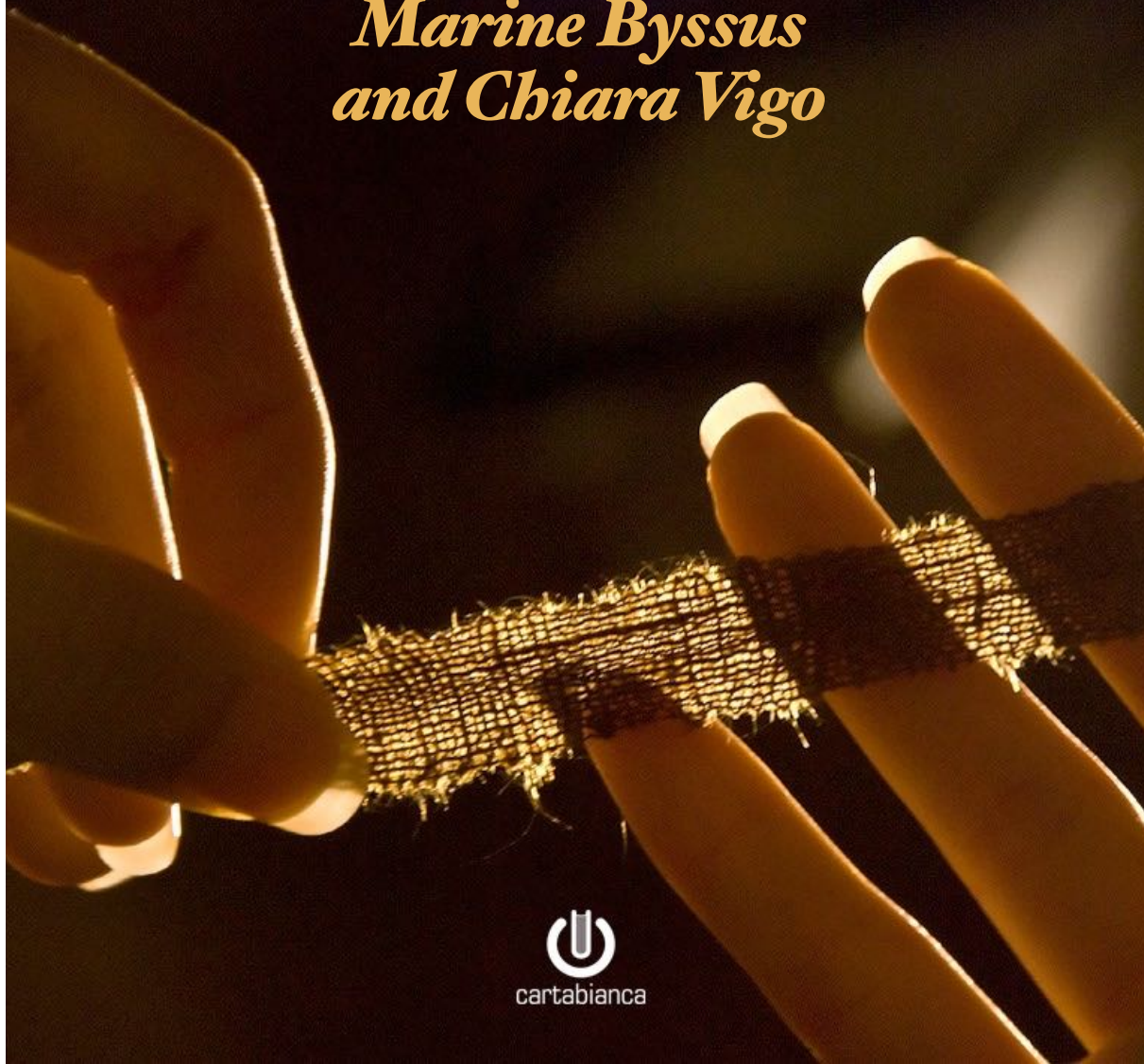


Susanna Lavazza

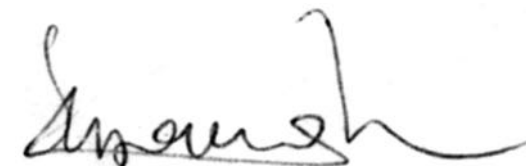
From Darkness to Light

*Marine Byssus
and Chiara Vigo*



It comes from the depths of the sea with a song, a moan, a melody. Breath of life. Light from the darkness. A golden ray bursting forth from the abyss. Marine silk. A Siren's hair. Filaments of a mollusc large as a child with which it anchors itself to the seabed. It defends itself from octopi. It prepares itself to offer its net to the world. A net that frees. Water-born thread from which sacred vestments are created. Eternal symbols. Timeless works of art.

It is the Pinna nobilis from which byssus is derived. Master is the one who can handle it, with a mastery that was once typical of the Renaissance. Neither artisan, nor artist. Repository of a unique talent; of ancient secrets that are shared only with descendants under oath. This is a story that is never what it seems.



I authorise the publication of my first artistic biography written by Susanna Lavazza and I dedicate to all the children of the world, from the past, the present and the future.



M. Di Bitto Marino



The Nymph Calypso

There once was (and still is) a lady who wakes up every morning at dawn to pray by the sea. She lives on a strange island connected by bridge to a much bigger island called Sardinia (Italy). This lady, with long black hair and velvet eyes, wears a tunic and sings in an ancient language that hardly anyone speaks anymore: Aramaic. Then she intones magic formulae in another ancient language of which only consonants and vowels remain, scattered randomly like confetti. It was the language of the people of Nur, who until 2500 years ago lived in stone-block castles called nuraghi. These chants are in good company. For Chiara, this is the lady's name, knows other litanies, ancient as the Mediterranean itself. At times she doesn't even recall the languages they are in.

