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THE DELPHIC ORACLE

By HUGH LLOYD-JONES

The ancient Greeks believed that the oracle at Delphi went back to immemorial antiquity. But were they right? The history of the site has been traced through excavations that are among the greatest achievements of modern archaeology. The interest of the French school in Delphi goes back to 1861, but for political reasons systematic excavation could not begin till 1893; since 1902 the series of volumes of the *Fouilles de Delphes* has appeared regularly. Mycenaean Delphi has been shown to have amounted to very little; and the chief centre seems to have been not on the site of the great temple, but at Marmaria, near the temple of Athene Pronaia. A few clay figurines may pertain to a private, but hardly to a public cult; an isolated Minoan marble drinking-horn shaped like a lion's head proves little. By the beginning of the Dark Age the settlement seems to have been destroyed by fire; before its life resumes during the Protogeometric period, there seems to have been a complete break in continuity. Only when the Dark Age is over does Delphi become important.

It is true that the mentions of Pytho in Homer suggest that the oracle was already celebrated. In the Catalogue of Ships it is simply one among several Phocian villages. But in the ninth book of the *Iliad* (404–5) Achilles declares that he would still reject Agamemnon's overtures, even if the king were to offer him all the wealth of Troy or Egyptian Thebes, or all that the stone threshold of the archer contains within it, in rocky Pytho. In the eighth book of the *Odyssey* (79 f.) there is mention of a prophecy of Apollo, made to Agamemnon in glorious Pytho after he had crossed the stone floor to consult the god; this is the first mention of Delphi as a place of prophecy. Hesiod in his *Theogony* (498 f.) says that Zeus placed at glorious Pytho, in the hollows of Parnassus, the great stone which his mother, Rhea, had given to her husband Kronos to swallow to prevent him from swallowing Zeus himself, as he had swallowed all their other children. Most people at present favour the eighth century as the time at which the epic poems reached their present form. If these passages are as early, it is surprising that they make Delphi seem as well established as they do.

The Greeks well knew that Apollo was a late comer to Delphi. The view that startled the learned world when Wilamowitz put it forward, that this god, the classical embodiment of the distinctively

Hellenic qualities, entered Greece from Asia at a comparatively late date, has been confirmed by much evidence that was unknown when it was first expressed.[1] The French excavations at Delos—appropriately, France has taken in charge both the two greatest centres of Apollo's worship—have shown that the mother and daughter, in historical times called Leto and Artemis, were established on Delos well before Apollo; no wonder Apollo in the *Iliad* takes the Trojan side. The earliest Greek account of the coming of Apollo to Delphi is contained in the Delphian section of the Homeric Hymn to him, perhaps a work of the seventh century. In order to found his oracle by the Castalian Spring, Apollo has to kill a monstrous female serpent, who on Hera's orders has brought up Typhon, the most terrible of the enemies of Zeus. In the later-attested tradition, this serpent is male, and his significance is different. A legend first told by Euripides in a chorus of his *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1234 f.), but found in many later texts, says that the serpent was Python, the holy serpent of the Earth Goddess, Gaia, to whom the oracle belonged before Apollo's coming. We must be careful to call him Python and not *the* Python, for feat of incurring the wrath of Professor Joseph Fontenrose, who in an exhaustive monograph[2] has written his biography and linked him with countless other mythical monsters. The Python story must be much older than Euripides. Aeschylus in the prologue of his *Eumenides* offers what is clearly a censored version of the story, in which Gaia gives the oracle to Themis, Themis to the Titaness Phoebe, and Phoebe makes it a birthday present to her grandson Apollo. Aeschylus must have avoided the story of Apollo's violent conquest of the shrine. Many scholars have argued that the Python story must be earlier than the legend told in the Homeric Hymn. This is by no means certain. Delphi had to struggle for primacy against an oracle whose claim to be the most ancient was perhaps more convincing than her own; an oracle, moreover, which claimed to derive its prophecies from Zeus himself—the great oracle of Dodona, in Epirus to the far north. Delphi countered Dodona's claim to be authorized by Zeus by insisting that Apollo derived his omniscience from Zeus his father. To counter Dodona's claim of greater antiquity, she had to assert the continuity of Apollo's oracle with an ancient oracle on the same site that had belonged to Gaia. But was there really such an ancient oracle? The archaeological evidence alone hardly suggests it. Perhaps the serpent killed by Apollo was originally simply the guardian of the sacred spring, like the dragon killed by Cadmus when he founded Thebes; perhaps it was only later that this dragon became Python. In the Hymn the dragon is female, doubtless because the story of the shrine belonging to Gaia had somehow led to the serpent

