

Medieval and Post-Medieval Greece

The Corfu Papers

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2.2 A New Approach to an Old Archaeological Site: *The Case of Delphi**

Platon Petridis

For each of the known and established archaeological sites more or less concrete images have been formed in the collective subconscious. These notions include an approximate idea of the period of flourishing, and also the moment of decline. The archaeological site of Delphi, one of the first excavated in Greece, is no exception to the rule. The most famous monument of the archaeological site, the Tholos, constitutes a trademark through which everyone recognizes the specific place, or at least hopefully so. However, only a few, as we are taught by our contact with the visitors through the years, can date it to the 4th century BC. The period in which the monuments where Pythia delivered her oracles were constructed, and during which they were functioning, is usually identified with the Archaic and Classical era. The dating has been supported by famous offerings, such as those of Croesus, as well as the bronze serpent column of Plataea. Other periods, though equally important for the sanctuary, such as the Hellenistic, during which local magistrates and sovereigns or wealthy citizens performed various offerings to the gods, or even the Roman period, are rarely related to Delphi. In contrast to this lack of diachronicity, a very concrete picture of the period, or more precisely, of the moment of decline of the oracle of Apollo exists in the mind of the general public. Unfortunately, this picture is identified with the definitive end of the city of Delphi.

The last oracle that was, according to tradition, delivered by Pythia,¹ is said to have been the answer to Oribasius the Quaestor, a delegate of the Emperor Julian, known in history as the Apostate. In the word 'Apostate' lies perhaps the reason why this oracle became so famous. It definitely meant the triumph of the new religion over the old one, the end of the pagan world and the establishment of Christianity in an undeniable and irrevocable way. This is also the reason why this oracle has been delivered in identical form or in paraphrase by the Fathers of the Church and other Byzantine writers,² and has wrongly been identified with the end of Delphi, thus symbolizing the end of an era. This concept became a commonplace always referred to by the tourist guides,³ and widely used in books for children and young people,⁴ flavoured with an intense shade of sadness for the irrevocably lost era. Only few know, of course, that there has been a dispute about the relation of this oracle with Delphi since 1962.⁵ It has been argued that the oracle was delivered not at Delphi, but by the oracle of Daphne near Antioch. Also here was a spring named Castalia, and indeed, the oracle was delivered according to the interpretation of the bubbling of its waters. Later, in 1978, this view was contradicted and the original interpretation was re-established.⁶ It was actually argued that Oribasius

himself, or someone associated with him produced the oracle, since the temple had practically been closed. The dispute remains open. Still, what is important is that this text has a significant weight, real as well as symbolic, concerning the transition from the old religion to Christianity, regardless of the place where it was delivered, and whether the specific oracle was ever delivered. Even if it did not refer to Delphi, the condition of the oracle and of any ancient temple at the end of the 4th century AD was not far from the romantic picture of abandonment, which those verses inspire. The most important buildings must have been already ruined, not so much because of Christian actions, but through natural causes and lack of revenue to sustain them.

But that did not happen with the city of Delphi. The guides and the books intended for the broad public continue to support the view that with the closing down of the temple, Delphi too withered.⁷ It was considered to be more appropriate that a place so deeply influenced by the ancient spirit in every expression (religious, athletic, even political) would have died together with it. In a book for children it is mentioned: 'In AD 394 Theodosius the Great closes down the oracle, orders the destruction of the temples of the old religion and abolishes the games. Little by little soil and rocks falling from Parnassus started covering the temple. So did Delphi vanish.'⁸

The impression of the final disappearance of a city is engulfed by a misty and over-simplified picture of natural destruction. As a matter of fact, mist covers ignorance. Those initiated in the science of archaeology and history and, as it unfortunately seems, only they know, of course, that Delphi survived the closure of the oracle. Thus, what modern research comes to prove is that Delphi not only survived the transition from the old religion to the new one, but even was a flourishing city that had no need to envy other provincial cities of Southern Greece. This new approach of placing an old archaeological site under the light of newer research actually extends Delphi's period of occupation for two and a half centuries, dating the end of the continuous period during which it was inhabited to c. AD 620.