That which today is uttered from her cherry-red lips is a sweet and liquid sound. Who knows from whence it comes...? I've always thought it to be like the Siren's; or perhaps Calypso's love song, the nymph who ensnared Ulysses and held him in her embrace for seven years, while she spent her days weaving and singing on that small island west of Ithaca. Fact is that every morning, as **the dark gives way to the light**, at the exact moment when the sun touches the tips of the Toro and Vacca islets, Chiara faces towards the sea and offers her song to the world. The song of the Water Women.

Chiara, in fact, is a high-priestess of the sea. When she prays she calls upon all the Water Women who have gone before her. With two stones she beats the call; as the North American Indians used to do with drums,



the Tibetans with horns and the Australian Aborigines with the didgeridoo (that hollowed out eucalyptus trunk which emits ancestral sounds).

Water transmits sound. It has its own memory and even a soul, it is said. The water of the sea is mixed with salts that purify and preserve. Its waves carry sounds across great distances...

At the point where Chiara's altar is to be found, in Sant'Antioco, the seabed is very deep. The fan mussel proliferates in the lagoon on the opposite side of the Island. It is a cross between an oyster and a mussel, and grows to a height of up to a metre and a half. In 1992 the *Pinna nobilis*, its scientific name, was classified as an endangered species. Today it is protected by a Regional law and a European law, which state that anyone who catches them by whatever means or is even found in possession of one on the beach or in a boat is liable to a fine or even arrest.

The mollusc that lives within the shell used to be eaten fried like a steak. It weighs up to a kilo and produces small coloured pearls. As a result, the largest bivalve in the Mediterranean is once again to be seen in great numbers. It is disturbed by boats, water that is not of the optimal salinity or temperature, and industrial pollution. In other words, it is an intelligent mollusc. If it is left alone in tepid waters, somewhere between clear and azure, and preferably surrounded by abundant posidonia, it will offer its treasure. However, like all treasures lying at the bottom of the sea, it is not so easily found. One must know how to look, how to sense... and then one must have the key to open the chest. Or know its combination...





The High-Priestess of the Sea

There once was (and still is) a giant mollusc in the Mediterranean sea. The *Pinna nobilis*. It has a pearly interior and a rough outer-shell, is as tall as a child, and hides within it a silk-producing gland that is stimulated by the continuous movement of its two valves. As if it breathed underwater. From time to time it spits out a floss made of keratin, like our hair. Upon contact with the outside it solidifies, producing a brownish flock encrusted with tiny sea-shells, coral and algae. It looks like a root, with which the *Pinna nobilis* anchors itself to the seabed; or a rough and unkempt beard with which it defends itself from octopi. But once brought **from the darkness to the light**, the ugly flock is transformed into byssus. Radiant as the Golden Fleece. Smooth and blond like the hair of a Siren. Soft and strong at the same time, like the vestments worn by high-priests and kings way back in Biblical times.

Only the high-priestesses of the sea knew the rituals required for this great transformation. They were trained to withstand the forces of nature when fishing for it and to master the arts of working it. They also had to resist the snares set by men when they were smitten with greed and to protect its great worth. Only in this way could they receive, under oath, the secret formula with which to render this marine fibre flexible and sensitive. Through this rite of initiation the Water Women acquired the faculty to dive down into the abyss and bring forth byssus to the world, weaving and singing.



Today there is but one living person capable of performing all this. She lives on a strange island called Sant'Antioco, which is not really an island as it is connected by an ancient Phoenician bridge to its mother island, Sardinia (Italy). Every year in May, upon the new moon, Chiara Vigo, high-priestess of the sea, dives into the waters without a wetsuit to retrieve the raw treasure from the *Pinna nobilis*. Diving down to varying depths and using only her fingernails or a special scalpel, she manages to cut off only the last 5 cm or so of the 40 cm long flock that each adult exemplar produces.

It takes about a hundred dives to bring 300g of raw fibre to the light. Once teased (combed to remove impurities), it is reduced to 30g of byssus. From this 12 metres of twisted thread is derived. The process is very long: the flock must be desalinated for 25 days in fresh water, which needs to be changed every 3 hours. Then it is bathed in lemon juice to turn it blond, after which it is treated with an ultra-secret substance which renders it flexible and spinnable. It is then twisted with



a juniper spindle. The twisting must follow an 'S' pattern to embroider, and a 'Z' pattern if one wants to hand-weave with byssus.

Once upon a time, people used to fish the *Pinna nobilis* with noosed ropes, long pieces of metal and trawler nets, without bothering to kill the creature. But, at that time people even used the shells to make plates and trays.

Today Chiara Vigo has devised a method which

avoid killing the mollusc and preserves its habitat. She uses only what the sea itself offers to continue the tradition: the extreme ends of the flock. Thus she has learnt to work the byssus with incredible mastery using threads that may not even reach half a centimetre in length.

Byssus does not deteriorate and is not susceptible to insects. It provides ideal insulation and is finer than a human hair, but a thousand times more resistant. For this reason was it used by the Chaldeans and the Greeks, by the Jews and the Egyptians. Chiara, what is byssus? "It is the link connecting the soul of water to Man".



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