being confused with the goddess herself and taking on her gender. But that does not prove the legend earlier than the seventh century. The Hymn claims that the Delphians were descended from Cretan sailors who had been trying to make for Pylos, but were diverted to Pytho by the god. This has been connected with the discovery of Cretan objects among the eighth- and seventh-century finds at Delphi; it may indicate an early connection between Delphi and Dorian Crete, where the cult of Apollo flourished.

Delphi had over Dodona the advantage of a more central position and better communications both by land and sea. From the late eighth century on we have evidence that it was consulted by various Greek communities, notably by Corinth and Sparta, but also by towns in Achaea, in the northern Peloponnese, and even by cities in Euboea. W.G. Forrest argues[3] that in the famous war of the late eighth century which began over the rich Lelantine Plain in Euboea, but then spread over the Greek world, Delphi was a partisan of Chalcis and her allies against Eretria and others. The friends of Chalcis lay near Delphi; Corinth, Thessaly, and Sparta were all near at hand. The mere facts of geography are enough to show why these states are prominent among early consulters of the oracle. One of Eretria's allies, Miletus, had its own great Apolline oracle at Branchidae, and hardly needed Delphi. Yet from the early seventh century the oracle came to be consulted by islanders: Paros, Thera, and Rhodes all figure among inquirers.

Both individuals and whole communities could ask Apollo for advice about practical problems and about what results would follow a particular course of action. Many of the early recorded consultations deal with the founding of colonies. When a new colony was being planned, the intending founders would consult the oracle and would seek the encouragement of a favourable response. During the eighth century all the colonies known to have been associated with Delphi were in Sicily or southern Italy; then in the seventh there are colonies in Thrace to the north and in Africa to the south. It has been argued that Delphi provided the main impetus for the colonizing movement, and that its priests maintained a vast archive of information that would be useful to intending colonizers. This, I think, is a mistaken view, rightly rejected by the leading modern authority on the oracle, H.W. Parke. Parke's history of the oracle, first published in 1939, came out in 1956 in a second edition written with the help of his colleague D.E.W. Wormell.[4] The volume containing the actual history is accompanied by a second volume containing the evidence for all recorded responses of the oracle, both certain and dubious. He believes that the initiative for a

new colony, and also the bulk of the information needed, was supplied by the intending colonizers; he illustrates his view of the way things happened from the well-known instances of the oracles given to Archias, the Corinthian founder of Syracuse in 734, and to Battus, the founder of Cyrene about a century later.

Another important feature of the oracle's activity that can be traced back to the seventh century was that of regulating problems, and most particularly those regarding purification and blood-guilt. Although these concepts are not often mentioned in Homer, I am convinced that they were important long before his time, and they continued to be so till well into the fifth century. The myths of the matricidal heroes Orestes and Alcmaeon indicate their significance; both seem to have taken their present form during the seventh century, when Delphi provided the Greeks with authoritative guidance on such matters.

