

DELOS. A MODEL MICROCOSM

Delos: A tiny island in the center of the Aegean Sea; an island in the center of ancient Greek civilization. In prehistoric times, a small community venerated on it a goddess of Nature. Fertility of nature is the basis of life. According to tradition, Dionysos gave to the daughters of the first king of Delos the power to produce wheat, wine and oil. Tradition and finds attest further to the amazing fact that this small prehistoric community had already close relations with overseas countries, from which cereals, but also works of art came to the island.

At the dawn of Greek civilization, around 800 B.C., the ancient cult of the island was integrated into the Greek pantheon. The goddess of Nature became Artemis and joined Apollon, the god of the rational cosmos of the Greek city-state. The island, protected and guided by this comprehensive pair of divinities, but without any claims of sovereignty, offered henceforth a unique neutral place for a synthesis of different interests. Around 700 B.C. it became the religious center of an association of all Ionians, the most populous Greek tribe. Representatives of all Ionian city-states met periodically there with offerings in to praise the gods and experience their divine cosmos. Cities and individuals used to highlight in this interregional center their excellence of any kind (power, wealth, skills or memorable deeds) with buildings and costly works of art that progressively embellished the sanctuary and brought wealth to the island.

Yet the Delian association, an early on a small-scale universal community, disposed to function on equal terms for all cities under the auspices of Apollon, the god of harmony and balance, could not escape the vices of human nature. Demonstration of excellence can easily fall into a claim to leadership. Already late in the 6th century B.C., Athens, the most powerful Ionian Greek city-state, manifested its intension to dominate Delos. The Persian wars suspended this march. The spirit of united Greece against the common enemy made Delos in the aftermath of the Persian invasion once again the center of a League of about hundred forty Greek cities with equal rights. However, Athens took soon control of the island, moved the treasure of the League from Delos to Athens and appointed magistrates who administrated the sanctuary for many years.

While the power of Athens weakened, Delos became for a third time the center of a universal community, this time on a more secular basis. In the late

4th century B.C., it was again independent and again the religious center of a League of the Aegean island cities with a federal character. Delos developed rapidly into a commercial center, where foreign merchants and mariners settled and developed communities of different nationalities, religions and languages, which gave to the island a cosmopolitan character. The two last centuries of the first millennium B.C. were for Delos a time of economic growth and prosperity, as the remains of the opulent houses of the period show. It is estimated that the population of the tiny island reached at that time the number of about 25.000 people.

Even so, or because of that, the island passed again successively under the control of powerful states of the time, Hellenistic kings, Athenians and Romans. The latter developed finally ports for the transit trade in Italy and so deprived Delos of the source of its prosperity and significance. In imperial and early Christian times, it gradually declined and soon after the 6th century of our era, it was deserted and deprived of any significance.

Delos and its high significance in the frame of Classical Culture were reinvented with the systematic excavation and study of its ruins in the last two centuries. The history and the spirit of Delos condense human attitudes of adaptation to nature, of reasonable human intervention in it, of sociality and partnership, of universality and engagement with an ideal cosmos. They condense also the character of human nature, which fluctuates between ideal and mundane. A clearer version of these universal messages is to be found in the mythology and religion of ancient Delos.

The Greek poet Pindar praised Delos in the 5th century BC as follows: *“Daughter of the sea, immovable wonder of wide earth, you that mortals call Delos, but the blessed ones in Olympus name the luminous star of dark earth”*. According to the myth, Delos was originally a female divinity, named *Asteria*. She was the granddaughter of *Ouranos*, the *Sky*, and of *Gaia*, the *Earth*. In order to escape the amorous advances of Zeus, she transformed herself into an *ortyx*, a quail, and flung herself into the Aegean Sea. Zeus turned her then out of pity into a rock that floated aimlessly about the sea, invisible to mariners. The name of the rock was at that time the same as the one of the divinity, *Asteria*, which means *one of the stars*, *starry*, or *Ortygia*, the *one of the quail*. The petrified divinity had nevertheless a glorious destiny. Zeus fell in love with

the sister of Asteria, *Leto*, and impregnated her, with the result of an angry outburst by his wife, Hera, who in her jealousy caused all lands to refuse to accommodate the delivery of Leto. Zeus appealed then to his brother, Poseidon, to help Leto to find a place, where she could rest and give birth to Zeus' offspring. Poseidon took the floating rock, which up to then was Ἄδηλος, that is *Invisible*, anchored it to the sea with four pillars on bases of diamond and renamed it Δῆλος, which means *the Visible*. Leto promised to Delos that she would make the island the richest in the world if it would allow her to rest there and to give birth. Delos, the living divine rock, consented. Leto knelt then on its ground, cast her arms about a palm tree and gave birth first to Artemis and the next day, assisted by her newborn daughter, to Apollon. The earth of Delos bloomed at the birth of Apollon and the island was filled with gold.

