

A VISIT TO DELPHI

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I WAS the only woman in a crowded motor-bus—only two of whose passengers spoke English—leaving Athens at 7.15 a.m. on a beautiful warm May day for the 5¼-hour drive to Delphi, the most venerable sanctuary of ancient Greece.

Following traces of the former Sacred Way, we soon passed the Monastery and Cloister of Daphni, with its eleventh century Byzantine Church decorated with exquisite mosaics, occupying the site of Daphni Temple, Shrine of Aphrodite (fifth century B.C.); while opposite there stands a fine olive grove of Apollo. The poplar and caeti-bordered route through the Plain taken by the Athenian processions to celebrate the "Eleusinian Mysteries"—one of their most important religious festivals—brought us to the present industrial town of Eleusis, once the sanctuary of Demeter, goddess of the earth; her daughter, Persephone, was stolen by Pluto, god of Hades. Skirting the wide bay, dotted with barges and fishing boats sailing towards historic Salamis, the roadside abounded in sheep, goats, geese and hens; while peasants rode side-saddle on donkeys with paniers of vegetables, fruit, hay, cans of milk, firewood and weighing scales.

Wild poppies and fields of golden grain surrounded the next main stop—Eleutherae—with its ruined hill-fort; and then, entering a ravine, we climbed over a pass two thousand feet high, to descend across the battlefield of Plataea to Thebes, built on the site of the Acropolis of Cadmus. Having visited its Egyptian namesake three months previously, I was much interested in this village with its tiny museum and open wooden clock-tower. Aristophanes speaks of "violet-wreathed Athens" and the fascinating blue haze enveloping bare hills (one having the form of a legendary sphinx), added much charm to the ever-changing scene of fields with an occasional huge water-mill, extending to the plain, reclaimed from a former lake. Tradition says that at Levadia spoke the Oracle of Trophonius, and the two springs of Memory and Forgetfulness still run at about thirty minutes' distance from this town on a spur of Mount Helicon. As the rickety bus jolted along the increasingly rough, serpentine roads, riddled with holes, on the slopes of majestic Mount Parnassus, the passengers firmly grasped the rods provided on the seat backs to retain position.

Passing Schiste Hodos, where Oedipus is said to have killed his father, we steadily mounted above a smiling landscape, recalling somewhat (except for the absence of Zulu kraals) a drive through the valley of a Thousand Hills at Durban, South Africa. The air grows rapidly cooler nearing Arachova, perched on a cliff with well-cultivated terraces reached by steep steps running in all directions. The fifteen-minute stay here was spent in inspecting a marble street fountain, with a bust of King George I (brother of our Queen Alexandra, and assassinated in 1913), surmounted by the double-headed Byzantine eagle and an ikon, with a coloured picture inset under glass of St. George and the Dragon. From this mountain eyrie, 3090 feet high, the road sharply descends, affording magnificent views over the whole countryside, to ruined Delphi—seat of the shrine and oracle of the Pythian Apollo, and religious centre of the Greek world—but for centuries buried under heaps of gravel and earth on which the poor village of Kastri was gradually built.

The bus having deposited its passengers at the three small hotels, I at once started forth to explore the neighbourhood which the French, empowered by the Greek Government, excavated beginning in 1892 under the eminent archaeologist, Prof. Th. Homolle. Impressive remains of temples, treasuries and monuments, with nearly five thousand inscriptions have been unearthed, many now housed in a museum provided by the late Andreas Syngros, whose bust stands in the entrance hall. Here the visitor's attention is immediately arrested by the celebrated bronze "Charioteer"—one of the best Grecian works of art extant, and originally part of a votive offering destroyed by an earthquake in 373 B.C. This dignified and aristocratic youth, clad in a woollen tunic reaching nearly to his feet, stands at ease, reins in hand, as victor in a race; and except that his left arm is missing above the elbow, this masterpiece of an unknown sculptor is intact. One room has the winged sphinx of the Naxians (550 B.C.) with the back and front feet of an animal, but the ringletted head and body to the waist of a woman, whose face is but slightly mutilated. Here also are beautiful portions of fluted columns, marble pediments and friezes of battle-scenes, often showing four horses drawing chariots, or horses with riders.