The shrine now began to receive precious offerings from great kings and rulers. Her connection with the wealthy power of Corinth, already strong under the rule of the aristocratic family called the Bacchiads, became still stronger under the great tyrant Cypselus. He came to power about the middle of the seventh century, and was the first donor to build a special treasury at Delphi to house his offerings. Delphi had a close link with Sparta and its royal houses. The kings based some of their claims upon a Delphic oracle, and they were attended by special officials called Pythioi, who managed their relations with Delphi. The reforms attributed to Lycurgus derived much of their authority from being sanctioned by Delphi; it became the custom for new legal codes to be submitted to Apollo for his approval. When soon after the beginning of the sixth century the Delphians had to defend their control of the oracle against the powerful city of Crisa situated at the head of the Gulf of Itea, they are able to invoke powerful foreign support. The Amphictyonic League had originally centred upon the temple of Demeter at Anthela near Thermopylae; it now made Delphi its centre and gave the oracle its protection. The Thessalian dynasts seem to have taken the lead in the so-called First Sacred War; but Cleisthenes, the famous tyrant of Sicyon, and Solon, another lawgiver who set store by Delphic sanction, both led contingents of their countrymen to help the Delphians. Athens had developed a strong Delphian connection at this time. Apollo as father of Ion, the mythical ancestor of the Ionian Greeks, acquired the title of the 'paternal god' of Athens, and special officials were appointed to give rulings in religious matters in close conjunction with the oracle.

Foreign rulers also sought Apollo's favour. The date and occasion

of the alleged consultation by Midas, king of Phrygia, are uncertain, though Herodotus saw at Delphi a throne said to have been dedicated by him. But the Lydian kings Gyges, Alyattes, and Croesus certainly inquired at Delphi and made splendid offerings. The greatest of all the benefactors of the oracle was Croesus; he hoped for encouragement for the expedition against Persia he was planning partly, no doubt, because he was trying to obtain Spartan aid. Apollo's famous prediction to Croesus that if he crossed the Halys he would destroy a great empire looks very like an afterthought to replace a favourable response that after the event was better forgotten. The poet Bacchylides (3.57 f.) wrote that Croesus was carried by Apollo to the land of the Hyperboreans and there lived happily ever after; oriental sources indicate that his life was not spared.

By the time of the great fire of 548 B.C., the wealth of Delphi must have been by contemporary standards very great. We get a notion of the art of that time at Delphi from the sculptures of the Sicyonian Treasury. A vast subscription was launched to pay for the rebuilding of the temple; one of the most generous subscribers was Amasis, king of Egypt, who relied heavily on Greek mercenaries. In the final stages the great Athenian family of the Alcmaeonidae, then in exile during the rule of their enemies the Pisistratids, took over the building contract. In legend this was the fifth temple, in fact the second. The first was built of Apolline bay from the Vale of Tempe, where it grew in abundance in ancient times; the second was made by bees from beeswax and feathers, and was finally blown by a mighty wind to the land of the Hyperboreans, where Apollo used to spend the winter months. The third temple was built by Hephaestus and Athene; it had walls and pillars of bronze, and above the pediment sang golden Keledones, creatures like the Sirens. So sweet was their song that visitors to the temple forgot their homes and families and stayed to listen to it for ever, so that in the end Zeus and Poseidon had to destroy the temple with lightning and earthquake. The fourth temple, the one destroyed in 548, was attributed to the heroes Trophonius and Agamedes; Trophonius had his own oracle at Lebadeia in Boeotia, on the present road from Athens to Delphi, where in the neighbourhood of an awe-inspiring chasm the inquirer had to climb into a narrow hole in the ground and then had the impression of being swept away into the darkness. The new fifth temple was of marble, and the Alcmaeonids marked their gratitude to the god for having rewarded their piety by bringing them back from exile by setting a marble pediment over the front instead of the limestone one specified in the contract. We can

get a notion of the splendour of the Alcmaeonid temple, and also of the formidable difficulties involved in building on this site from the magnificent supporting wall which survives from it.

