Chapter One

“On the island of goddess Calypso”

The etymology of the island’s name, Lipsí, connects its identity with the distant past of the region. The earliest references under the name Lepsia trace back to Hellenistic and generally pre-Christian times without a more precise dating, as indicated by the relevant inscriptions found on the island¹ (Volanakis 2002: 43 and 37; Dreliosi-Irakleidou 2003; Volanakis 2007: 64).

The later name Lipsó appears in the eleventh-century Byzantine documents² that grant the island to the Monastery of Patmos, founded in 1088 by Saint Christodoulos, along with the nearby islands. In Modern Greek the island’s name connotes some kind of omission (ellipsis) as it associates its meaning with the verb lipo (to miss), and thus suggests some kind of deficiency.³ This shortage is attributed to the island’s geomorphology, particularly the shape of the hospitable harbor of Lipsi, which is elliptical, indeed, and recalls the region’s seismic history: “Geophysically, it is as if a chunk of the island is missing at the point of the harbor’s large bay.”⁴

Lipsó, Ogygia, and the Deluge

In the older inhabitants’ conscience, however, the island’s name, Lipsó, is pareymymologically attributed to the goddess Calypso (pronounced Calipsó in Greek) who—according to the local oral tradition—was living there in the very old times, in a distant past vaguely set some time before the Deluge.

It comes from the name of Calipsó. This old man was telling us that before the flood Arkioi, Agathonissi and the islets around us—Aspronissi, Makronissi, Frangonissi⁵—were all a single mass and the flood broke us apart. That’s why the old man used to say there were 14,000 souls on this island, and they had this church where they attended mass; it was the old church we now call Panaghiá tou Kousseliou.⁶

The “Flood” is a frequent reference in the older islanders’ stories who usually associate it with the end of an era when fruits were large and
plentiful and the island had a lot of underground water, as attested to by the many dry wells (vótsi) in the countryside and the springs of fresh water in places seen as either haunted or sacred. In world mythologies Flood narratives are widespread in a wide number of cultural contexts; in general they refer to a total destruction due to divine retribution against humanity (Couffignal 1988: 427).  

The “territory” of Calypso spans the area from the region of Castro (the Castle) to Kousselio, southeast of the current settlement.

Calypso was up at the Castle. From the Castle there were steps going down to Kousselio—you know it. She walked down to Kousselio and had her bath. There was a cave, too, near the sea. That’s where Calypso would go, take her bath, sit for a while and then climb the steps back to the Castle. She lived up there. Yes.

That’s where people in the old days used to hear the knocking sound of her golden loom in the night, subtly recalling the Homeric verse (Odyssey, 5.60). Castro is purported to be connected via secret underground stairs to Kousselio and the cave where the goddess hid Odysseus—“the queenly nymph Calypso, that bright goddess, keep back in her hollow caves, yearning that he should be her husband”—and the place where she bathed.

There is also something like a cave, the bath, as we call it, and there they found a pair of doves; not real doves but made of gold: they touched one and it was gold. So the goddess Calypso would bathe and then go back to the Castle and work at her distaff. But on the east side of the Castle there was a door, opening once a year, and going down forty steps. That’s what the old people used to say. Alright, it’s me saying this now, but I learned it from an uncle of my mother’s.

The archaeological survey of these locations attests to finds from the prehistoric to the early Christian era, which suggest that an ancient habitation did exist indeed on the south slope of the hill under Castro (Dreliosi-Irakleidou 2005: 333). According to archaeologist I. E. Volanakis, this was evidently “the capital of Lipsi in pre-Christian times. This settlement covered a large area, its acropolis was on the hill of ‘Castro’ to the NE and it was next to a safe cove. It flourished in the classical, Greco-Roman and early Christian times” (Volanakis 2002: 43). The “Bath” as reference in a number of oral narratives may therefore allude to finds associated with the existence of an early Christian baptistery (Volanakis 2002: 46).