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**The religious and social policies
of the Delphic Oracle**

Towards the end of the second millenium BC a general upheaval prevailed over all mainland Greece. The so-called Mycenaean civilization was collapsing, and the laborious, painful and lengthy process begun, which would eventually lead to the full emergence of the strictly meant Hellenic condition. This formative period comprised two phases of development: One, the former, eminently kinetic, was indelibly marked by continual migrations of races on a large plane, each people pressing and displacing another in a series of chain reactions. When this fertilizing volatility has spent itself and its results subsided down, an interval followed of fermentative consolidation which by the beginning of the 8th century BC has already produced characteristic and fundamental forms and realities of Greek life and culture: the structure of the city-state physically and socially, the geometric style of pottery decoration, the principle of the pregnant and meaningful line in the plastic arts, a peculiarly acute sense of order and symmetry, the love of well-defined shape, rich, full-blown mythology, the work of an inimitable imagination luxuriant, vivid and concrete at the same time, the radiance of Epic poetry, the entire repertory of representation in themes and archetypes. A material event most aptly typifies the Greek awareness of achieved identity: it is the first officially recorded Olympiad at about midsummer of 776 BC, a secure focal reference chronological and otherwise.

*New
beginning
- transformation
period*

In the numerous Greek pantheon one divinity is above all most closely connected with the spirit and chief guiding lines of that recently emerging and quickly flourishing Hellenism: Apollo eternally blooming in youth and beauty, god of spotless perfection and absolute harmony, Lord of the closed circle, guarantor of sound wholeness, averter of external evil, avenger of internal disruption, upholder of good order. The representation of the other gods, although naturally preserving zealously intact their particular nature and ancient prerogatives, is more or less infused by the newly blowing wind;

*Apollo
expressing
the new
spirit*

but that of Apollo, and especially of the Pythian Apollo, has so entirely assimilated the emerging total experience, that it became its impeccable symbolic expression, to the extent that we generally miss the pre-hellenic basis of the God's character, and only discover it in particular by-cults and awkward divine epitheta of his worship.

Not, of course, that the pre-hellenic stratum was erased from Greek existence or even thoroughly marginalized. On the contrary, it indispensably complemented the fresh attitude in a happy and fruitful fusion, where their antithesis, without being annihilated, was sublated to a synthesis in which the opposite poles were integrated as intrinsic elements. The older component was summarized in the Principle of Blood: kinship, personal and external, and its complicated but objective law, was the fundamental, graduated relationship and alone constituted the immovable and stern structure of κόσμος, the solid but dark system of the world, physical and social. To this substrate, preserved into the novel state, there was superimposed the peculiarly hellenic experience, quintessentially Apollonian: the principle of harmonious Order and Beauty. *The two poles*

The Greek good, and thereby stable, order realized itself in the ideal of human excellence, of καλὸς κ' ἀγαθός, the man beautiful in shape and soul, nimble in body and alert in mind, well endowed physically and mentally, and further thoroughly cultivated in both respects. Under the influence of this vision, social order was gradually transformed from an absolute system of observances, connections, rites and institutions governed by the Ordinances of Blood, into a dynamic realm of rights illumined by the Law of Perfection. This order of natural privileges was automatically determined, once a recognized hierarchy of excellence was established. For it was essentially reducible to the natural cohesion of the parts within the whole according to their specific nature and function as exponents of perfection, and not merely as terms of blood-ties or graduations of kinship. Consequently, perfect order fundamentally consisted in everybody's occupying his proper *old and new order*
the principle of excellence

and peculiar position in the social fabric, secured by his faculties and the degree of their perfection. This was indeed the deeper meaning of the Pythian maxim γνῶθι σ' αὐτόν – know thyself, be aware, that is, of your place and keep it avoiding excess and stretching for more than it is objectively warranted and divinely allotted; herein lies the true road to happiness and contentment. All transgression of boundaries set irrevocably by nature and zealously watched over by the Gods was crucially obnoxious to the deity of enlightened order. *Limits were sacred and meticulous regard for proper measure in everything was evidently of paramount importance for human well-being.* Presumption and insolence, whenever discerned, were deftly but sharply rebuked in Delphi. A series of deliverances emanated from the Pythic tripod, *oracula velut ad castigandam hominum vanitatem deo emissa*, as Pliny puts it.