Over the three entrances of the temple were inscribed three famous maxims: 'Nothing in excess', 'Know thyself'—which means not 'Practise introspection', but 'Remember that you are mortal'—and 'Go bail and ruin is at hand'. These maxims were associated with the sixth-century sages known as the Seven Wise Men; but the kind of wisdom they exemplify was ancient long before their time. It has been held to be specifically connected with Apollo, and Apollo is indeed the incarnation of the attitude to life which they exemplify. But this attitude is by no means exclusively Apolline, but rather common to the Greeks of epic and archaic times. Jean Defradas[5] is one of many who have believed in a specific Apolline wisdom, invented and preached to the Greeks at large by a powerful body of Delphian 'clergy'. This belief is false, as Defradas's distinguished countryman Pierre Amandry pointed out in a masterly review of his book.[6] The mountain villagers no more set themselves up as a clergy to preach a doctrine than they organized a vast information bureau for the benefit of intending colonizers and of a Panhellenic drive in search of *Lebensraum*. Their aim was to help Apollo to fulfil his promise to give advice to those who sought it, and in doing so to maintain the splendour of the sanctuary and to keep out of trouble.

The actual working of the oracle presents difficult and complex problems. The ancient evidence is surprisingly defective, and it is unlikely that general agreement on all the controversial issues will ever be attained. But the understanding of the question has been greatly furthered by Pierre Amandry;[7] the best modern treatment of the problem of the Pythia's trance is that of E.R. Dodds.[8]

The Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, was chosen from the local community. She had to be over fifty years of age, and was not permitted to indulge in sexual intercourse. The gender of a priest or priestess was normally the same as that of the divinity he served, and this exception to the rule must be accounted for. Rohde in his great book *Psyche*, published in the nineties of the last century, put it down to the influence of Dionysus, who was believed to take over Delphi during the winter months of Apollo's absence. But there is no evidence for Dionysus at Delphi earlier than the fifth century; and Rohde's theory depends on a distinction between Apollinian and Dionysiac prophecy rooted not in fact but in the theory of his early friend, Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1940 Kurt Latte suggested that the Pythia was a priestess of an oriental type who was imagined to be the consort of the god; he found this exemplified in the cult of

Apollo at Patara in Lycia, and in the myth of Cassandra. He thought Apollo had brought the Pythia with him when he came from Asia. But there is no indication that the Pythia was ever imagined as being the consort of the god, and the cult of Patara is too different from that of Delphi to permit the drawing of analogies. More probably the priestess of the Earth Goddess had been female, and the gender of the priestess remained unchanged after its taking over by Apollo.

Originally consultations took place only on one day of the year, the seventh of the Delphic month Bysios, which was Apollo's birthday; this month corresponded with the second half of February and the first half of March. Later they were held on the seventh of every month, except for the three winter months of Apollo's absence. People who wanted advice at other times had to remain content with the oracle conducted by drawing lots in the shape of beans to determine answers to alternative questions. On the days of consultation there was a large crowd and a very long queue; in Plutarch's time there were two Pythias with a third in reserve, working in shifts.

At dawn the Pythia purified herself, and after testing the omens the priest sacrificed a goat, probably on the great altar east of the temple dedicated during the fifth century by the people of Chios. Then the Pythia entered the sanctuary and took her seat upon the god's sacred tripod. The priests and the inquirers also purified themselves with water from the Castalian spring, and the order of consultation was determined. It was fixed partly by lot and partly by precedence; the Delphians used to reward benefactors of their community by grants of priority in the consultation of the oracle. Consultation was of course free of charge but the inquirer could not enter the temple till he had offered on the altar outside the sacred cake, and these cakes cost a great deal of money. There was a means test; communities paid more than individuals, and both communities and individuals paid according to their means. Then the consultant had to sacrifice sheep or goats on the inner hearth of the cella of the temple. In early times the Delphians were notorious for the greed with which they seized upon their portion of these sacrifices. It was in a dispute over sacrificial meat, according to Pindar in the sixth *Paean*, that the hero Neoptolemus met his end. His shrine stands just outside the precinct, just as the shrine of Erechtheus stood on the Athenian Acropolis near Athena's temple and the shrine of Pelops at Olympia near the temples of Hera and of Zeus; probably he was brought by the northerners when they came to Delphi.

