

## **The desolation of ancient temples**

**By the Archbishop of Athens, Christodoulos Paraskevaides**

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111-116

**This is a study by His Beatitude the Archbishop Christodoulos, which, like many other studies, provides us with further, documented information that refutes the Neo-Paganists' unhistorical and false accusations, that they were –supposedly– deprived of their temples by the Christians.**

**The truth is that Neo-Paganist distorters DO NOT WANT people to learn that Greece had already been devastated and destroyed, even BEFORE the arrival of the Christian faith.**

**Nor do they want people to know about the damage that they themselves inflicted on their temples, or that later on, many Gentiles had themselves freely and voluntarily abandoned those places of worship, in spite of the persecutions against Christian converts, who had turned their backs on the obscurism of idols and demons, albeit fully aware of the risk entailed when choosing to worship Jesus Christ, the only true God!.**

The destruction of idolatrous temples in Greece can in no way be attributed to religious differences. **Greece had been laid waste and destroyed to a large extent, even before Christianity had been officially recognized**, at a time when Christians were either the victims of large-scale persecutions, or, even before Christianity itself had made its appearance in history at all. Already, during the Hellenistic period, no small number of cities had been turned into small groups of hovels, all strewn with broken statues and ravaged temples.

The oracle at Dodoni had long ceased functioning and was in ruins [80](#) as Strabo tells us in his work "Geographica" which had been completed around **7 b.C.** Strabo actually stresses that not only the oracle at Dodoni, but also that the other oracles of Greece were virtually extinct during his time. [81](#)

The oracle at Delphi was only barely operating - it was nothing more than an impoverished sanctuary, as Strabo tells us; [82](#) Nero had gone there, and, after grabbing all the prizes of the games (which had been purposely organized so that only he would claim the awards), he had departed, promising that he would restore the oracle to its original glory. Regardless of the above, before leaving for Rome, he did not omit to ransack many of the works of art which had been left untouched by the Romans before him. And of course, when he arrived back in Rome, he promptly forgot his promises and the oracle. Later on, Dometius restored the temple of Apollo.

Plutarch, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, speaks of the oracle's transient glory, which was now extinguished. [83](#) He in fact feels the need to explain this dramatic decline, and proceeds to attribute it to the moral decay of society and to the baser quality of questions that were now being posed with the oracle, since its visitors were no longer asking the god about serious issues, but only about marriages, inheritances and the suchlike. [84](#) Plutarch however does not overlook the fact that another factor of decadence was definitely the depopulation of Greece, the shortage of manpower, [85](#) on account of which the oracle had become deserted and deprived of pilgrims for a long time. [86](#) This somber reality obliges him to pronounce the grave statement of: "go forth and announce that Pan the Great has died" [87](#)

Delos, the island of Apollo and the "sacred heart" of the Ionian people, had been converted from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century b.C. into a place of worship for Egyptian deities (Isis, Serapis, Annubis) and a pantheon of Syrian and Phoenician deities. The island was no longer the sanctum of Apollo. Even in this state, it still did not survive for long: it was destroyed by Mithridates' general, Archelaos, who slaughtered 20.000 people and looted Apollo's treasury. The island afterwards became a refuge for pirates, who ransacked everything that had remained standing. Later on, Rome drove out the pirates and the island was able to breathe somewhat, except that now it was bedecked – not with statues of

Apollo – but with busts of Roman magnates.[88](#)

Apart from the “holy sites” of idolatry, the larger cities had also been dismantled or minimized. The once all-powerful and wealthy island of Kerkyra (Corfu) had been turned into a mass of ruins, to the point that it became proverbial.[89](#) Ruins in the place where the famed Samos used to stand were also noted by Cicero – a contemporary of the Apostle Paul – in a letter to his brother; [90](#) Strabo speaks of the “once glorious” Thebes, of Tanagra and of Thespies, saying that “what remains of them to this day, is not even a village worth mentioning”.[91](#) Corinth had been stripped by the Romans, and had been populated by Italians, as Pausanias informs us,[92](#) and with Jews whom Claudius had expelled from Rome.[93](#) In Cicero’s correspondence, we read a narration of a journey to the Saronic Gulf in 45 A.D.: “Behind me lay the island of Aegina, and before me, the city of Megara. To my right was Piraeus, to my left was Corinth – cities that once flourished and now fallen and destroyed, are standing before my eyes”.[94](#) Desolated of a population was Sparta, according to Strabo,[95](#) while Nemea was a mere village, and the temple of Zeus with its collapsed roof and its statue missing from inside,[96](#) was described by Pausanias as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., in other words, at a time when Christianity was still in its cradle.