In the one hundred and sixteen years separating us from the beginning of the 'Great Excavation' that brought to light the sanctuaries of Apollo and Athena, the Gymnasium, the Stadium, the tombs and the secular buildings, the Christian past of Delphi has not passed unnoticed. However, it never gained the appropriate significance. Being closely attached to the study of the sanctuaries, and the oracle's period of flourishing (mainly Classical and Hellenistic), former generations of

archaeologists and historians dedicated only a minimal part of their rich bibliographical production to the period from the 4th to the 7th century AD. Consequently, the monuments dating to this time-span were hardly ever mentioned. There are quite a few cases, where these monuments had been destroyed to allow research in lower layers,⁹ or even to facilitate the admission of tourists (Fig. 1).¹⁰

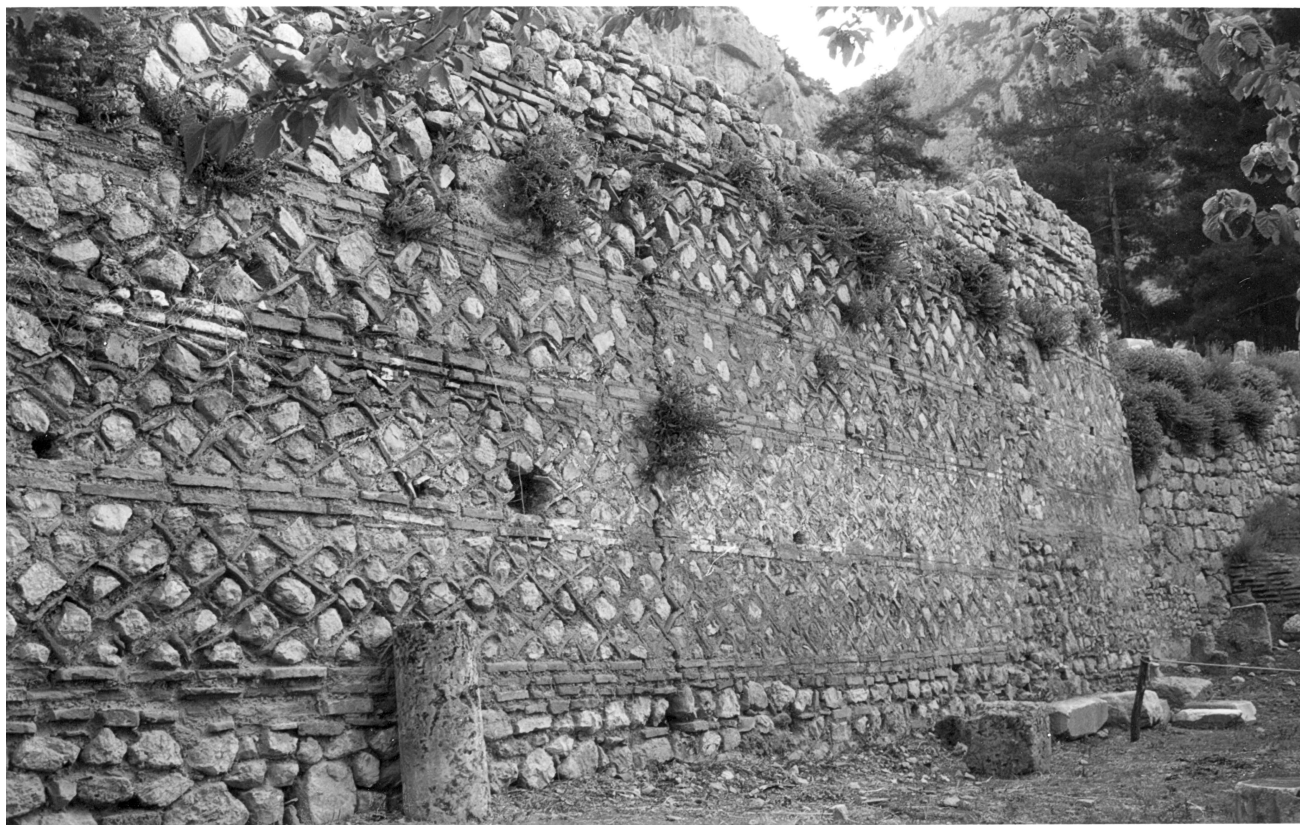
One should not wonder why the crowds of tourists that visit Delphi every year do not take the slightest notice of the monuments of the Christian period. However, the research of the last eighteen years, re-orientates us towards the restoration of that period in the collective memory as a period of flourishing for Delphi, yet totally different from the thriving city during the ‘heyday’ of the oracle. Delphi, thanks to its symbolic context, can function as an example to help us understand that the transition from the pagan period to the Christian era was smoother than was up to now believed. Above all, Delphi shows that the decline from the urban standards these cities had acquired in Greco-Roman Antiquity happened later and was not connected with religious intolerance, but with other, more complicated internal and/or external factors.