After the sacrifice the inquirer entered the inner sanctuary at the

back of the temple. He sat in silence at the back of the room. The Pythia, already in a state of trance, was out of sight somewhere at the other end; either she was on a lower level or a curtain hid her. The inquirer was accompanied by the Prophetes, the chief priest, to whom he had already given his question, either verbally or in writing; the Prophetes now put it to the Pythia and received her answer. Her reply was shouted, and no doubt sounded incoherent; the Prophetes had to make sense of it and render it in hexameter verse. The rapid improvisation of hexameters is less difficult than some people imagine; it is helped by practice. These hexameters had a conventional style, based on that of epic verse, with formulaic phrases, ornate diction, and riddling paraphrases. After receiving the answer, the inquirer left the temple.

How was the Pythia induced to become the mouthpiece of Apollo? How was an elderly peasant-woman from a mountain village made to enter a trance and to emit prophetic ravings? Nineteenth-century rationalism produced a variety of ingenious answers, based upon this or that fragment of the ancient evidence. The tripod was supposed to have been placed over a deep chasm in the rock, from which mephitic vapours rose, inducing trance. But the archaeologists showed that there was no chasm, and the doctors showed that, if there had been, vapours rising from it could not have produced the supposed effect. The Pythia is said to have chewed leaves of Apolline bay, and it was suggested that this caused her ecstasy; but Professor Oesterreich chewed large numbers of bay leaves, and found that he was no more inspired than usual. Most people now incline towards a psychological explanation; if you tell an elderly peasant woman that on a certain day and at a certain time she will become the mouthpiece of Apollo, you do not need to be a hypnotist to get the desired result. Dodds used extensive evidence from the observation of modern mediums to argue that the Pythia's trance must have been auto-suggestively induced.

It is not difficult for a rationalist of the nineteenth-century type to write off the procedure as manifest fraud. How could the Prophetes discharge his role without being aware that he was putting a response into the mouth of the god? But once more modern research into the psychology of religious belief, not to mention common sense, enjoins caution. The Prophetes knew, as all believers in the ancient gods knew, that gods commonly worked through men. Apollo worked not only through the Pythia, but through the Prophetes, who can scarcely have thought of his own action as a fraud. The members of the village community who served as priests accumulated in the course of centuries great experience. They must be given credit for

much good sense, as a study of the responses collected by Parke and Wormell, with due allowance made for the presence of many prophecies made after the event and other doubtful items, will make clear. The advice given to inquirers is not only eminently practical; it is also based on sound moral and religious principles. Few individual consultants can have had occasion to reproach the god. Inquiries from communities or from their rulers about important public matters raised obvious difficulties. Anti-clerical critics can easily accuse the Delphians of cynical pursuit of their own private interest. They can point to some manifestly awkward incidents, like the alleged bribery that at the beginning of the fifth century secured the deposition of a king of Sparta, Demaratus, and led to the dismissal of the Pythia and the exile of a leading Delphian priest. They can accuse the Delphians of having supported the Lydians and later the Persians in their designs against Greek independence, or the Corinthians in the Lelantine War or the Peloponnesians in their wars with Athens. But such accusations take into account only part of the complicated truth. Obviously Apollo wished to content everyone; obviously he gave the answer that would content most people, and at the same time protect the interests of his sanctuary. One may instructively compare the awkward position in which the Pope found himself during the war of 1939–45. Perhaps Pius XII was too careful of the interests of his Church at the expense of wider interests. But will anyone who is not hopelessly prejudiced contend that he really sympathized with Hitler or with Mussolini? The Delphians are a good deal easier to excuse, for before the Persian War Greek nationalism hardly existed, and Apollo was not a merely national god. Nor did the Lydians or the Persians subscribe to an ideology which Apollo's worshippers were bound to consider wicked.

