

“Mykenai” and “Delphi”: Poetic Echoes of Ancient Hellenism

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Mykenai (the ancient Greek spelling of Mycenae) was a center of Greek Bronze Age civilization and in Homer's *Iliad* the home of Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks in the Trojan war. The impressive walls of its citadel were called cyclopean because the ancient Greeks believed they were built by the giant cyclopes. Later local legend said that the mountains viewed from Mykenai formed the outline of a reclining Agamemnon. Schliemann excavated the grave circles inside the citadel and found what he believed to be the golden death mask of Agamemnon. The main gate of the citadel is the Lion Gate, depicting two lions flanking a column. Outside the citadel are the tholoi or beehive-shaped tombs, the largest known (incorrectly) as the “Treasury of Atreus”. A stepped tunnel leads from the citadel to a covered cistern (now sealed off) which provided a secure water supply.

Mykenai

Cyclopean stones
walls still rising
above the plain
where Agamemnon lies
silhouetted in mountains
on the horizon
beyond the circle of slabs
awaiting a Hellenic dawn

The houses of the town
lie in ruins far below
the still imposing citadel
lions facing a column
above the empty gate
the tholos tombs
far below, in the valley
hives made of fitted tiers
guard long-vanished treasure
whose honey was death

Beneath, the steps
wind down into darkness
the twisting tunnel
of increasing damp
only to stop abruptly
at a modern wall
cutting off the cistern
from its purpose
leaving the traveler
in echoing night

And yet, at dawn
flowers rooted
in gaps of stone
bloom among
the summer weeds
an eagle stands sentinel
on the watchtower
where signal fires
once warned of danger
he surveys ranks
of windblown blades
moving, like the waves
of the distant Aegean
blossoms white
as unfurled sails



Delphi was the site of the Delphic oracle of Pythian Apollo, the most famous oracle of the ancient world. Here the sibyl, a priestess of Apollo, predicted the future for individuals from Greece and beyond. It was excavated and partly reconstructed by the French. The Castalian spring near the temple was sacred and was used for purification as well as inspiration. The sibyl's stone or rock was said to predate the nearby temple from which the sibyl later prophesied. The Greek states made offerings to Apollo and built individual treasuries to house them. Above the sanctuary are the Phaedriades, or "shining ones", lower cliffs of Mount Parnassos that reflect the sun and shine in the moonlight. The modern road to the site is lined with small shrines containing icons and oil lamps. These are modern memorials, usually at the site of automobile accidents, either as memorials to the dead or in thanksgiving for survival.

Delphi

The hills and scrub
stretch to the distance
violet with mist
down the valleys towards Itea

Cypresses stand in groups
like roofless temples
the hillsides white and brown
with pathways and rubble
just as marble statues
are colored with grey
to distinguish old from new
and ruin from restoration

Along the highway road
at night, oil lamps before icons
in roadside shrines
echo the torchlit processions
of vanished gods
in the empty hills

The oracle is silent,
but in the darkness,
there are murmurs
in the Castalian spring
as movement disturbs
the ancient fountains

The mountains bathed
in starlight, against a sky
of constellations' myths
the Phaedriades glow
with the borrowed light
of a crescent moon
itself a pale reflection
of the shrouded sun

On these pathways
of the past, as I walk
again, among the treasury ruins
mists and smoke
rise like incense
undiscovered chambers
lie beneath the sibyl's stone

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