In our attempt to restore the truth about the evolution of Delphi, after the closing of the oracle, and until the

moment when it ceased to exist as a city, we are helped by:

- The written evidence;
- The monuments from the 4th to the 7th century AD (consisting of buildings and scattered architectural elements);
- The stratigraphic excavations carried out in recent years by the French School of Archaeology;
- The archaeological finds retrieved from these excavations (mainly ceramics and coins).

The number of inscriptions and other written evidence that survived from the second half of the 4th century AD and onwards, is relatively small, but enough to prove that Delphi had not been erased from the map and still attracted the interest of the central authorities. This is evidenced by a pedestal bearing an inscription in honour of Valens and Valentinian,¹¹ dated between AD 364 and 371, the period after the death of Emperor Julian. The two emperors are mentioned as benefactors of the city. A further indication comes from an excerpt from the Codex Theodosianus of AD 424, referring to an exemption from taxes to Rome, granted to Delphi because of some ‘new misfortunes’.¹² Delphi is also mentioned in Hierokles’ *Synekdemos*,¹³ while the only Christian inscription found is the tombstone of deaconess Athanassia from the 5th century AD.¹⁴



*Fig. 1 - Surviving northern wall of the 'Lower Thermae',
the other walls of the baths were removed to provide access to the site*

The monuments dating to the period between the 4th and the 7th century AD, which are visible today, are located within an area which extends from the temple of Athena in the East, to the entrance of the modern village in the West. In the North it reaches the Cnidian Lesche, and in the South the fringes of the pedestrian road leading from the archaeological site to the museum.¹⁵ A larger concentration of buildings is found around the sanctuary of Apollo, where existing older terraces made the terrain suitable for the construction of buildings of larger dimensions. In fact, the Great Excavation, to which we owe the majority of the monuments of the Early Christian era that are visible today, did not advance too far a distance from the Sacred Wall, thus confining the known extent of the area. Only few of these monumental buildings had been studied before recent research turned its attention to them. These recent studies have focussed on the Roman Agora and the Southeastern Villa, but also investigated the location and the plan of the remaining structures.



Fig. 2 - Northeastern part of the Roman Agora, shop/workshop excavated by the French School of Archaeology

The Roman Agora (Fig. 2) is a secular building whose axis was slightly altered in the 4th century AD to get adjusted to the ancient Sacred Way. These interventions probably coincided with activities which altered the Sacred Way and turned it into a trade road. Along the Sacred Way, but also at other points inside the sanctuary, shops, workshops and houses were established.