The Persian invasion of 480 exposed the oracle to a severe test. The Delphians were well aware of the immense power of Persia, and were understandably reluctant to offend it. Before the revolt of the Ionian Greeks at the beginning of the century, the men of Cnidus in Caria had asked Apollo if they should make their city into an island by cutting a canal, obviously in order to hold out against Persian attack if necessary (Hdt. 1.174.4). The god answered that Zeus would have made their territory an island, had he wished to; clearly he did not wish to encourage a rebellion. When in 480 the Athenians asked Apollo what they should do in face of imminent invasion, they received this answer:

Wretches, why are you sitting there? Leave your homes and the hilltops of your wheel-shaped city and flee to the ends of the earth! Neither your head nor your

body shall remain, nor your feet nor your hands nor any of your middle. Your state is not to be envied; you are struck down by fire and the fierce war god, driving on his Syrian chariot. He shall ruin many another fortress, and not yours alone; and he shall give many temples of the immortals to the ruthless fire. They now stand bathed in sweat, quivering with terror, and blood pours over their rooftops, as they foresee the compulsion of distress. Leave the temple, and let your thoughts dwell on trouble (Hdt. 7.140.1).

The Athenian envoys were greatly distressed at this answer; and an influential Delphian called Timon advised them to return as suppliants and to ask for a second answer. They took his advice, and told the god that if he did not offer a more encouraging response they would remain in the temple till they expired. That would have polluted the sanctuary; the same threat is used by the Danaids in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* to force the king of Argos to grant them protection. Apollo told them that Athena could not persuade Zeus to spare them, but that he would grant her that, though all of Attica was ruined, a wooden wall should remain, and should protect her and her children. They should not await the coming of an army, but should retire. 'Divine Salamis', the oracle concluded, 'you shall destroy the children of women, either when Demeter—the corn goddess—is being scattered or when she comes together.' Salamis was the obvious place for the Athenians to put their non-combatants.

It seems that the advancing Persians left Delphi alone. A story of how a force tried to attack it, but was destroyed through a miraculous agency, looks like an afterthought. After the battle of Salamis, Apollo seems to have changed his mind, for Plutarch (*Vita Aristidis* 11. 3) says that an inquiry by Aristides not long before the battle of Plataea provoked the response that if they prayed to certain specified gods the Athenians would be victorious. After the war Delphi was so far from having lost prestige that it received magnificent offerings from the Greek cities in honour of the victory. Marathon had already been commemorated by the erection of the Athenian Treasury, and now the Athenian Stoa commemorated Salamis and the states victorious at Plataea set up the golden tripod that bore the serpent column still to be seen in the Hippodrome in Constantinople. It was even proposed to dedicate to Apollo a tithe of the property of those Greek cities which had sided with the enemy, though the proposal was not adopted. To the same period belong the splendid dedications by which the Sicilian tyrants commemorated their victories over the Carthaginians and Etruscans and their successes in the great games, whose chief survival is the charioteer from the group dedicated by the brother of Gelon and Hieron, Polyzalus.

During the next half-century Delphi continued to be consulted by the principal Greek states, including Athens; Apollo blessed the transfer of the bones of Theseus from Scyros and the founding of the Italian colony of Thurii. But during the Peloponnesian War geography made it hard for Delphi to be neutral. When in 431 the Spartans asked Delphi whether they should go to war, he encouraged them and promised them his help, so that when the plague broke out at Athens people might remember the plague in the Greek camp started by Apollo's arrows in the first book of the *Iliad*. During the war the Athenians are known to have consulted Dodona and even the distant oracle of Zeus Ammon in the oasis of Siwa in the Libyan Desert; access to Delphi was in any case scarcely possible. Delphi received dedications for the Syracusan victory over Athens, and for Lysander's final victory at Aegospotami. Yet she seems to have done what she could to remain the common sanctuary of all Greeks. Both in 456 and again in 414 Argos, the ally of Athens, commemorated a victory over her hereditary enemies, the Spartans, with a Delphic dedication. The former was probably made during the short period of Phocian control over the oracle that followed the Athenian conquest of Boeotia at the battle of Oenophyta, and so may not be relevant; the second is a fact of special interest.

