GREEK RELIGION AND SOCIETY

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sort of pseudo-science outmoded by the progress of true science is one that, in one form or another, has dogged and hampered the study of primitive religion from Frazer to Evans-Pritchard and beyond. Evans-Pritchard's classic study, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* – an account of his field-work among a southern Sudanese tribal people – is a brilliant, subtle and sophisticated analysis of a culture's complex religious thinking, but Evans-Pritchard is still sufficiently under the influence of the pseudo-science analogy to treat the thought-processes of the Azande as characterized by error and illogicality. He speaks of their displaying 'patterns of thought that attribute to phenomena supra-sensible qualities which . . . are not derived from observation or cannot be logically inferred from it, *and which they do not possess*' (my italics), as opposed to 'common-sense notions . . . that attribute to phenomena only what men observe in them or what can logically be inferred from observation'. That is to say, Evans-Pritchard assumes that the evidence of our senses and the application of an objective 'common-sense' are enough to show that Zande assumptions about the operation of oracles, magic and witchcraft in the way things happen are simply wrong, and 'pseudo-scientific' in the sense that science is merely a methodologically more demanding development of 'common-sense notions', one which 'has better techniques of observation and reasoning'.[1] On this view Zande thought-processes are unscientific and therefore simply mistaken, not 'in accord with objective reality': 'witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist',[2] and therefore their magical rituals are, to quote a distinguished philosopher of religion, 'a pseudo-technique, an effort to make up for poor practical skills with an imaginary technology'.[3]

Evans-Pritchard would presumably have said much the same about ancient Greek religious notions and thought-processes. The trouble about this is that not only is the thesis vulnerable to philosophical argument about the nature of 'objective reality',[4] but also that Evans-Pritchard's own experiences of the Azande

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ferences in experience are fundamental, so too are the differences in religious tradition, which reach into every aspect of consciousness. Greek religion is not 'revealed' as Christianity is; there is no sacred text claiming the status of the 'word of God', nor even of His prophets; no Ten Commandments, no creed, no doctrinal councils, no heresies, no wars of religion in which 'true believers' confront the 'infidel' or the heretic. Central terms of our religious experience such as 'grace', 'sin', and 'faith' cannot be rendered without disfigurement into the ancient Greek of the classical period: the central *Greek* term, *theous nomizein*, means not 'believe in the gods', but 'acknowledge' them, that is, pray to them, sacrifice to them, build them temples, make them the object of cult and ritual. There is never an assumption of divine omnipotence, nor of a divine creation of the universe, except in philosophical 'theology', nor any consistent belief in divine omnipresence. There is no church, no organized body persisting through time comprising those with dogmatic authority, able to *define* divinity and rule on what is correct or incorrect in religious belief. Men of religion in ancient Greece are of two kinds, those with ritual functions (*hiereis*, meaning primarily 'sacrificers') and custodians of religious tradition and customary law on the one hand (that is men such as the Athenian *exēgētai* and the *hierophants* of the Eleusinian mysteries), and, on the other, men with a god-given and peculiar closeness to divinity, with a special insight into or power to communicate with the divine, that is *manteis*, dream-interpreters and such figures as the Pythia (Apollo's prophetess) at Delphi. All these are indeed essential parts of the fabric of Greek religion (no army took the field in fifth-century Greece without a *mantis* to accompany its dangerous enterprise[10]), but they do not constitute a church; there is no system of relationships joining them together and making them conscious of a common stance or a common ideology; there is no 'training for the priesthood'.

All this means that, for all its weight of tradition (not less evident in ancient Greek religion than in other religions), Greek religion remains fundamentally improvisatory. By which I mean

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power of the forest'?) and characteristically use arguments from the circumstances of the attack to support or rebut attempts to diagnose the power at work.[11]

For all the elements of this series of incidents that are specific to Dinka religion (such as the categorization of divine powers and the significance of 'being away from home'), the greater part of this story, and in particular the way in which it evokes a religious response by threatening 'chaos', could be rendered without distortion into Greek terms. Indeed, an example, strikingly close to the case of Ajak, can be found in the behaviour of Phaedra in the early scenes of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, with its wayward, contradictory fluctuations of mood and state of mind: Phaedra's failure to reply to the nurse's anxious questions and her apparently senseless words addressed to no one in particular of those present – all this leads the women of the chorus, like the spectators of Ajak's possession, to attempt diagnosis. They too are inclined to discern a supernatural power at work, but cannot be certain; much less certain is the power's identity: is it Pan or Hecate, the Korybantes or the Mountain Mother, or Diktynna (all are possible, for Phaedra's strange behaviour seems associated with the wilds); or is it after all a response to some breakdown of family ties; or more mundanely still, just some (ordinary) abnormality inherent in the constitution of women? (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 141–69.) The nurse expresses *her* sense that a divinity is active but suggests that much help from oracles will be needed to identify the god involved (*Hippolytus* 236–8).