The Southeastern Villa (Fig. 3), outside the ancient Sacred Wall, constitutes a typical example of a private building with reception rooms (the so-called *triclinia*), storage rooms, accommodation rooms and small, but very elegant private baths. The picture is enriched by other private villas of the Early Christian period, however, of smaller dimensions. A considerable number of villas are located west of the temple of Apollo. It does not seem that any particular pattern has been followed in the plan, because of the particularity of the ground and the fact that some of them have been constructed within already existing buildings whose use has changed.¹⁶ Poorer buildings are found around the Roman Heroon. The expansion of the city to the West is most obvious and the area that it covers in the Early Christian years is larger than in any other previous period. In response to increased demands for water, a big cistern was built to the West, re-using materials from older buildings. Attalus' Portico had also been transformed into a reservoir since the 3rd century AD, providing water for the most important public baths, the 'Eastern Thermae'.

A picture of 'constructional explosion' emerges, from which we cannot omit references to places of Christian worship. Two basilicas have been found, one in the Gymnasium, and the other at the entrance to the modern village. Architectural sculptures give evidence to the existence of a third basilica at a central point of the city, perhaps to the East of the Roman Agora. As for the cemetery, it seems from the saved *arcosolia*, that this was placed to the West, following the expansion of the urban fabric.

From the excavations carried out by the French School of Archaeology between 1987 and 1997, it is worth mentioning at first the Xystos of the Gymnasium.¹⁷ There, the excavations have securely established that a ceramic workshop was active already since the second half or the end of the 4th century AD. Another shop or workshop has been studied in the Roman Agora, while the most important elements of information of the history of Delphi in Late Antiquity, and especially of the last period of the city have been provided by the excavation of the Southeastern Villa.¹⁸

Constantly increasing prosperity has been attested from the 5th through the 6th century AD. This is indicated by transformations of the house plan and the addition of other *triclinia* besides the original eastern *triclinium*. A first abandonment around AD 580 comes to interrupt these elaborations. A few years later its rooms were transformed into workshops, with mostly ceramic production (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3 - The Southeastern Villa

A final abandonment of the place, which corresponds with the end of the city of Delphi, is observed around AD 620. The years between AD 580 and 620 bring an evident reduction of the urban fabric. However, the last quarter of the 6th century ceases to be the benchmark for the total abandonment of Delphi, as had been previously supported. On the contrary, the existence of workshops producing ceramics of the same type as those produced before AD 580, the imports of ceramics that continued albeit reduced, and the coins, prove that life in Delphi found again its pace and continued until the first quarter of the 7th century AD. Whatever reason it was that forced the residents of the Southeastern Villa to abandon it in the last quarter of the 6th century (inability to afford its maintenance, an epidemic or a raid of Slavic tribes), it did not give the final blow to the city. This must have come in the first quarter of the 7th century. The picture we have from the stratigraphy is that of a sudden abandonment of the place. From this point onwards, architectural remains as well as ceramics and coins (with few exceptions) disappeared completely. The combined evidence leads us to believe that an urban formation in the form of a city ceased to exist in Delphi. This was to remain during the centuries to follow and lasted until the formation of *Castri*, which existed already in the 15th century; however, we do not know the exact date of its foundation.

As far as the finds from the excavations are concerned, they allow us to date the construction phases of the buildings and, in particular the Southeastern Villa. They help us to establish the critical moments of the first abandonment, the consecutive development of workshops, and the final abandonment, which proves to be significant for the history of the whole site. The finds

offer an insight into the social framework that used, produced, or imported those objects. These finds reflect the tendencies of the time, the practical and/or aesthetic needs of the local clients, and also their economic capacity. The study of imported ceramics in particular, allows us to place Early Christian Delphi within a network of commercial communication, within which all the cities of Southern Greece are situated and where imports from Northern Africa occupy a prominent position.



Fig. 4 - Local amphora with painted decoration (AD 6th - 7th century)

The combined evidence offered by modern research, which has been presented in brief, converges at a point which leads to a new picture of welfare and comfort for Delphi in the period from the 4th to the 7th centuries AD. The new picture is very remote from the impression established in people's mind of a ruined, deserted and forgotten place.

NOTES

* I would like to thank Dimitris and Eleni Tsougarakis and John Bintliff for having invited me to such an interesting conference and Joannis Georgopoulos for having translated my text. A Greek version of this article has been previously published (Petridis 2006).

