Financing Temple Building at Delphi in the 6th Century BC

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The 6th century BC was a period of radical transformation at Delphi. The 7th century temple of Apollo, about which little is known, was built in the midst of the inhabited area of Delphi. Early in the 6th century, houses neighbouring the temple were demolished and for the first time the sanctuary was separated from the town by a *peribolos* wall.[1] Later in the century, after the old temple apparently burnt down,[2] a grandiose remodelling of the site was undertaken, so that when the new temple was completed near the end of the century it sat atop a massive dual terrace, buttressed by a polygonal wall.[3]

Delphi had attracted visitors from far afield for a long time, yet the the 6th century transformation of the site itself was something new and different. Traditional explanations have centred on the supposed 1st Sacred War of around 590 and the takeover of Delphi by the Amphiktyony, hitherto based at Anthela.[4] This does not hold water. I have argued elsewhere that we should follow Noel Robertson's view that the 1st Sacred War is a fiction dreamt up in the 4th century, and that in any case, it would not provide an explanation for the arrival of Amphiktyony.[5] And while it is easy to ascribe the separation of sanctuary from town to the influence of the outside body, it is just as tempting to see native Delphian ambitions as the cause.

Scholars have tended to see the Delphians as untutored backwoodsmen, beside the supposed sophistication of the Amphiktyons.[6] Yet with the benefit of regular contact with visitors, there were probably those at Delphi who understood the opportunities perfectly well, but believed the physical presentation of the sanctuary needed to match its increasing fame to capitalise on them. That was made difficult by the sloping nature of the site, hence the need for expensive remodelling.

There was a danger of over-reaching, and very possibly not all Delphians shared the confidence of their more entrepreneurial brethren. The conflict between these groups may, indeed, be visible to us in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo. The Hymn has been traditionally dated by its supposed reference (lines 540–544) to the 1st Sacred War.[7] Once we abandon that, we are left with a poem dated somewhere in the 6th century, which fails even to hint at the existence of the Amphiktyony (or, for that matter, the Pythian priestess). There are two passages which might be read as responses to critics of Delphian ambition. At lines 287–295, Apollo himself lays out his temple with the promise that his *perikalles* temple and its oracle will attract crowds of people and sacrificial animals from far and wide. Even more explicitly, when the Cretan sailors he has recruited as priests query their economic prospects at Delphi, the god's response is that the tribes of men will bring them an endless supply of animals for sacrifice (lines 525–537): not a bad economic prospectus for those who wanted to remodel the site.

Nevertheless, ambitions may have outrun resources. This might explain the long delay between the destruction of the old temple, supposedly in 546, and completion of the new one with the help of the Athenian Alkmeonidai around 510.[8] Even in the

4th century, building the new temple took 40 years, with a ten-year interruption for war, and financial problems were solved with Phokian reparations after 346. Herodotus tells us that the 6th century temple cost 300 talents[9]: the Amphiktyony asked the Delphians to raise a quarter of this amount, and to do so they had to go as far afield as Egypt.

Not much weight can be placed on Herodotus' account, but I would suggest (and will argue in more detail elsewhere) that when the Delphians ran into trouble with their grandiose project they voluntarily invited the Amphiktyony to share the responsibility. The Amphiktyony itself may well have been transformed and extended to include states in southern Greece which could provide help with both financing the works and finding skilled workmen to carry them out. Thus, the problem of financing the 6th century temple building, while growing out of purely local ambitions, may in the end have helped catapult Delphi even further into the international sphere.

Notes

[1] Jacquemin 1999, 247; Luce 2008, 67–72.

[2] The date of 548, provided by Paus. 10,5,13, cannot be considered reliable.

[3] Courby 1927, 166. 170–171; Scott 2010, 56–59.

[4] Summary of modern views in Londey 2015, 226–229. 232–233; to which add Luce 2008, 104–115.

[5] Robertson 1978; Londey 2015.

[6] e.g., recently, Scott 2014, 70. 94.

[7] e.g. Janko 1982, 127–129. 132.

[8] Hdt. 5, 62.

[9] Hdt. 2, 180, though the figure seems very high and its source a mystery.

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