In such a context good social order (εὐνομία) appeared to be a simple question of symmetry and harmony as applied to the body-politic, of the working of the self-same principles that governed the corporal proportionateness of an athlete, the fine balances in well-constructed oratorical periods or the subtle counterpoises in a work of art. Conversely, social discordance, any disruption of the social nexus, was primarily felt, just like a personal vice or bodily defect, as a case of sheer ugliness. *No wonder that the same god was himself resplendent in beauty, the upholder of the moral code and the protector of social order, all at once.*

The emphasis on true and objective order is also revealed by another consideration pertaining to forecasting. Apollonian divination was not so much sheer prediction of future events, but rather a confirmation, as against perceptual failures of frail and egotistical human understanding, of the universal laws of harmony, and their application to difficult particular cases. The refusal or reluctance in cases of the God to speak, and the famous oracular ambiguities, the occasional, too, apparent miscarriages of soothsaying competence, express simply his unwillingness to "prophesy the

μὴ
ὁρίσιν

significance
of
limit

book
precision
of measure

order,
symmetry
of
proportion

peculiarity
of Apollonian
divination

future" in the trite sense. Indeed there is no prediction but that which deduces what *will* happen from what *must* in the order of things obtain by necessary law. Divine divination is a consequence of divine wisdom; and wisdom always is of the secrets of an objective order, not of the accidentals of individual happenings and chance circumstances.

The aristocratic order based on natural and cultivated excellences came soon in Greece to severe testing and heavy difficulties. There was, to begin with, a demographical eruption, not unusual with nations in their prime of youth, after the pangs and turmoil of their inception have been over, and the formation of their character has been achieved. But as always, accumulation of wealth proved to be the resolving catalyst in the dissolution of the old system. For it is amassing of riches, transmitted through inheritance, that first creates in a natural society the possibility of divergence between means of power wielded by an individual and degree of his personal merit – a possibility which is inevitably actualized as merit cannot become endemic in a family or clan with the relative facility that wealth may. Still, if society owns powerful forms, institutions and professions open, through external danger or internal wisdom, to unpossessed worth or at least independent of the wealth producing mechanisms, like a religious caste or the warrior class; it can then absorb most of the stress and tension that the progressive non-correspondence between material goods as means of significance, status and power on the one hand, and human excellence as perfection of man's nature and corresponding effective functionality on the other, generates.

But Greek earth was unsuitable to the flowering of such solid, self-perpetuating groupings automatically dominated because of their set purposes by principles other than excess of individual property. Nor could it have been a question of political safeguards prevailing to soften the antithesis in the manner of modern democratic formalisms. Thus the struggle there had to be carried out at the open freely and in the very midst



problems
of the
system
of
Apollonian
natural
drift forces

1. demography
2. wealth

(Sociology)
lack of
institutional
checks

unbridled freedom

of the social structure. To counteract the insidious influence of inappropriate, because unfunctional wealth one could not have recourse to *institutional* resistance; there was only the national patrimony of values, beliefs, sentiments and experiences, determining the cultural identity of Hellenism to fall back upon. The contest was therefore violent, and its progress archetypal. For when that dislocation between wealth-based power and merit-fomed authority becomes unacceptably marked and widespread (in the absence of appropriate permanent arrangements of stability or relief like the before mentioned ones), social strife is either started in seriousness, or, if pre-existing, is dangerously heightened *through its sense of self-justification*. Whichever party wins in such conflict, whether they are the opulent or the needy, the principle of aristocracy, honouring that is spontaneously and willingly the most worthy man (the ἄριστος and βέλτιστος) with the best position in each area of the social fabric, is ruined. "Love of money will destroy Sparta and nothing else" prophesized epigrammatically the Pythian God.

I shall not here study the ways and means by which Greek society endeavoured instinctively or designedly to safeguard its ideal way of life and the values embedded therein, against the deteriorating effects of factors based themselves on principles equally natural to those she intimately cherished. Instead I shall concentrate on how the Delphic Oracle as a historical institution faced this crucial problem in the development of Hellenism.

