

# RECONSIDERING THE EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE FROM THE PROVINCE OF ACHAIA AND THE *PROVINCIA INSULARUM* IN LATE ANTIQUITY, AD 300-600

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## PAGANISM AND PAGAN TEMPLES

A large number of pagan sanctuaries in Greece had fallen into disrepair or lay abandoned already before the middle of the third century.<sup>1</sup> Many saw only a temporary revival in the Antonine period before they lost their appeal again. The age of the Tetrarchy marked the final period of repair, new construction, and imperial funding for traditional cults that had survived the vicissitudes of the third century. Our sources indicate that the great Pan-Hellenic religious centres at Delphi, Olympia, Epidauros, and Eleusis continued to function and attract visitors until the end of the fourth century. Some traditional festivals, such as the Panathenaic festival at Athens, the Olympian and Isthmian games, the "festival of the whips" and the Hyacinthia at Sparta, continued to be held during the fourth century as an occasion of traditional ceremonial and entertainment, though deprived of public sacrifices.

Scattered epigraphic testimonies indicate that a few local cults of Demeter and Kore and also other mystery cults survived in Greece and the islands in the fourth century. With Christian pressure upon public paganism increasing during the second half of the century, the survival of these cults relied on the financial support and the diplomatic skills of the local pagan elites.

The final suppression of pagan cults in Greece apparently occurred after Julian's reign. Both physical and human agents were at work in the demise of pagan temples towards the end of the fourth century. Late paganism had been already alienated from public sacrifices and temples and it was forced to adjust its ceremonies and practices to Christian hostility; old rites, sacrifices, theurgy and divination were confined to the private sphere. Nevertheless, various sources attest that lofty pagan temples and sacred spots did not cease to be places of pilgrimage, worship and inspiration for local people and pagan elites.

The sites of the broken temples either fell into oblivion or their material was dismantled and re-used. The erection of Christian shrines over or next to the derelict pagan temples may not always be related to a clearly anti-pagan attitude. A nexus of different issues such as pragmatism, imperial legislation, religious antagonism and local circumstances should ex certime be acknowledged in order to achieve a good appreciation of this phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.

## EPIDAUROS, ARGOLID

Epigraphic evidence and recent investigations showed that the sanctuaries of Asclepius and Apollo Maleatas at Epidauros enjoyed a period of repairs and revised activity around AD 300. No less than 20 exactly dated altar dedications and votive

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1. The province of Achaia during the period under study embraced all central Greece south of Thessaly and Epirus. It included the Peloponnese and some offshore islands. The province of the islands was demarcated after the administrative reforms of Diocletian and Constantine. Corinth and Rhodes were the capitals of the provinces and the seat of their governors.

2. The most telling epigraphic document related to the conversion of a temple into a church is an inscription from the island of Ikaria. It copied a popular story of an Apollo's oracle that predicted the temple's future conversion into the House of Holy Mary (IG XII. VI<sup>2</sup>, 1265). This piece of evidence may be connected to a centrally organised project by the local ecclesiastical authorities.

statuettes come from 297 to 308. The latest inscription from the sanctuary is dated to the year AD 363. It is also striking that at about this time the sanctuary officials set out to create an inventory of all the votives that belonged to the sanctuary<sup>3</sup>. Three more fragmented texts indicate that major religious festivals and building restorations continued at least during the early fourth century. One of them is an edict concerning food and money for a religious festival<sup>4</sup>. Resources for building restorations and costs for official guests were given (late third/early fourth AD).

The inscribed altars dedicated by local priests demonstrate that the sanctuary at the early fourth century became an oasis of pagan religion and played a central role in the sacred landscape of Greek paganism. The so-called sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods and the nearby Odeion were the focus of the cult at the Asclepius sanctuary in the late period; incubation, rites and sacrificial banqueting continued. It is now believed that the so-called defensive wall around the heart of the sanctuary was a temenos-enclosure with a perimetric colonnade. It was intended to provide a monumental enclosure for the most important religious buildings of the sanctuary. It is perhaps dated in the first half of the fourth century.

There is clear evidence that religious activity and nocturnal rites continued until the end of the fourth century at the Maleatas sanctuary, too. Finally, the erection of one of the earliest and largest Christian basilicas of Greece (d. c. AD 400) near the boundaries of the sacred precinct of the Asclepius sanctuary may have sought to manifest the triumph of Christ over Asclepius in the eyes of the converted Christians of the Peloponnese.

### THE HERAION OF SAMOS

Sacred caves and groves is an obvious place to look for cultic continuity in difficult times. A striking verse inscription from the Heraion of Samos commemorates the visit of a pagan dignitary to cave-shrines during the fourth century. The metrical hymn reads: "Hera, queen of all, spouse of great Zeus, be gracious, protector of the cities, and protect me, your devoted servant. I, Plutarch hav-

ing the illustrious name of my father, just performed sacrifice to Zeus at the Cretan Cave of Ida at the peak of the mountain and it was allotted to me as a gift by the king, to govern over the islands, which the roaring sea surrounds".

Plutarch, a literary pagan and Roman senator, was a pilgrim to the Idaean Cave on Crete and the famous sanctuary of Hera on Samos. The *basileus* in the text was possibly the emperor Julian who made Plutarch *praeses provinciae insularum*, and perhaps was personal friend of him. This inscription along with two more early fourth century texts from the "Peripteros" temple of Hera, suggest that public cult and ceremonies were held at the Heraion in the fourth century and that the sanctuary enjoyed the favour and the gifts of imperial personalities at least until the reign of Julian. The closing of the sanctuary occurred towards AD 400. Finally, the Roman Heraion was converted into a large Christian basilica not before the middle of the fifth century<sup>5</sup>.