(This testimony, which is only a small part of what we could present, indicates how erroneous and misleading the perception is, that the Christians had “inherited” a Greece that was bejeweled with glorious temples everywhere, which they had supposedly destroyed out of hatred.....)

Athens had however escaped from this fate. Because of its fame as a school of the intellect, it was treated with care by both the magnates of the Hellenistic periods as well as the Romans. The wars and the invasions assuredly had disastrous results on many public buildings, but afterwards, they would always be rebuilt [97](#) The Roman Sulla may have put the entire city to the sword, slaughtering and selling off as slaves the majority of the population, destroying and chiefly looting to an incredible degree the city’s treasures, but the Romans did repair quite a few buildings and they also built many new ones. Pompey, Caesar and Augustus, and of course Hadrian, were considered the personages that rebuilt Athens, having sent many Romans to live

there and to become its citizens.[98](#) Nevertheless, the Roman Athens was no longer the Athens of Solon or Pericles; the suburban environment was being rebuilt, but the heart of the city – The Athens municipalities – and of course the sanctuaries and the temples therein, were left in ruins.

Certain imaginative characters accuse the Christians that they had smashed statues of unsurpassable beauty as well as pillars, to use them as building materials when building their own temples; the desolation however of the temples was the product of several factors.

One of them was the demographic issue, as mentioned by Plutarch. Greece was in a phase of diminishing population. I have already made mention of this, above. If we take into account the escalating number of Christian faithful, it is easy to perceive the reason for the decreasing numbers of idolaters. [99](#) Plutarch says that, whereas in the past, three priestesses were required at Delphi to cover the needs of the public, in his time, one priestess was more than enough.[100](#) With Christianity becoming more and more widespread, the idolatrous element was steadily shrinking. For example, during the time of Constantine the Great, the Christian Greeks were so many, that their Bishops participated in the 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Council in Nice, in the year 325A.D.[101](#) In Athens, the first Christians used to congregate inside the caves of the Acropolis hill; but very soon after, they became so many in number, that they built a huge basilica on the banks of the nearby river Ilissos.[102](#) This same phenomenon was also observed in other cities of the Empire; by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Antioch had more than 200.000 inhabitants, almost half of which were Christians [103](#) –to give but one example.

Another factor was the recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the state. This undoubtedly played a role; the state was no longer willing to allocate funds for the maintenance of Paganist temples, and the restoration of damages that were wrought by time and barbarian raids.

However, one must not omit to note a third -not necessarily in order of importance- factor: the merchants of building materials who used to collect the remnants of destroyed and deserted temples and who sold them to anyone needing to build a new house or church. The re-use of construction materials taken from

temples and public buildings was not done in secret; it was a very familiar practice in antiquity. Innumerable tombs and monuments of the Kerameikos cemetery –those which belonged to families that left no descendants behind them- were used in the rebuilding of the Long Walls (which protected the route between Athens and Piraeus harbour).<sup>104</sup> It was quite usual in ancient times to erect a new building on the foundations of a destroyed temple or monument.

We need to understand here that these people –both idolaters and Christians- were by no means senseless vandals; Quite simply, in those ages the concept of a “landmark” for preservation did not exist. There are extremely few instances where we can see the trait of preserving an older building for historical or aesthetic reasons, and even so, it was only in the instances where an emperor or a leader had specifically ordered the preservation of such an edifice; it was not a general trend. We have recorded instances where Christian emperors have preserved idolatrous temples, for the sake of their aesthetic quality.<sup>105</sup>

One thing is certain: that there was absolutely no “mutual perception” by the overall community, of preserving a monument – whether architectural or any other kind.