In a natural society ambition and the will to excel do not by themselves degenerate into unresolved civil strife; there they are always exhibited in a healthy state of antagonism which has its outcome determined speedily and satisfactorily, and what is more, agreeably to the popular feeling of rectitude. The incumbent of any position of ascendancy or honour will continually prove his ability, if necessary against the daring challenger. So the magician will never cease testing himself in his dealings

with the world of spirits, the elder in his dispensation of justice, the war-lord in battle against the foe. And the same holds practically good for every kind of function, activity or work in the commoner life of society. But wealth introduces an unresolvable element into the picture: the power it confers on its possessor, cannot be taken away without gross injustice; if left, on the other hand unattended, it tends through its fossilization in the inheritance of unworthy possessors to unfairly influence the outcome of all other contests of merit, and indeed finally to virtually undermine the very criteria by which excellence is determined. For unless resolutely checked in time, it becomes, in place of Man, Nature or God, the measure of everything.

Civil strife never depends on absolute magnitudes of affluence or want, but always on provocative relative differences, *strikingly unaccompanied by corresponding commensurate variations of merit*. When it erupts in volcanic tension, two ways only are open to deal with effectively, although still not to cure, the ghastly evil: *a reorganization of society on a large scale or a withdrawal of the disturbing part of it*. The first implies standardly a redistribution of wealth; which speaking of an agrarian society means a redivision of land and reallocation of lots. This was abhorred by the ancient Greeks and they resorted to it under the most rare and exceptional circumstances, highly sensitive though they always have been as to the degenerative effect of unhealthy importance being laid on inert and deadening external material possessions (in warnings against which, Apollo never failed). The second is called colonization, and it was much approved and extensively practiced. By its means both the actual or would-be needy and *those whose functional position in the existing scheme of society did not correspond, or was not felt to correspond, to their true merit*, the bold, destitute, capable, disappointed or aspiring and ambitious, were able to begin anew their lives as members of a society starting from the beginning, and thus free from the distortions and burdens, obnoxious but unavoidable, of its development in time. Colonization was thus a partial

demerit

reorganization of the existing society on a new, far-off laying, soil, which, by removing the troublesome anomalies, was also hoped to leave sound and whole the remaining and more or less satisfied, conservative or timid portion. The boisterous effervescence and offscouring scum of society's cauldron was segregated from the purified and ripened, peaceful and contended, revered, reverent or self-respectful matter. ||E

The great expansion of Greeks during the 8th and 7th centuries, chiefly to Magna Graecia, Sicily and the non-helladic coast of the Aegean Archipelago, but also in Western Mediterranean, Africa and the extremities of the Black sea, was authorized and to a great extent directed by the Pythian God. And it really had to be so. The people were extremely unwilling to abandon their country, to leave their homes, to break, or at least loosen, the religious bond and close blood ties, – family, clan, tribal, racial – that constituted the coherence and close-knit fabric of an ancient society – and this reluctance was exhibited even to the face of the most dreadful internal dissensions. Thus, for example, repeated oracles enjoin the same city or person to send or lead a colony. The settlement in a new land was a religious matter of the gravest importance. Cults were to be transferred or adopted, protective heroes to be invoked and worshipped, local divinities to be honoured, specific links with the metropolis to be instituted. It was after explicit consultation with the gods, and in particular with Delphic Apollo, the unerring God of wise counsel, that the deep-seated feeling of the Greek to consider himself inalienable part of the place and people in which he was born, could be softened and subdued – teaming as that sentiment was, with multiple qualms, fears, inhibitions, strongest attachments and densest dependencies of a sacred or quasi-sacred nature. A very different situation manifestly from the spirit of modern European explorations and consequent colonization of the world, yet resulting in similar effects. φ

But the Delphic oracle did not restrict itself to simply sanction proposed colonizations. It also actively directed them. Endowed with an ||E

immense treasury of information concerning locations and customs, state affairs, public incidents and private stories, it undertook the task of a veritable bureau of colonization. Pious, trustful travellers or merchants must have been collecting it for the priests, and the unceasing influx of pilgrims and visitors no doubt considerably contributed to it. Above all, precolonial trade supplied the necessary information for the divine wisdom to operate with. As to the various local and panhellenic traditions, mythological and ritual, the knowledge and masterly treatment of them was certainly exemplary.