Ancient myths are an unquestionable image of the cosmos, a condensed worldview of ancient societies. This is explicit in the way classical Greek tragedies use traditional myths in order to present rules of fate, state policies or moral values. In this context, the mythology of Delos represents the concept of a cosmogony, a concept of the creation of a real, as well as ideal world. Ancestral intelligence manifests itself markedly in the Delian religion.

Life is integrated into the Universe. Asteria comes from heaven and creates land in order to house life. The land emerges from a chaotic sea and, being populated by a primordial birth, stabilizes its movement. Leto, as sister of Asteria, comes equally from heaven, but she is bound to earthly life. She is a kind of a goddess of nature. She bares her children leaning on a tree and her delivery is accompanied by a parallel birth of vegetation and wealth in Delos, which will create the appropriate environment for her children and their worshipers.

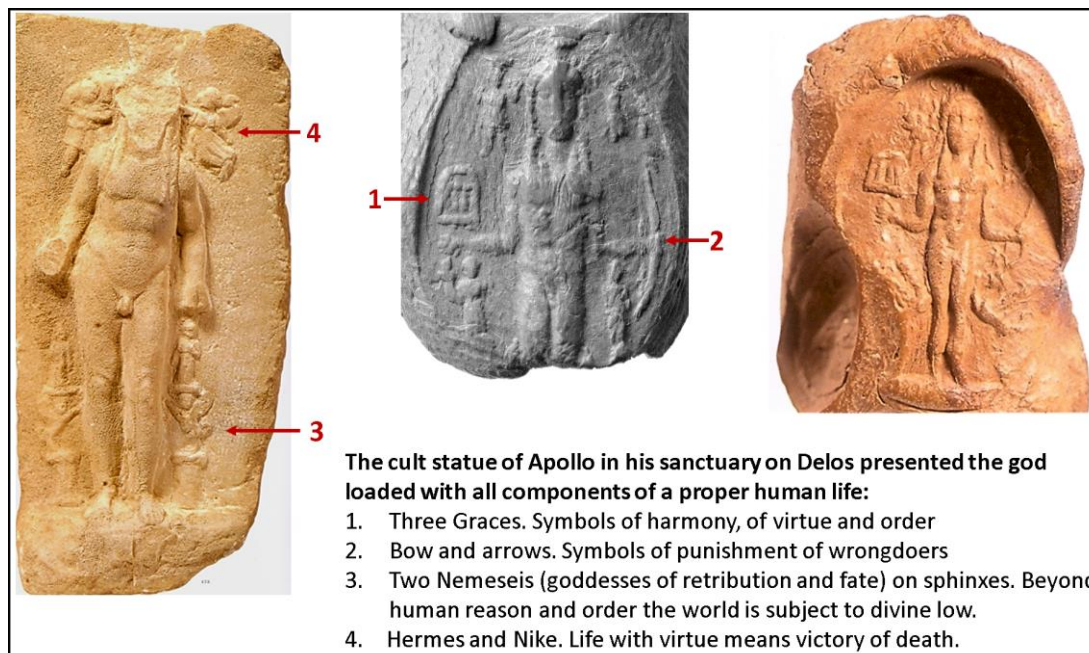
The children of Leto embody the polarity of human cosmos. Artemis governs the uncontrollable powers of nature. She assisted her mother to give birth to her brother, becoming thus a kind of duplicate mother. She constructed the first altar in Delos as a mistress of animals, using the horns of goats she had shot on the island. She was cousin of Hecate, a goddess of chthonic and nocturnal character, who was born by Asteria and was venerated in Delos. The personality of Artemis was closely related to that of Hecate. The other child of Leto, Apollon, rules over man's habit to shape life conforming to his reasoning

and intellect. According to the Homeric Hymn to Apollon, the god, immediately after he was born declared: "*The lyre and the curved bow shall ever be dear to me, and I will announce to men the unfailing will of Zeus*". The lyre, music in general, especially characteristic of Apollon, stand for harmony and balance that humans strive to achieve in their life and deeds, while the bow symbolizes the required punishment of those who violate the rules of harmony in man's social life or in his relation to the divine. Moreover Apollon reveals to men the divine will, because after all man is part of the transcendental world of the Universe. Having all this in mind we can understand why the poet of the Homeric Hymn says that Artemis was born on *Ortygia* and Apollo on *Delos*. We read: "*Blessed Leto, you bare glorious children, the lord Apollo and Artemis who delights in arrows; her in Ortygia, and him in rocky Delos*". The poet is referring to the same island. In the case of Artemis, it appears – in line with her personality – with its celestial and chthonic, invisible, or better said uncontrollable components, as they were personified in Asteria or Ortygia. In the case of Apollon, the world has already become visible. By the name *Delos* the island will house an ideal, transparent human society under the auspices of gods. As Callimachus, another Greek poet says in his Hymn to Delos, "*war and death would be kept out of the island forever, and people from everywhere would swarm it leading up choirs in honor of the god*".

