

DEMETRIUS J. GEORGACAS

PROFESSOR LILLIAN B. LAWLER gave an interesting account of the name *Melissa* in ancient Greek.¹ Regarding the explanation of how a strong change in the name could have come about, I suggest another possible view.

Μέλισσα 'Honey-bee' as a name of industrious women,² creating sweet, pleasant life was and is natural. It is, in my opinion, from actual family and social life that such a name entered Greek religion and mythology. The name *Melissa* finally came to mean 'companion, courtesan, concubine'; although this meaning is not explicit and, for this reason, not recorded in the Greek dictionaries, yet it is implied from the names which Professor Lawler has noted.

The semantic way to the latter meaning is, I think, not the one indicated by Professor Lawler, namely from 'bee' to 'dancing bee' to 'courtesan.' To me it is conclusive that *Melissa* 'bee' came to mean 'priestess' (of Apollo, Demeter, Artemis, Cybele), also the plural *Melissai* 'priestesses of the cult' of the Magna Mater and of Demeter; *Melissai* and *Hierai Melissai* were priestesses of Demeter and Persephone. Then the name *Melissa*, 'priestess' and therefore 'chaste' (like *Vestal*), was taken to denote, certainly euphemistically, the 'female companion, courtesan.' The passage in Lucian,³ "and will you be as good a girl as if you were not a hetaera but a priestess of Thesmophoros (= Demeter)," (mentioned by Lawler⁴) perhaps fits this development of meaning. As another parallel from the religious language there may be mentioned the term *ιερόδουλος* f. 'temple-slave' and 'temple-courtesan, religious prostitute,' the latter meaning recorded for Corinth and other places.⁵ It is well known that there was regular temple prostitution of slaves in the

cult of Aphrodite at Corinth and elsewhere. The learned modern Greek still includes the term *ιερόδουλος* for 'prostitute.'

Such names are sarcastically used in many languages. So in ancient Greek, where *παρθένος* f. 'maid, virgin' occurs, names are recorded such as *Παρθένιον*⁷ and *Παρθενίς*⁷ as names of hetaerae. Furthermore, *Παρθένιος* as a man's name is found in the Iliad 16.80; he was the child of a known person in the story and of a prostitute.⁸ And *Παρθενίαι* were the youths born at Sparta during the Messenian war, actually 'sons of concubines.' Modern Greek *καλά κορίτσια* 'good girls' means 'prostitutes' in slang.

With regard to the connotation of prostitution, it should be added that another possibility may exist. A goddess called *Mylitta*, worshipped at Babylon by the Assyrians, akin to Ishtar and concerned with childbirth, was identified by Herodotus⁹ with Aphrodite (here Herodotus states that the Persians took over the Assyrian goddess *Mylitta*); every Babylonian woman, once in her life, had to sit in the precinct of the goddess and have intercourse with a stranger; she remained in the temple waiting (even for years, if ugly) till approached by a stranger in the name of the goddess *Mylitta*; the fee offered (a silver coin) was sacred because dedicated to the goddess.¹⁰

It is possible, then, that along with this custom, which Herodotus calls most foul, the Assyrian name *Mylitta* was taken over into Greek and by folk etymology became *Melitta* and *Melissa*. As Herodotus¹¹ states, the Assyrian custom was found also in certain parts of the island of Cyprus. I assume that, as the goddess *Mylitta* was transformed into *Melissa* in Greek religion, so also her temple-prostitutes took over the same name.

In a word, where *Melissa* came to mean 'courtesan' it came rather from the Assyrian *Mylitta* cult (by folk etymology), but where *Melissa* meant simply 'priestess' it derived directly from *melissa* 'honey-bee.'

NOTES

¹ *Names*, 3 (1955), 28-31.

² Cf. Van der Kolf, "Melissa, 3," Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll, *Realencyclopädie*, 29 (1931), 525 ff.

³ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Hetaerae*, no. 7.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, 30.

⁵ Athenaeus, *Deipnosoph.*, 13.572 f.; Strabo, *Geographica*, 8.6120 (ed. Meinecke, 2.536; ed. H. L. Jones, *The Geography of Strabo*, Loeb, 4 [1927], 190).

⁶ Alcaeus 3.33.2.

⁷ Lucian, *op. cit.*, no. 15.

⁸ M. Scheller, *Festschrift für Albert Debrunner* (Bern, 1954), 400 note 3.

⁹ *History*, 1.131.

¹⁰ See Herodot., 1.199; see Preisendanz, "Mylitta," *Realencyclopädie* 16, 1 (1933), 1073. The name means perhaps 'woman in labor' or something similar.



American Palatinate Names.—Dr. Herbert Leutz is currently engaged in tracing the family names of the Kurpfalz (Palatinate), northern Baden and southern Hessen—those German districts which sent more immigrants to Pennsylvania and the Middle West than other German provinces. For some strange reason the family names of the old Pfalz have been somewhat neglected by the compilers of German family names. Here are a few names of special interest:

The family name of our President appears as Eysenheuwer in 1546 in the parish of Ebersbach;

the name of the Pennsylvania pioneer and poet Konrad Beisel originated from Beusel, a diminutive of Baus (in Ebersbach since 1420), related to *pausbackig*, 'chubby-cheeked.'

the name of the first treasurer of the United States, Michael Hillegass, is derived from Helligast (Höllengeist, 'spirit from hell'), obviously a nickname attached to a village actor who played the role of an infernal spirit in the pre-lenten plays; the name occurred in Mosbach in Baden after 1400.

Dr. Herbert Leutz (Mannheim-Neuostheim, Mühlenfeldweg I, 20) has expressed his willingness to give information to our members concerning family names of German origin. Requests should be accompanied by an International Reply Coupon.