¹ On the Delphic Oracle see Parke and Wormell (1956, 194) and Athanassiadi 1991. The oracle is mentioned by the Christian writers Philostorghi and Cedrenus. Philostorghi, a contemporary of the Emperor Julian, does not refer to the assignment of Oribasius, but speaks of a visit. Cedrenus, a few centuries later, expresses the notion of an assignment given to Oribasius connected to the construction, or more plausibly, to the repair of the temple of Apollo. In the first case we can imagine that the priests appealed to the Emperor for help, which brought about a visit to Delphi by Oribasius, one of the emperor's closest companions. In the second case, it is Apollo himself who refuses the help of the Emperor, since everything was considered lost.

² Gregory of Nazianzus, In Julianum imperatorem invective, and Cedrenus.

³ (Miliadis, 1930, 28) 'After the abolition of the old religion, the city of Delphi too followed the decline of the Oracle'. Miliadis admits that life continued for a while, but he does not refer to any archaeological remains except for the wall, the Christian cemetery near the temple (without giving a specific identification) and the sculptures. Carouzos (1974) leaves the post-Julian period largely unnoticed in his historical retrospective, except for a reference to the Edict of Theodosius, and a further reference to Bishop Pantimianus. In the guide to Delphi by Petrakos (1977) there is no historic mention of the years after Emperor Julian, while a single reference is made to archaeological material from the Early Christian period, namely the mosaics exposed in front of the entrance to the Museum.

⁴ Crontiras (1996, 63).

⁵ Vatin (1962, 235-238).

⁶ Parke (1978, 199-219).

⁷ In the best of cases we meet an indirect admission of the continuation of life in the place, with the mistaken reference to the construction of churches within the oracle. See Assimomytis, Gountakis and Katsoulakos (1998, 157) for another widespread model with clear ideological bias. This model suggests that Christians built their churches precisely over all ancient temples to emphasize their victory over pagan cults.

⁸ Crontiras (1996, 64).

⁹ The remains of the Early Christian basilica of the Gymnasium are a case in point.

¹⁰ From the so-called Lower Thermae (see Fig. 1), only the northern walls have been preserved, while all other structures have been removed to create the entrance to the archaeological site and access to the Roman Agora.

¹¹ Inv. No 7715 is located in the Roman Agora. The inscription reads:

Τους δεσποτας ημων
Φλ. Ιουλ. Βαλλε[ν]τιανων
και φλ. Ιουλ. Βαλητα η πολισ
Δελφων τους εαυτης ευεργε-
τας ανεστησεν.

¹² *Cod. Theod.* XV, 5, 4: "Delforum Curiae facultates novis damnis frequenter adtritas Relatio Tui Culminis intimavit. Ideoque praeceptis ad universas Illyrici Civitates Iudicesque transmissis, notum omnibus faciat, nullum penitus spectacular oportere solemnia Urbis aeternae populis exhibere: sed unumquemque civium intra propriam civitatem debere solitae devotionis officia (prouit patriomonii sui vires patientur) implere...".

¹³ Hierokles's Synekdemosis, 643, 13: Delphi is classified in the 'province of Greece that is called Achaia'.

¹⁴ Laurent (1899, 273-278).

¹⁵ Surprisingly, all these monuments have remained unnoticed by so many writers of guidebooks and manuals.

¹⁶ The villa constructed within the Western Portico is an example of such practice.

¹⁷ The following preliminary reports of the Xystos excavations have been published: Pentazos, Déroche and Queyrel, 1986, 1987, 1988; Queyrel 1986; Déroche and Queyrel 1986.

¹⁸ The preliminary reports of the excavations at the Roman Agora and the Southeastern Villa have been published as follows: Déroche 1991, 1991b; Déroche and Petridis 1992, 1992b, 1993, 1994; Déroche, Petridis and Badie 1995, 1996, 1997.

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABBREVIATIONS:

DChAE = Deltion Christianikès Archaiologikès Elaireias
BCH = Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique

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