Sparta continued to be the most influential Greek community at Delphi till in 371 her defeat by the Thebans at Leuctra changed the balance of power. Two years before that, the Alcmaeonid temple had been ruined by an earthquake; ancient authors say surprisingly little about this event, but the inscribed building accounts reveal what happened. Again a vast subscription was opened; but before the work of restoration was complete a new disaster supervened. Under pressure in their war against the Thebans, the Phocians seized the sanctuary and plundered its treasures to pay their mercenary troops. Philip of Macedon got himself made president of the Amphictyonic League, and skilfully exploited the indignation which the sacrilege aroused; the Phocian defeat in the Third Sacred War of 346 was greatly to his advantage.

In the following years Athens preferred to consult Dodona; Demosthenes, if we may trust his enemy Aeschines, openly accused the Pythia of philippizing. Philip and his son Alexander after him treated Delphi with respect, and in 330 the restoration of the temple was completed. But there is no indication that they thought the oracle politically important, and in the new world dominated by military monarchies Delphi could hardly hope to exercise the same influence that it had wielded in the old world of small city states.

It still gave rulings in matters relating to religion, and it was still treated with general respect; but in high politics it no longer counted. In the closing years of the fourth century Demetrius Poliorcetes when he gained control of Athens did not only receive the divine honours of celebration in a paean and approach by an embassy whose members were styled not *presbeis* but *theoroi*; a decree echoing those referring to oracular responses ordained that his pronouncements should have the force of oracles. Even fifty years earlier, no such thing would have been possible.

Soon after the beginning of the third century, Delphi came to be dominated by the Aetolian League, the least civilized of the various forces that counted for something in the war and politics of the Hellenistic world. That domination lasted for about a century, until the Romans removed the Amphictyonic League from Aetolian control. A raid by the invading Gauls under Brennus in 279 was defeated, it appears, by an Aetolian and Phocian force, and the Aetolians spread stories of miraculous protection of the shrine calculated to boost their own reputation for piety. Many inscriptions found near the sanctuary name people whom they singled out for honour. Under their control the oracle continued to function, but hardly enjoyed its old prestige.

The Roman connection with Delphi goes back to the fourth century B.C. when the Romans, who had been preceded by the Etruscan city of Caere, or Agylla, rewarded Apollo for his share in the overthrow of Veii by dedicating a golden mixing-bowl. In the crisis of the Second Punic War they sent Q. Fabius Pictor, the first Roman annalist, to consult the oracle, and he received a list of divinities to whom supplication should be made. During the period of extreme alarm that followed Cannae the government must have wanted to satisfy the people that every possible religious measure was being taken; but the move may indicate a wish for friendly relations with the Aetolians, and soon after Rome became their ally against Philip V of Macedonia. After the Metaurus, Delphi received a handsome offering; and when the Sibylline Books were found to have advised the bringing of the image of the Mother of the Gods from her shrine at Pessinus to Rome, Delphi took part in the transaction. But once Rome had gained the desired foothold in Greek politics, Delphi ceased to be consulted. The Romans had their own methods of divination, and the advice of Greek oracles was not needed.