### Notes and Quotes

<sup>80.</sup> Strabo, Geographica, 7.7.9.17 (And not only the oracle: «η τε Ἥπειρος πάσα και ή Ιλλυρίς, νυν δε τα πολλά μεν ερημία κατέχει, τα δ' οικούμενα κωμηδόν και εν ερειπιοις λείπεται».

<sup>81.</sup> «Εκλέλοιπε δε πως και το μαντείου το εν Δωδώνη, καθάπερ τα άλλα», 7.7.10.

<sup>82.</sup> «Πενέστατόν εστι το εν Δελφοίς ιερόν», 9.3.8.2, and he continues, describing the looting that the once spiritual center of Greece had suffered.

<sup>83.</sup> «μεγάλη γαρ η παλαιά δόξα τής εκεί θεότητας, τα δε νυν έοικεν υπομαραίνεσθαι», *Περί των Εκλελειπότηων Μυστηρίων*(= *On the Lost Rituals*) 411 d. 10-11

<sup>84.</sup> «αισχροών και αθέων ερωτημάτων, ά τω θεώ προβάλλουσιν οι

μεν ως σοφιστού διάπειραν λαμβάνοντες οι δε περί θησαυρών ή κληρονομιών ή γάμων παρανόμων διερωτώντες» 413 b1-4

[85.](#) As above, 413 f 2

[86.](#) «πολύν χρόνον έρημον γενέσθαι και απροσπέλαστον» as above, 414 B1-2

[87.](#) As above, 419 C4

[88.](#) Habicht, Athen, 252, 338-9 s

[89.](#) «επί λοιδορία παροιμίαν έλαβεν "ελευθέρα Κόρκυρα, χεζ' όπου θέλεις"» (jeering proverb: "Corfu is empty – shit where you want"), Strabo, as above 7.7.1.8.5.

[90.](#) Ad Quintum Fratrem, 1,1.25.

[91.](#) «μέχρι εις ημάς ουδέ κώμης αξιόλογου τύπον σώζουσι, και [αι] άλλαι δε πόλεις ανάλογον», Geographica, 9.2.5.

[92.](#) «Κόρινθον δε οικούσι Κορινθίων μεν ουδείς έτι των αρχαίων, έποικοι δε αποσταλέντες υπό Ρωμαίων», Corinthiaka, 2.1.2.

[93.](#) Acts. 18,2.

[94.](#) Epist ad familiarum 4.5, 5.

[95.](#) Geographica, 8.4.11.

[96.](#) «κατερρυήκει ο όροφος και άγαλμα ουδέν έτι ελείπετο», Corinthiaka, 2.15.2.8.

[97.](#) Ref.: Charalambos Bouras, "Urban planning and architectural issues of Athens in Hellenistic times" and Alk. Spetsieri-Choremi "Development of urban planning and monumental buildings in Athens at the time of Augustus and Hadrian"

[98.](#) Refer to expounded subject in Christian Habicht, Athen, 326-334 s

[99.](#) Rostovtzeff, social and economic history II 620 p.

[100.](#) Περί των εκλελοιπότων χρηστηρίων, 92.414, B4-8.

[101.](#) Eusebius, Εἰς τὸν βίον Κωνσταντίνου Βασιλέως, (=On the life of Constantine the King) 3.8.1-6.

[102.](#) M. Kazanaki-Lappa, "Athens, from the latter ancient times to the Turkish occupation" "Ἡ Αθήνα ἀπὸ τὴν ὕστερη ἀρχαιότητα ὡς τὴν τουρκικὴ κατάρκτηση», 200 pages.

[103](#) F. Trobley, as above. 110-111 pp

[104.](#) Habicht, Athen, 11 S. Commenting, Lycurgus says that for the rebuilding of the Long Walls, «ἡ μὲν χώρα τὰ δένδρα συνεβάλλετο, οἱ δὲ τετελευτηκότες τὰς θήκας» (=the land offered its trees, and the deceased their housing) : Against Leokrates, 43.10-11.

[105.](#) Codex Theodosianus, 16.10.15.

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