A few examples may suffice to illustrate what has been said on this topic. The Chalcidians, in a time of singular barrenness of earth and general dearth decimized their population and dedicated the separated part to Apollo, who instructed them to settle Rhegium; the place was determined in the oracle as laying by the mouth of Apsia River, "where the female weds the male". There it was found a vine entwining a wild fig tree and thus the prophecy was fulfilled. – After the events in the sanctuary of Limnae which led to the first Messenian War, internal commotions in Messenia resulted to the exile of those who wanted to compose their differences with the Lacedaemonians, by their political opponents. They complained to Apollo for what befell them and asked for guidance; he replied that the exile will prove to be to their benefit as they will thus avoid the ruin which ineluctably comes to their country; he also instructed them to join with the Chalcideans in the establishment of Rhegium. – The commotions in Sparta that led to the settlement of Taras are worth mentioning for a number of reasons. For the whole duration of the very protracted first Messenian War, the active male population of Sparta was continually engaged in hostilities abroad and, if we are to believe our ancient sources, practically out of the country for all purposes. We may take it that it was so for the young men at least. At any rate the lack of proper offspring begun to be felt in a menacing way. Sparta always enjoyed, and it was necessary that she enjoyed, singular eugenic

oracle:
store of
information

examples

preoccupations. Bent on preserving racial purity in the midst of a subjugated autochthonous population, she needed a certain number of citizens, fine and fit. The means she adopted in order to solve the present problem without compromising the fortunes of the war abroad, was typical of her turn of mind. Bands of strong youths were released from their military duties and sent home with the express purpose to procreate, through indiscriminate intercourse with the Spartan maidens. A select body of well-endowed young men of indisputable prowess from the inferior population were also allowed to help the State in its hour of need. But the issue of such illicit connections (the Παρθενίαι) were later severely discriminated against by proper Spartans. As a result of this harsh treatment they formed a conspiracy, which was however discovered in time by the civil authorities. Summary justice could not be dealt on them because of their number. The Oracle was consulted and the Παρθενίαι begged permission to inhabit the rich tract of land lying between Corinth and Sicyon. The god forbade unconditionally such encroachment on fellow Peloponnesians; but gracefully ordered a colony to be sent to Southern Italy – and thus great Taras was settled.

Well-informed as to facts and circumstances, fully versed in the memories of the historical or legendary past, thoroughly penetrating into the mysteries of the human soul, outstandingly capable of seeing the realities behind the questioners' expressions in face and word, prudent in applying the general maxims of its policy to particular cases, the Oracle possessed all the necessary and controllable elements of its success. Surely there was much more to be gained by its consultation than what is preserved and recorded in the actual oracular deliverances.

The Pythian God ordained colonization in many cases where social disturbances are not evident in the occasion of his being taken counsel. Plague, famine, extraordinary barrenness of land, persistent drought, even defeats in war with an enemy, and apparently irrelevant private concerns are some of the proximate causes of inquiry which received as response

injunction of colonization. It is here that the wisdom of the Delphic Oracle becomes eminently manifest. For all such visitations, even taken in themselves and quite apart from whatever collateral information as to the state of the people in question the priests at Delphes might have possessed, are divine proclamations of disorder, evident results of sickness and signs of deeper troubles, and, in a closely knit social context, either aggravating circumstances in a preexisting commotion, or likely to instigate one in an atmosphere tense with misgivings. In many instances we can show this to be so from what our sources relate about the case; but we may also be certain that it was the same in now uncheckable situations. The beneficial action of the Oracle was not restrained to merely healing; it was also *proleptic*. *Besides it knew as well as the ancient physicians that raising the tone to some worthy endeavour in circumstances of crisis, is by itself remedial of illness, physical or psychological.*

But even wholesale emigration can only be a temporary remedy for societal distemper and maladies. For the causes that created civil tension in the first place, will repeat their workings as soon as the relief offered by colonization wears out. It is true that the demographical problem will not present so acute a front once bursting states of national euphoria have passed, and more settled and mature conditions prevail. But what impetus the cry for social change may lose as a result of procreative enervation, is more than counterbalanced by the increasingly distorted self-awareness of the individual and the threatened preponderance of anomalous (i.e. disproportionate to real, functional value) private interest over meritocratic social order and soundly corporate well-being.