The decline of Greek religion which had marked the Hellenistic age continued during the period of Roman domination. The educated classes showed respect to the old gods, drew their real spiritual

sustenance from philosophy, and the ignorant relied upon astrology and other superstitions of eastern origin: the ancient gods were still deferred to, but they were not worshipped with the old devotion. The philhellenic emperor Hadrian twice visited Delphi, and held the local archonship; in his time Herodes Atticus restored the stadium, and Plutarch took special pride in being a Delphic priest. Several of his works are concerned with Delphi, and tell us much about its history; and his connection with Delphi was an important element in the blend of ancient piety and more modern philosophy that make his work and personality so attractive.[9] But even Plutarch cannot conceal from himself the oracle's decline. He is clearly a little saddened by the oracle's responses being no longer given in verse. But in the peaceful conditions of his own age, he argues, there is less need for oracles in verse: 'War has ceased, migrations and civil strife exist no more, nor tyrannies, nor the other diseases and plagues of Greece, which needed the resources of many and powerful medicines.' Inquiries on trivial subjects, he believes, do not deserve poetic treatment. When Hadrian himself consulted Apollo, he did not ask him about affairs of state, but asked instead where Homer came from and who were his parents; Apollo answered that his country was Ithaca, and his parents Telemachus and Nestor's daughter Epicaste.

Within a century after Hadrian's time, the oracle seems to have become virtually silent. Christianity was now powerful, and it was actively hostile to the pagan oracles; since it did not deny their effectiveness, it was obliged to attribute it to the agency of demons. A legend grew that these demons had abandoned their sanctuaries on the birth of Christ; and Eusebius, the panegyrist of Constantine the Great, speaks of a Delphic response given to Augustus which caused him to dedicate on the Capitol an altar 'to the first-born God'. Even under Constantine Delphi seems to have enjoyed some consideration; although Constantine looted its treasures to adorn his new capital, statues of him and his relations were still erected there. The last defender of the old religion, Julian, is said to have consulted Delphi, with other ancient oracles, before his fatal expedition to the East in A.D. 362. There is a tradition that Julian's quaestor, the great doctor Oreibasius, inquired of the oracle and received the following response: 'Tell the monarch, the marvellous court has fallen to the ground; no more does Phoebus occupy his house, no more his prophetic bay, no more his speaking fountain; even the talking water is cut off.' The tradition cannot be believed. Little more than thirty years after Julian's death, Greece was brutally devastated by the barbarian horde of Alaric the Goth.

According to Eunapius, the Goths were assisted in the work of destruction by Christian monks. It is easier now than it was a few years ago to imagine these, barefooted, covered with hair, stinking with the odour of sanctity and eagerly destroying the treasures of centuries in the name of their own sacred dogmas and emotions. Delphi must have been among the first objects of attack, and we can still observe the thoroughness with which the work was done. The imperial throne was then occupied by the bigot Theodosius, who had saved what could be saved of Roman fortunes after the disastrous defeat of Adrianople in 378. He issued orders that the material got from the destruction of temples should be used to repair roads, bridges, aqueducts, and walls. We can hardly doubt that it was after this event that the famous oracle said to have been given to Oreibasius came into being; it smacks too strongly of Christian propaganda to be genuine.[10] Now began the long centuries of the shrine's desertion.

NOTES

1. W. Burkert, *Rheinisches Museum* 118 (1975), 1 f., has now made a strong case for connecting Apollo's name with ἄπελλα, and has argued that he originated in the Peloponnese. The Apollo of historical times may well contain elements of different origin; Dr. C. Sourvinou-Inwood will soon publish a new study of the question, taking account of recent archaeological discoveries.

2. *Python* (Berkeley 1959).

3. *Historia* 6 (1957), 160-75.

4. *A History of the Delphic Oracle* (Oxford); Parke followed this in 1967 with an excellent short book, *Greek Oracles* (London), available as a paperback in the Hutchinson University Library series.

5. *Les Thèmes de la propagande delphique* (Paris 1954).

6. *Revue de philologie* 30 (1956), 268-82.

7. *La Mantique apollinienne à Delphes* (Paris 1950).

8. *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951), 70 ff.

9. It is well described by D.A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London 1972).

10. See C.M. Bowra, *On Greek Margins* (Oxford 1970), 233 ff.