original books. The usual assumption is that he had recorded them simply for posterity's sake and to ensure that they were transmitted to the younger generations before they were lost forever. It is true that the stories in *Hrejjeġ Missirijietna* have been reprinted several times, and presented and illustrated as fairy tales fit primarily for schoolchildren, but this was certainly not Magri's real intention. To start off with, these were not stories for children. For even though many involved supernatural, magical and heroic motifs, they also featured adult themes such as marital betrayal, murder, revenge and torture.

**Regarding *Il-ħrafa tax-xhur*:** The myth of the months is by no means a story for children. In it, we find the wisdom of our forefathers from the East, who from time immemorial dressed their knowledge in the guise of colourful folktales. (XM p.96)

Indeed, Magri's primary scope for recording the tales and beliefs was to relate them with classical Semitic mythology, using them to prove that the language and culture of modern Maltese people were derived directly

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1 *The Maltese Bestiary* is a compendium of mythological creatures, plants and entities of Maltese folklore compiled by the same author (2014).

2 The title '*missirijietna*' would be considered sexist and incorrect today. Many folktales were adapted and transmitted to younger generations by mothers and grandmothers.

from the ancient Phoenician settlement in Malta. After his death in 1907, much of his opinions as to the Maltese being the direct descendants of Phoenician colonists have been discredited, as modern archaeology, philology and written history brought to light the true course of Malta's past. His notes were thus swept aside and almost forgotten. Yet his mythological observations and comparisons are still rather thought-provoking and worthy of revision.

### ***The Twilight of Maltese Myth***

Maltese oral tradition was still prevalent during Magri's lifetime in the late Victorian era. Life in villages had been an isolated affair for many centuries. Children grew up, married, had children and died within the same community, receiving—and passing on—the same tales, beliefs and customs that had been handed down to them by word of mouth through countless generations. The start of the twentieth century saw the modern world making inroads into the old way of life, replacing and extinguishing the folk beliefs and rituals that had characterised rural life in Malta.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Maltese people were still divided into social classes. There was also a clear distinction between the city dwellers (*tal-ibliet*) and the village folk (*tal-irħula*). Each had their distinct customs, dialects and even languages, meeting when in need of services and trade but otherwise generally keeping to their own communities. In the walled cities lining the Grand Harbour, there lived the merchants, innkeepers, dockworkers and others who had supplied services first to the Order of St John and then to the British and their fleets, integrating with them and absorbing their languages and customs. In palaces and large town houses, in and around Mdina, Valletta, as well as in country mansions, there lived the elite, who included in their ranks the noble landowners, legal professionals and

the higher echelons of the clergy. They generally communicated with each other in Italian and actively imported art and culture generated in Italy and the European mainland.



Then there were the village folk who provided the rest with agricultural and fishery produce. These tended to be the more isolated, speaking only Maltese in their regional dialects, and having their own ancient traditions and rituals. Indeed, the rural community, as in other countries, was considered by the rest of the population to be backward and old-fashioned. Even village youths who managed to be educated in the towns felt angry that their folk held on to their 'ignorant' beliefs. In the eighteenth century the Maltese linguist Mikiel Anton Vassalli, who had been born of a family of peasants, described in his Lexicon of Maltese words the belief of *il-Gewgew* but criticised it as one of the many superstitions of the common folk, and commented that 'this superstition and so many similar ones needed to be uprooted completely from the ignorant as they cause great harm to society in many ways'. His writing had no immediate effect on his illiterate compatriots.

Later on, the British colonial government introduced primary education in the rural areas, but it was not obligatory and few of the country folk believed their

children had any need for it. Their livelihood depended on their farms and fishing boats and not on reading or writing. There were a few exceptions, even in the early twentieth century. One was the son of a farmer from Ħal Luqa, a certain Juann Mamo, who was more interested in books rather than ploughs and goats. He was sent to school and grew up reading. He travelled the world, took up journalism and wrote popular stories written in Maltese. In the 1920s he authored various articles and even the first novel in Maltese: *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka*, in which he described rural Maltese life and ridiculed the same ignorance and superstitious beliefs Vassalli had written about a hundred years earlier. However, this time around trends were rapidly changing in Malta just as they were in the rest of Europe.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, new political beliefs, cinema, formal education and modern technology began to infiltrate village cores and dislodge age-old beliefs and rituals. At the same time, a mass emigration to North America and Australia led to further cross-cultural influences between Malta and progressive cultures. Class and geographical distinctions became diluted and blurred.

Many old traditions and beliefs were no longer passed on to the younger generations. Cinema and television replaced storytelling, modern medicine replaced folk cures, while science and technology replaced the remaining rituals and beliefs. Acquisition of the ancient lore and values of the elders, as had been the way for countless generations, was no longer considered part of the modern way of life. Many of the old traditions were ridiculed, avoided and eventually forgotten. Mikiel Anton Vassalli and Juann Mamo would have been more than pleased with this social reform, as the life of the Maltese was distinctly improved in many ways.

And yet—much was lost. It was only due to the interest of a handful of scholars, who collected the last remaining

fragments of the legends, myths and beliefs from older generations, that not everything was forgotten. Those 20th century folklorists, including Ġorġ Pisani, Joseph Cassar Pullicino, Guido Lanfranco and Anton F. Attard recognised the cultural value of the old customs and beliefs and recorded them in journals and books. Even though most old tales, legends and rituals were not considered important, or indeed of having any intrinsic value in a modern lifestyle, these scholars saw in the lore a basis in the formation of a national identity—for it was not just the language or the geography which made a country a nation, but also the traditions, the beliefs and the rituals of its inhabitants. In the middle of the twentieth century, at a time when the Maltese were considering their independence and their place in the community of nations, a definition of what identified their own culture became essential. The study of the traditions and oral narratives suddenly became a worthwhile and noble pursuit. A Maltese folklore society was set up. Professional and amateur scholars contributed to the bank of information that described the old way of life. This is when the importance of the handful of Victorian folklorists, including Manuel Magri, Bertha Ilg and Hans Stumme, who had managed to record legends, sayings and stories before they were forgotten, was realised. For it was, in many cases, too late to record anything else. Although a few exceptions of oral tradition persisted into the latter twentieth century, the older folk, the last custodians of the rarest oral traditions, had by then long passed away.

### ***Manuel Magri — the Mythologist***

At the end of the nineteenth century, Father Emmanuel Magri was in his forties. He was an avid scholar of ancient mythology, a proficient archaeologist, well-versed in many classical, European and Semitic languages, and had travelled extensively in the East and in North Africa.