### OLYMPIA

Earthquakes caused serious damage to the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia in the 290s. However, extensive repair and the building of a new guesthouse are placed around AD 300. The early fourth century was a period of recovery and expansion for the sanctuary of Zeus. The festival of Olympia maintained its interregional character well down to the late fourth century AD<sup>6</sup>.

An inscribed bronze plaque was recently discovered inside the club-house of an athletes' guild at Olympia. The inscription records the names of twenty victorious athletes who were members of this guild. The time of their victories ranges from the first century BC to the late fourth century AD. The successful athletes came from different places of the Greek mainland and the cities of Asia Minor. The last two entries belong to the 290th and 291st Olympiads, that in 381 and 385.

The festival was possibly abolished in AD 393 or during the reign of Theodosius II. The chrysele-

3. BLINKENBERG, CHR., "Epidaurische Weihgeschenke", *AM* 24, 1899, 379ff; LATTE, K., "IG IV2 1 ed. Hiller de Gaertringen", *Gnomon* 6, 1931, 132 ff.

4. IG IV2, 1, 92; PEEK, W., *Neue Inschriften aus Epidauros*, Berlin 1972, no. 40.

5. HALLOF, K.; KIENAST, H.J., "Aus der Arbeit der Inscriptiones Graecae IX. Zwei Monumente aus dem Heraion von Samos", *Chiron* 31, 2001, 277-89; CHANIOTIS, A., "Plutarchos, praeses insularum" *ZPE* 68, 1987, 227-281.

6. Preliminary reports in *Nikephoros* 5, 1992, 75-84; 6, 1993, 153-8; 7, 1994, 229-50; 8, 1995, 161-182; 9, 1996, 199-228; 10, 1997, 215-6.

phantine statue of Zeus was shipped to Constantinople and the temple of Zeus was burnt down in the same period. By the middle of the fifth century the sanctuary of Zeus was turned into a prosperous rural settlement. Centre of the community was the mid-fifth century basilica built over the so-called Workshop of Pheidias. The central area of the former sanctuary with the temple of Zeus was turned into a fortress-like square of walls. The structure had possibly served as a fortified material depot and a place of refuge for the populace in time of danger. After the abandonment of the settlement in the early seventh century, a community of Slavs was settled near the Cronus hill.

## CHRISTIANITY

The prestigious church of Corinth and the various old communities of Jews favoured the spread of Christianity on the Greek mainland and the Aegean islands. The arrival of the new religion at towns and villages occurred apparently early on the islands and coastal centres before moving inland. Christian inscriptions grow rapidly in the century 350-450. Due to the total lack of hagiographical texts and the absence of reliable criteria for the dating of early Christian epigraphy, the history and the development of the Christian communities cannot be followed in full.

The earliest Christian basilicas in Greece and the islands are not dated before the end of the fourth century.

According to conciliar lists and other sources, numerous Christian communities in Attica, Boiotia, the Peloponnese, the Cyclades, and the Dodecanese (Rhodes and Kos) were organised in bishoprics by the middle of the fourth century. The important martyr-cult sites of Quadratus and Leonides at Corinth and that of Apostle Andreas at Patras must have stood side by side with the pagan temples of these cities during the fourth century. Perhaps the most popular early Christian

pilgrimage site of the Cyclades was the Hekatonpyliani Church of Paros.

Centres of Christian pilgrimage are epigraphically attested also on Tenos, Delos, Samos and elsewhere. The natural anchorage of Grammata on the island of Syros provided a natural shelter for ships and navigators<sup>7</sup>. A large number of invocations by pagans, Jews and Christians were found cut on the rocks by the passing navigators. In one of them we read: "Lord, save the ship of Sergius, *optio* of the governor of Bithynia, and those who travel with it, amen. And? Gregory the captain"<sup>8</sup>.

Another aspect of the religious geography of Late Antiquity is the cult of angels and archangels among different religious groups in this period. After its collapse around AD 400, a large subterranean bath complex in the Gymnasium area at Corinth, known as the "fountain of the lamps", was turned into a place of cult and magic. People used to cast lamps and other offerings into the flooded chambers of the bath calling upon angels and Nymphs who are believed to dwell upon the waters. Tracings of graffiti on these lamps offer a glimpse into the nature of this cult. It appears that the power of these waters was recognized by pagans, Jews, and Christians<sup>9</sup>. More interestingly, a significant number of EC basilicas on the islands are attested to have been dedicated to Archangel Michael.

Monasticism and asceticism in late antiquity were not totally unknown in this area. Archaeological and literary evidence suggest the existence of mostly small monastic units and ascetics in Megara, Argos, Delos (?), Samos, Rhodes, Kalymnos, Karpathos, Lesbos, Thasos and Crete. From a sepulchral inscription (5/6<sup>th</sup> c.) found near the Roman Baths at the Agora of Argos, we read: "[cross] Sepulchers ow[ned by the holy small mo]nastery of the most holy local ch[urch...] if anybody has the impudence to open these graves apart from the monks of this holy small monastery?, he shall share the same fate as him and those who said *Away with him! Crucify him! Cross*"<sup>10</sup>.

7. KIOURTZIAN, G., *Recueil des inscriptions grecques chrétiennes des Cyclades de la fin du IIIe au VIIe siècle après J. C.*, Paris 2000.

8. *Ibid* no. 131.

9. JORDAN, D.R., "Inscribed Lamps from a Cult at Corinth in Late Antiquity", *HTR* 87, 1994, 223-9.

10. FEISSEL-A., D. Philippidis-Bratt, "Inventaires en vue d'un recueil des Inscriptions historiques de Byzance. III. Inscriptions du Péloponnèse (à l'exception de Mistra)", *TM* 9, 1985, 370, no. 116\*.