To support the old aristocratic order on a more permanent basis in the emerging new era, the Delphic Oracle relied heavily upon the religious Principle. It undertook to nurse, propagate and highlight the view that the human condition, all man's contingencies, dealings and fortunes, depend on the divine order. This was but an aspect of a profound experience

characteristic of the ancient Greek world: that the divine, cosmic and social orders are at bottom manifestations of the self same Lawfulness; that basically the same ordinances govern human actions and vicissitudes, physical phenomena and the life of the blessed Gods. The foundation of all existence is divine; the Gods represent in archetypal purity the real powers that weave the fabric of World and Man, of both the physical and the human system. *To care for the divine worship is ipso facto to uphold the preservation of the natural and social order*, as it was safeguarded by the very nature, not merely the will, of the Gods themselves. Mythology and ritual exhibited directly or profoundly the eternal values and characteristic constraints of that order whose undiminished validity it was of paramount importance to reimpress upon the people at large in those critical times of ambiguity, wavering, complaint and disaffection.

The Greek order, and Greek religion as the Arc of Hellenism, consisted in two strata, clearly distinguishable, but fused together in a manner so happily wrought, as to heighten their several and conjoint efficacy by mutual interdependence. The two elements manifest themselves in a number of dimensions, but it is exquisitely hard to name them appropriately in themselves. Racially the differentiation lies between Pelasgic and cognate stems on the one hand, Aeolians, Achaeans, Ionians, Dorians on the other. Geographically and habitationally, the antithesis is expressed between men of the plains and mountaineers, lowlanders and highlanders. Regarding the chief type of work done, agriculturists are set against hunters and free nomads (to whom there are later added artisans and traders respectively). We may distinguish theoretically, the culture of Blood from the culture of Light, the chthonic from the celestial, *the root that searches for the Earth from the flower that aspires to Heaven*. But in Greece, the very topography of the country, with its ceaseless undulation of plain and mountain, of mild bay and rocky promontory, of land and sea, as well as the small size of the several constituents, necessitated a thorough "synoptic" interrelationship of

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the two
poles
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the opposing elements, which resulted, given in addition the strong localism of the people, to small ecological units: each plain with its surrounding heights tended to constitute an autonomous, and more or less, self-sufficient system. Thus the above mentioned poles came to work in inevitable conjugation and with reciprocating interaction of *fertilization* versus *stabilization*, themselves exhibiting a striking example of such harmonious co-existence and collaboration as both envisaged in different ways. *The beauty of the flower depends physically on the potency of the roots; yet the latter's spiritual justification is found in the former's perfection; indeed the very existence of root and plant springs from the seeds that will come of the flower.*

why
conjugation

The Delphic Oracle, in bringing religion to the foreground as focal point of human and all existence, fullheartedly accepted the two poles as integral constituents of the Greek Way. And thus not only it naturally celebrates the Olympian aspects of Greek religiosity, which is only to be expected given the quintessential celestuality of the Apollonian worship; but in fact it appears very anxious to highlight the significance of the chthonic element as well – and this might seem paradoxical. That the notions and practices of an agricultural religion are endorsed, goes without saying; still more obsolete curious rites, repugnant observances, monstrous divinities and the *entire apparatus, terrible and profound, of the culture of Blood are explicitly and emphatically sanctioned by the God of Light*. Even human sacrifices were reputedly demanded occasionally by the Oracle in former times as effective resolutions of great evils. Most characteristically: the God himself underwent expiatory purification for killing Python, the chthonic monster. *The Spirit of luminous perfection recognized that earthly horror and the inexorable fate emanating from Night's awful Womb, possess decisive ballast for the ship of State, as well as for the balance of the World.*

Apollon
sanctions
chthonic
cult

xxx
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Sterility of earth cursed the Phigaleian land in Arcadia, in full 5th century BC. The God, questioned, commands renovation of the Cult of Black

Demeter. The Goddess was raped by Poseidon, she in the form of a mare, he as a stallion; with dark rage in her heart, dressed in black, she came to a cave by Phigaleia: she was there worshipped of old as sitting on a stone, woman in all but the head, which was equine with figures of snakes and other beasts attached to it. Sacrifices to Lamia had to be offered on another occasion, and deities to be honoured like Dionysos the Phallus or Artemis the Hanged.

