

The Name Melissa

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ONE OF THE OLDER NAMES which seem to have had some resurgence of popularity in recent years is Melissa. In both its forms, Melissa and Melitta, the name denotes 'a bee' in Greek. Its ultimate origin is from Greek *meli*, 'honey.'

In Greek literature there are innumerable references to persons or supernatural beings named Melissa. In the field of legend, we find a princess of Crete named Melissa, the daughter of a king Melisseus. This princess was believed to have fed honey to the newborn god Zeus, in the cave in which the divine mother, Rhea, gave him birth (Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* i, 22; Ant. Lib., 19; Apollod., *Bib.* i, 1, 6-7; Hyginus, *Fab.* 182; Columella ix, 2, 3). This Melissa is said to have been the first priestess of the Magna Mater; and in later times her name was pluralized to denote the priestesses of the cult, Melissai.

Artemis of Ephesus, as moon and birth goddess, is sometimes given the name Melissa (Porph., *De Antr. Nymph.* 18); and her chief priest was called a 'king bee,' *essen* (*Et. Mag.*, s.v.). Demeter, too, mother-goddess and patroness of agriculture, was sometimes called Melissa, and her priestesses Melissai (Callim., *Hymn. Apoll.* 110-112; Porph., *De Antr. Nymph.* 18; Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* iv, 60; Schol. Theocr. xv, 94). A woman named Melissa was honored by Demeter with a revelation of her mysteries; she was later torn to pieces by other women, to whom she had refused to reveal the sacred rituals (Serv., *Aen.* i, 430). Demeter, we are told, caused bees to be created from the dead woman's body. Women who celebrated the mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, and priestesses of those goddesses, were called Melissai, 'bees,' or Hierai Melissai, 'holy bees.'

A beautiful woman named Melissa was changed into a bee by

Zeus (Columella ix, 2, 3). Muses and nymphs are often associated with, or called, bees, and are said on occasion to have been changed into bees, or to appear as bees (Himerius, *Or.* x, 1; xxviii, 7; Philostr., *Imag.* ii, 8, 6; Varro, *R. R.* iii, 16, 7; Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* iv, 60; Porph., *De Antr. Nymph.* 18). The priestess of Apollo at Delphi is called the "Delphic Melissa" (Pindar, *Pyth.* iv, 59-60).

There is some evidence that the legendary and religious uses of the name Melissa are tied in with a very old ritual of bee mummery and dancing, with accompanying frenzy and prophecy, the whole performed by costumed women, over a wide area in prehistoric Crete, Greece, and Asia Minor,¹ in the worship of various female divinities or supernatural beings of great antiquity, associated with motherhood, fertility, and prophecy. In this connection, we may perhaps note the parallel of the Hebrew Deborah, "Bee," who was a prophetess.

In the classical and Greco-Roman periods the connotations of the name Melissa-Melitta were quite different from those of the name in earlier times.

One of the best-known references to the name appears in Athenaeus iv, 157 A—in an account of a dinner party. There were present, says the Greek author, two well-known courtesans, Melissa and Nicion. The latter of these he calls sportively a *kynamuia*, 'dog-fly.' Melissa he calls *theatrotoryne*, 'ladle of the theater.' Elsewhere² I have shown that this epithet denotes a woman who performs a lascivious dance in which she rotates the hips and jerks the body in a manner reminiscent of the motions of a ladle stirring food. It is evident that this Melissa was akin to the modern dancer who uses "bumps" and "grinds" in the theater today!

In another passage (xiii, 578 A-579 E) Athenaeus speaks at some length of a witty and popular courtesan whose real name was Melitta, but who so maddened her lovers that she came to be known as Mania.

In Alciphron's *Letters of Courtesans* (iv, Letter 13, frag. 6) appears a *hetaira* named Melissa. In Lucian's *Dialogues of the Hetairai* (4), one of the speakers is the courtesan Melitta. And, in Latin literature, Petronius (*Cena* 61, 6 and 62, 11) gives the name Melissa to the woman who is the lady-love (although she is married!) of Niceros.

Of an earlier period is the Melissa who is associated with Periander of Corinth. Periander, a "tyrant," or, as we should say, dictator, fell deeply in love with and married Melissa, daughter of Procles, tyrant of Epidaurus (Athenaeus xiii, 589 F). Here we are certainly not dealing with a courtesan. However, the story is told by Athenaeus in his section on courtesans; and he adds that Periander first saw the young woman when she was acting as cup-bearer to the men, "wearing but one tunic"—very scanty and unprincesslike garb! Diogenes Laertius (i, 94) tells us that her real name was Lyside, but that Periander himself nicknamed her Melissa. The romance faded some years later; and Periander indeed is said actually to have slain his wife (Herodotus iii, 50).

There is a Melissa also in the story of the elder Carneades, the philosopher. He is reported as having been so devoted to his studies that even when he was at table he sometimes forgot to put out his hand to take food. His Melissa "whom he had in place of a wife," used to put his hand upon the food (Val. Max. viii, 7, ext. 5).

Very definitely, then, in the classical and Greco-Roman periods the name Melissa has a connotation of "courtesan, concubine"—a decided change from the earlier significance of a priestess or attendant of one of the major deities. Oddly enough, Lucian, in his *Dialogues of the Hetairai* (7), points up the difference quite unconsciously. One of his speakers says to a courtesan: "Be as good a girl as if you were a priestess of Demeter instead of what you are."

How could such a strong change in the connotation of the name have come about? I believe that it can be explained very simply.

In the ritual of "bee priestesses" and "holy bee-women," dancing certainly played a large part—as it did in practically all prehistoric rituals of the Greeks and Cretans. Now, the bee was much respected by all the peoples of classical antiquity, and its habits were observed closely—sometimes even through the agency of hives made of transparent substances (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xi, 16, 49–50; xxi, 14, 80). Within recent years scientists have proved conclusively that honey-bees actually do dance, spiritedly and ecstatically. For example, when a worker-bee returns to the hive to report on the finding of a food supply, it performs a frenzied circle-dance if the food is very near the hive; if the food is farther away, the bee engages in a "waggle dance," whipping its abdomen violently to the

left and then to the right. Other bees join in until the hive is a whirring, humming, "wagglings" bedlam. These strange dances of the honey-bee have recently been photographed in color, on a very large scale, and presented to audiences in Walt Disney's short picture, "Nature's Half-Acre." Of the two dances, the "waggle-dance," with its marked swinging of the abdomen, could, if imitated by a human dancer or ritualistic "bee-woman," quite easily change, over years, into something very like the "bumps" and "grinds" of the courtesan-dancers.

The Greeks of the classical and post-classical periods seem to have been unaware of the semantic development of the name. To them, for reasons into which they do not seem to have inquired, Melissa was simply an appropriate name for a "companion" or a courtesan. And it is probably just as well that our modern Melissas are happily unconscious of the full background of their name!

NOTES

¹ Lillian B. Lawler, "Bee Dances and the 'Sacred Bees,'" *Classical Weekly*, Vol. 47 (Feb. 15, 1954), 103-106.

² Lillian B. Lawler, "Ladles, Tubs, and the Greek Dance," *American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 71 (1950), 70-72.

³ Karl von Frisch, "The Dances of the Honey Bee," *Bulletin of Animal Behavior*, Vol. 5 (1947), 1-32; summarized in *Psychological Abstracts*, Vol. 23 (1949), 1140.