An antique Grecian Treasury is a small structure in the form of a temple with only two front columns between two antae (i.e. small pilasters at the corners of a building) to contain votive offerings or war trophies; and dedicated by the cities

erecting them to their god. The most perfect of these seventeen ruined architectural gems found at Delphi is the (534 B.C.) Ionic Siphnian Treasury (once surmised as of Cridos)—a complete restoration in plaster of which is here with delicately carved friezes from the original broken fragments, and an ornamental pediment. Its supporting pillars are two sculptured "Caryatids"—exquisite female figures carrying sacrificial baskets of fruit or flowers on their heads. In the main hall stands the Omphalos—an elaborately-carved sacred stone of a rounded conical shape, bound with fillets and fabled as the central point of the earth. Other rooms contain archaic stone statues, busts and lions' heads; cases of vases, pottery, horns and bronze daggers; an entrancing thirty-foot acanthus-topped column encircled by "Dancing Caryatids" of the fifth century B.C.; and the unique blocks engraved with two Hymns to Apollo, accompanied by musical notation.

Standing on the Museum Terrace, one tries to picture ancient Delphi—the "Pytho" of Homer and Herodotus—situated high above the Crisian Plain with its lovely little lake, in a rugged glen below the precipices of Parnassus known as the "Phaedriades" or "Shining Rocks". Between these tremendous cliffs—Nauplia and Hyampeia—ran the holy spring "Castalia," in which it was traditional to bathe before entering the sanctuary of the fair god, Apollo. In a gorge nearby was the noted Corycian Cave, which afforded shelter to three thousand during the Persian invasion. The terrestrial exhalations from subterranean sources through fissures on this awe-inspiring site probably caused Delphi, before the introduction of Apollo worship, to be consecrated, according to legend, to the gods of the underworld—Ge-Themis and Poseidon; whose divine power was manifested by the oracle where Pythia prophesied from the Rock, guarded by the serpent Python, son of Ge, who lived in an adjacent cavern.

The Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* evidently combines two different versions: (1) approach of Apollo from the north by land; (2) the introduction by marine Cretan votaries of Apollo Delphinios, i.e. in form of a dolphin—supposedly the source of the name Delphi. The new divinity figures in many beautiful legends, and the earliest temple to Apollo (burnt 548 B.C.) was soon rebuilt by voluntary contributors, including Croesus, King of Lydia, Amasis, King of Egypt, and the exiled Alcmaeonidae from Athens, the builders, who generously substituted marble on the facade for the limestone specified in their con-

tract. The fame of the sanctuary not only attracted pilgrims to question the oracle or bring offerings to the god, but made a political centre; for the Amphictyonic Council (forerunner of the League of Nations) representing twelve different, and sometimes rival, Greek towns, held its meetings there.

Following Delphi's greatest prosperity during the sixth century B.C., the attempted raids by Persians (480 B.C.) and Gauls (279 B.C.) were said to have been frustrated by the god hurling rocks, through storm or earthquakes, on the invaders. The real decline started in 86 B.C. when the Roman general Sulla, confiscated treasures from the sanctuary to pay his soldiers; Nero later ordered the transportation of five hundred bronze statues to the Eternal City (Constantine the Great later enriched his new capital by the sacred tripod, with its support of intertwined snakes, dedicated by Greek cities after the battle of Plataea—still existing with its inscription in the Hippodrome at Constantinople). In spite of these ravages, Pliny reports having counted more than three thousand statues in the sacred precinct, and Pausanias (about 170 A.D.) in his *Description of Greece* tells of finding Delphi very rich in works of art. The Roman Emperors, Hadrian and the Antonines, as well as the benefactor of Athens, Herodes Atticus, vainly tried to restore the sanctuary's former prestige; for the advent of Christianity brought a cessation of offerings to the god. After the pathetic and hopeless wail over departed glory given by the oracle (about 360 A.D.) to the delegate, Oribasius, sent by Emperor Julian the Apostate to restore the Temple, Pythia prophesied no more, and time, aided by earthquakes, sealed Delphi's fate.