Misfortune or unsuccess, ills inexplicable and frightful prodigies, disturbances suspending the ordinary course of things, were consistently construed as the wrathful visitation of an offended deity or hero; or, alternatively, as the necessary outcome of a pollution contracted upon the commission of an enormity in the past. The gods had to be propitiated, daemons appeased, semi-gods conciliated, and a complex ritual of atonement, purgation and aversion performed according to the character of the case. It could also happen that gravest consequences might follow upon acts or omissions which would not normally be considered as of paramount importance.

For the baleful and inexorable workings of Contamination, the awesome but obstinately exact equilibria in the retributory modalities of Blood, and the exquisite sensitivity, even capriciousness, of perfect Serenity weave a most intricate web into which man cannot but be caught repeatedly often unaware. To escape unscathed is an utter impossibility; one can only hope and strive, through wise carefulness or instinctive rectitude, to avoid the anomalous focuses of collision among disparate forces, riding, as it were, smoothly along the driving momentum in his vicinity at each time and junction, meticulously following the lines of maximal security, not necessarily of least resistance in the complicated cosmic field of powers. It is evident that in such a world-view, the most natural is the more deeply religious. It is also obvious that, nevertheless, one can be never assured that in his doings or undoings he does not violate some sacred decree, some adamant ordinance and a cosmic law of a-moral ponderousness. *There is*

no safe-conduct through-life. There are no guaranteed exits, and the only available safeguards, prove to be the very sources of danger. It is a thoroughly mystic world of monstrous lawfulness, a great Mystery, and to live in it piously is to live dangerously – not deliberately provoking risks, but necessarily answering them again and again in unwitting confrontation. This half-hidden cosmic nexus of intimate and partly conflicting interdependencies provides the solid objective foundation both for the ardent desire of Man for extra-human help and guidance, and for the system evolved in fulfillment of that desire. The Delphic deity therefore acted consonantly to the external order of things as it was conceived and the inner needs of man, in fostering and exalting this deep lying natural religious sentiment. He, too, simply projected the divine world structure onto the social realm, in both unusual and regular circumstances.

*The risk
of
existence*
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For, it requires no mentioning that by the side of responses called forth on extraordinary occasions, the God habitually delivered oracles through which cults were instituted, various parts of the prevailing worship regulated, even questions of divine affiliation determined, consecrations and votive offerings made. And he is never weary of extolling the role of true and fullhearted piety as the only secure foundation of human life blessed and prosperous. Sybaritic prosperity was secured so long as they continued to properly honour the deities, but should end when they would reverence a mortal before a god. Thus Apollo prophesized, and thus it turned out. In this cosmic wisdom lies the secret of oracular divination.

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Neither the temporary relaxation of society's tensions through colonization, nor the long-term medicine of universal religious emphasis on each and every item of human condition and relationship, could stabilize the historical process to the extent and degree desired by the Greek sense of things, and achieved by Hellenism in the world of spirit and culture. The conflicts within the bosom of Greek society were becoming, as the time

*The two
means*
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went on, explosive, irreconcilable differences continued to undermine the aristocratic ideal of the best, the unconditional mandate of excellence, wealth did not cease to represent a focus of anomaly in the context of the archaic order so long as it remained unadapted to the requirements of the new emerging order and thus unfunctional and reactionary – and there finally came the necessity of *Force* in maintaining the given character and cohesion of the human flock as well as the demands of the novel historical developments. This was the *age of the Tyrants*. Their ostensible aim usually was to succour the weaker members of society against an unfair domination exercised by the stronger ones – which by this time meant not merely the antithesis of the poor to the opulent, but also, and more and more importantly, the antagonism of the forces of progress to the upholders of the status quo, the battle fought between the enterprising and inquisitive spirit of artisans, artists, traders, historians and philosophers on the one hand, and the power of the establishment, based on the landowning nobility and its clientele on the other, the war being waged of the new, vibrant individualism versus the old, fossilized one. The objective significance, at any rate, of the archaic tyranny, resided in the attempt to prudently regulate and control the imperious demands of the reactionary higher classes – which again evinced in the circumstances a drive to curb the pretensions of the well-to-do of the ancient régime, to destroy or lessen the impact of their *inertia*. Therefore, the rulers in force tended, in effect, to discriminate against an unacceptable principle of preponderance and an artificial measure of worth, by violently redressing the undue weight of old wealth in questions of social status and influence. In this way, they in effect sought to prevent wealth from becoming the new popular criterion of excellence and monopolizing the principle of social hierarchies; they thus expressed, whether consciously or not, the claims of true excellence over undue eminence, and *by implication* of the whole over the part, and of traditional values over traditional institutions. In a sense they appear now