The polarity embodied in the myths of the Delian gods manifests itself also in their cult on the island. Around the primeval altar of goat horns, next to the sanctuary of Artemis, the youths and maidens of Delos performed every year the dance of *geranos*, the crane dance, imitating the flight of cranes in the sky, from where Asteria flew as a quail into the sea. Next to the sanctuary of Artemis and the altar of horns, an olive tree was found, which was said to have sprung up when Leto gave birth to her children. Worshipers performed at this tree another primitive dance. They run around the olive with hands tied behind their backs while being flagellated – *buffeted with blows*, as Callimachus says – and left the place after they had bitten the sacred trunk of the tree. The meaning of the ritual is obvious. The source of vitality and strength, of ability to endure pain, is the direct contact with nature and the nourishment by nature.

On the other hand, the cult statue of Apollon was loaded with a variety of symbols, which alluded to all aspects of an orderly human life. The god was

represented naked. On the palm of his stretched right hand stood the three *Graces*, while in his left he held the *bow and the arrows*. This meant that the cosmos of Delos would mainly profit from the gracious gifts that Apollo bestowed to humanity for an orderly life, but one should always have in mind the wrath of the divine for wrongdoers. However, no matter how righteous human activity is, it cannot control the unfathomable divine will. This was the meaning of two figures of *Nemesis*, the goddess of divine retribution, who held the *wheel of fortune* and stood on top of a *sphinx* on either side of the statue at its feet. Nevertheless, persistent righteous behaviour against misfortunes leads to a blessed afterlife; it becomes the absolute victory in life. This was symbolized by two more figures flying around the head of Apollo, *Hermes the Psychopomp* on his right, *Nike, the Victory*, on his left.



It is in this sense that we have to interpret one more important ritual in Delos, the *Dance of the Delian Maidens*. It is described in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo as follows: “*And there is this great wonder: The girls of Delos, hand-maidens of the Far-shooter, praise Apollo first, and also Leto and Artemis who delights in arrows. And then they sing a strain-telling of men and women of past days, and charm the tribes of men. In doing so they imitate the tongues of all men and their barbaric speech. Each would say that he himself were singing, so close to truth is their sweet song*”. The girls sang and danced at night, with torches in their hands. The common praise of gods and of significant mythical or real

persons of the past, in the dark, metaphysical environment of night, was the absolute justification of the deeds of the latter in life, whose message the girls communicated with their different tongues around the world.



One of the months of the Delian calendar was *Galaxión*, when the festival of *Galáxia* took place, during which the *galaxías*, a kind of frumenty, made out of milk (*gála* in Greek) and barley flour was offered to gods and consumed by the worshipers. Milk in Greek mythology was divine food, fallen from Heaven, when Hera breastfed Heracles. Its course from heaven to the earth was thought to be the *Gála* or *Galaxías*, the *Milky Way*. The ritual of *Galáxia* was meant to purify the worshiper and prepare him for a blessed afterlife. It is characteristic that in the Eleusinian mysteries the worshiper after his initiation felt that his soul “*flew away from the mournful circle of life and ascended with fast feet the Milky Way*”. So *Galáxia* had to do once again with the attainment of a blessed afterlife, a reintegration of life into the Universe.

Some twelve hundred meters south from the sanctuary of Apollon people in Delos venerated Asclepius, the healer god, in a small sanctuary at the west coast of the island. It is not proven but highly probable that the festival of the god, *Asklepieia*, was celebrated in the month *Galaxión*. If this happened, the festival of Asclepius and the *Galáxia* of Apollon were celebrated very close to one another, which means that the patients of the god, albeit expecting to be cured, were at the same time soothed with the prospect of a blessed afterlife.

Even so, the presence of Asclepius in the sacred island of his father Apollon, who had also healing powers, shows that people in Delos did not seek only spiritual but also physical health. In the remnants of the Asclepieion, we recognize the temple of the god, and the buildings for the accommodation of patients, for feasting and for incubation, which was the usual practice in order

to obtain the divinely inspired cure. On the other hand, many votive offerings depicting ailing or cured parts of the body, found in the sanctuary, attest to real medical treatments exercised by the personnel of the establishment. The location of the sanctuary was carefully chosen. Far from the densely populated sanctuary of Apollon and the adjacent residential area, protected from winds in a small bay, it secured on the one hand a quiet and healthy environment for the patients and on the other, it ruled out the spread of infectious diseases. In the sacred island, it was forbidden to die. One strived there, as we saw, for eternal life, life that transcended death. However, human nature is bound to physical death. The god of medicine was there to help people to extend as far as possible their life on earth. Nevertheless, the location of his sanctuary shows that he provided also for the inescapable physical death. The Asclepieion was situated at a place nearest to the opposite island of Rheneia, so that patients about to die could be easily transferred there, where their demise could not contaminate the ideal life offered in the sacred island. The sanctuary of Asclepius in Delos connected the ideal cosmos of Apollon with the reality and the concerns of everyday life.