Provided with an excellent numbered plan of the precinct, I followed a path from the Museum, past men busily excavating with shovels and barrows, to the Lacedaemonian offering on whose stepped pedestal once stood statues of gods and admirals; and on to the Theban and Athenian Treasuries. The latter—a small Doric temple—has been restored by the present city of Athens from original blocks, as testified by a base dedicatory inscription saying it was built from the spoils of Marathon (490 B.C.). Passing the ruined Bouleuterion, or Delphi Council House, I arrived at the sacred "Halos" or "Threshing-floor"—an open circular space 52 feet in diameter, once surrounded by seats, where probably the drama of slaying the Python by Apollo was periodically performed.

The rocky ground above, thought to contain the fissure which emitted fumes in the primitive sanctuary of Ge-Themis, is near the marble pedestal of the Naxian Sphinx. An Athenian portico, considered the oldest specimen of Ionic style, retaining only three of its original eight marble columns, is backed by a beautifully jointed polygonal wall, also of the sixth century B.C., and covered with seven hundred inscriptions concerning the manumission of slaves and other public acts—thus serving as a permanent official registry of Delphi.

I zig-zagged uphill by the Sacred Way—trodden so often by thousands of pilgrims—towards the Holy Shrine and Pythian Oracle. The workmen's warning of caution was valuable, as the steep, inset stone slabs proved most slippery, particularly on the descent. Unfortunately the majestic Doric Temple of Apollo, measuring 198 feet by 78 feet, with six columns in front and fifteen at the sides, was found in a very ruinous condition, though portions are in the Museum. No remains were found of the pediments mentioned by Pausanias as representing: (1) "Apollo and the Muses"; (2) "Dionysus and Bacchantes," designed by Praxias, pupil of Calamis. Existing pavement blocks, broken pedestals, fluted columns and archaic statues were all numbered, as also the Great Altar, dedicated as inscribed by the people of Chios to Apollo in 518 B.C. History is recalled on this site by the base of his statue, erected by Aemilius Paulus after his victory over Perseus, King of Macedonia at Pydna (167 B.C.) on the very pillar the defeated monarch had prepared for his own statue; and a portico, commemorating the saving of Alexander the Great's life during a lion hunt in Persia, was dedicated here in 320 B.C. by his rescuer's son. Within the precinct are ruins of the interesting Cnidian Clubhouse (472 B.C.); but nothing remains of the exquisite frescoes by the painter, Polygnotus, which according to Pausanias represented: (1) the Visit of Odysseus to the Land of the Dead; (2) the Capture of Troy by the Greeks; (3) Disembarkation of the Greeks at Troy.

Information as to the Oracle of Delphi and how it was consulted is confused: probably the ritual varied. Questions had to be given in writing, and responses were uttered by the Pythian priestess—in early times a young girl, but later a woman over fifty, attired as a maiden. After chewing the sacred bay and drinking of the spring "Cassotis," which was conducted into the temple by artificial channels, she took her seat on the sacred tripod in the inner shrine. Her utterances were reduced

to verse and edited by the prophets and the "holy men." This "Adytum" or "Holy of Holies" also contained an image of Apollo and the "Omphalos", marking the spot where met the two eagles started by Zeus from opposite extremities of the world, and thus is Delphi's story interwoven with mythological ages.

The path brought me to the well-preserved theatre (fourth century B.C.) capable of holding 5000, whose seats, once occupied by ancient worthies, indicated by still decipherable inscriptions, were used by the world's literate during Delphi's spring festivals of 1927 and 1930, when famous classic tragedies were here given on the initiative of the Greek poet Sikelianos and his wife. Still climbing to an altitude of 2200 feet, I reached the Stadium, measuring 620 feet long by 82 feet wide, with a clear wall inscription stating that "the sale of wine is prohibited under a penalty of five drachmas." As now seen, it dates from the Roman era with a ruined triumphal arch; but on the whole it is one of the best preserved and finest examples of an ancient Greek Stadium where 7000 people—many on seats hewn in solid rock—watched youthful athletes contend for the prized laurel.

Carefully retracing my steps by the Sacred Way, I descended the bank towards the valley to visit "Marmoria" with its remains of a three-columned small sanctuary of Athene Pronaia, i.e. Athene before the Temple of Apollo, and a beautiful marble monument of fifth century B.C. Grassy paths along olive terraces led to a ruined gymnasium and a circular swimming pool, reached by three steps quite intact. Regaining the upper slopes to climb the lower part of the chasm—source of the sacred "Castalia"—I finally drank of its waters, now flowing from taps at the side of the main road, as a last act of homage to Delphi's past.