Satisfying

Force in place of institutions

The new polarity

CLIX

character of tyranny

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in radical disguise; sometimes also, no doubt, radicals under reactionary pretexts. But in fact their function was to attempt to hold society together while it underwent radical intellectual, economic and social change. When they succeeded, they facilitated the transition to the new order, just as ¹⁰⁵ tyrannically supervised the transformation to the new system of more enlightened justice. ¹¹ crux ¹² e

But the Delphic Oracle could not accept the logic and terms of the problem as the Tyrants posed it. Aristocracy was unconditionally incompatible with institutionalized violence; any external coercion is repugnant to its true spirit. Society in a healthy state of development must assent spontaneously to the superior claims of perfect merit, and the exercise of naked force can only be a restricted if signal means of proving higher excellence by putting it to the test under fair and natural conditions, while simultaneously obliging inferior worth to keep its proper station. Furthermore, absolute power wielded by a man is to that frame of mind an unparalleled aberration: not even a god strictly speaking possesses it. Still he is the only possible approximation to it; and it is thus not surprising to find the Hellenistic Monarchs assuming as a matter of course full divine prerogatives. Some of the tyrants exhibited besides not unfrequently an almost equal disregard to the divine as to the moral codes of rights, and a rather high-handed attitude towards the god's honours, privileges, and treasures. ^{opposition of tyranny}

And finally, constrained equilibrium can not last for long: and so the God envisages and predicts a limited term of even benign tyrannical power – a few generations, or even fall in the querist's lifetime. It is of course a completely different matter if some wise man, under divine sanction and with the implicit approval of the people, low and high standing, can assume the informal office of *moderator* and for a time undertake to harmonize the discrepant tendencies and diverging gravitations of the social organism and re-adjust its organized functions under changing conditions. Εὐδαίμων ^{lack of duration for constrained equilibrium}

πτοήεθρον ἐνὸς κήρυκος ἀκοῦον· happy the city which listens to one herald, was the message of a Pythian declaration. The Oracle had encouraged, confirmed and often nominated, directly or indirectly, such herald-moderators. But it stood in the archaic times determinedly against the idea of despotism, eschewing oppression even under suspiciously disadvantageous circumstances and with untoward results. At most it might have condoned particular cases as necessary and rather pedagogical means of rigorous chastening inflicted on an unruly population, on a society who run riot. On the whole however, it preferred a compromise being struck of traditional aristocracy by birth with the natural aristocracy of merit, of nobility with ability, between old and new wealth, whereby the old fabric could be preserved intact in its main lines and dominant features, incorporating, though in a subordinate place, the new reality as it did in the past the old one, provided this proved equally docile and subservient to the great principle of excellence.

It did not, however, appear to have been satisfied with the results of such attempts, whether they moved in the direction of democracy or oligarchy. The modern factor proved too aggressively self-asserting; while the opposition took forms equally abhorrent to the initial spirit of merit-controlled order. Thus when the oriental host of the King of Kings invaded Hellenic soil, it seems that the God would prefer the subjugation of Greece to foreign domination – at least of Greece except Peloponnesus, the land where the aristocratic ideal seemed to survive as best as it could under the unwary eyes of Sparta.

Half a century later, the antagonism that operated within the city-states till then, exploded as a universal War in which most of Greece was implicated, divided into two vast armies under the respective command of Sparta and Athens.

Old values, as interpreted by the spirit of conservatism, confronted then squarely new realities – economic, social, cultural. The god

pluto Persia

pluto Sparta

unhesitatingly took the former side, and proclaimed that he will enter the battle patronizing the forces of Tradition, invited or un-invited as he put it. He also prophesized victory. And victory indeed befell Sparta. That it was a pyrrhic one, is another story. For the Delphic priesthood mistook the frozen skeletons of the life of old for its pulsating reality. And so they failed to observe the living essence of Hellenic Spirit old and new operating in the Glorious Revolution of High Classicism that was taking place in the Greek world, under Athenian leadership.

our
next
subject
tomorrow