Thus among Greeks, as among the Dinka, waywardness in human behaviour is traced to divinity; it is a sign. There are others. Plague and epidemic we have already met: in Athens in 429 and the years that followed; at the beginning of the *Iliad*, and at the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. And each time the response is the same, to turn to men of god for expert guidance, to *manteis* and to oracles. That is also the characteristic response to other modes of the uncanny: to dreams (repeatedly in Herodotus), to the event that makes no sense, and, equally, to the event that

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observes the formalities of a public and collective address to divinity:

> 'Hear me,
> lord of the silver bow who set your power above Chryse
> and Killa the sacrosanct, who are lord in strength over Tenedos,
> Smintheus, if ever it pleased your heart that I built your temple,
> if ever it pleased you that I burnt all the rich thigh pieces
> of bulls, of goats, then bring to pass this wish I pray for:
> let your arrows make the Danaans pay for my tears shed.'
> (Homer, *Iliad* 1.36–42 trs. Lattimore)

Two assumptions underlie this prayer, and the language of Greek prayer at large: one is that a divinity must be addressed with precision and courtesy, by formal titles and by rehearsal of his powers and attributes (otherwise he may not hear the prayer); the second is that he who utters the prayer must establish and point to ties, bonds of obligation that exist (or will exist) between god and worshipper. Behind the second lies a more fundamental assumption still, one that is central to ancient Greek culture: the assumption of reciprocity, the assumption that lies behind the Greek use of the word *charis*, which is both the doing of good by one person to another but also the (necessary) repayment of that good, the obligation that exists until it is repaid and the feelings of gratitude that should accompany the obligation. The assumption is that any action will be met by a matching and balancing reaction (good for good, evil for evil), and therefore the implication that divinity will respond in kind and reciprocate human action, for good or ill, is one that locates the divine powers squarely within the conceptual framework by means of which ancient Greeks understood the ordering of their world: the divine powers are not anomalous. It also carries the further implication that relations between divinity and worshipper can be construed in the same terms that make sense of relations between men, and that the expectations that men have of one another can be carried over into their expec-

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of innocence', the array of pretence (the self-sacrificing victim, the hidden knife) and the group-involvement of the whole community in the act, in the throwing of barley-grains and the innocuous but symbolic and magical violation of the animal's integrity by cutting off the few hairs. Does this mean that Burkert and Meuli are right in seeing sacrifice as no more than ritualized slaughter?[14] Perhaps at this point we should suspend judgement on the issue, noting for the moment only that non-rationality, paradox and seeming self-contradiction are recurrent features of absolutely central elements in religious ritual and myth in other religious traditions: we may think of such examples as Catholic-Christian 'transsubstantiation' (bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ) in the Mass and the concept of 'virgin birth' in Christian myth.[15]

The problems of interpreting what sacrificial ritual 'says' about relations between man and divinity have been acknowledged ever since Hesiod. If we turn to those religious occasions which we traditionally call 'festivals' (occasions such as the Panathenaia or the Dionysia), which are in effect ritual sequences of greater complexity still, the problem of interpretation (on the face of it more difficult) is often made to seem less pressing because of the assumption that their component parts are (merely) the result of historical accumulation and juxtaposition, perhaps even fortuitous: the supposition that they just 'growed'. Yet that assumption too is no more than an assumption, and perhaps we can take an Athenian festival as an example and see if another approach makes better sense.

The three days of ritual comprising the festival called Anthesteria took place in February each year, in honour of the god Dionysus. The three days, which ran like the Jewish Sabbath from sundown to sundown, were called 'Opening the storage jars (*pithoi*)', 'Jugs' and 'Cooking pots'. The rituals of the first two days centred on the opening and first consumption of the new wine from the previous year's harvest. Their climax was the ritualized drinking of the day called 'Jugs'. The day took its name from a

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a language where words are no more than ambiguous signs and do not mean what they seem to say, and where, characteristically, they are *replaced* by signs: in Heraclitus' words, 'the god whose is the oracle at Delphi neither speaks nor hides: he indicates' (i.e. 'he uses signs': *sēmainei*).[18] He does, and does not, communicate with man.

The notion of ambiguity in divine communication, of a divine language of signs rather than words, seems deeply rooted in the Greek imagination, so that when, in Herodotus, for example, men aspire to the status of divinity and claim the power to predict the future, it is in such a language that they speak. The Scythians predict to Darius the failure of his expedition against them: they send him a present of a bird, a mouse, a frog and five arrows. Darius reads the message (wrongly) as implying surrender: mice live on the ground (and thus stand for earth), frogs live in water (and thus stand for water); birds (which 'are much like horses'!) and the arrows (which represent Scythian power) are surrendered to him. Only Gobryas, his associate from the time of the revolt against the usurping Magus, perhaps reads the signs rightly: 'Unless you Persians turn into birds and fly up in the air, or into mice and burrow under the ground, or into frogs and jump into the lakes, you will never get home again but will stay here in this country and be shot down by Scythian arrows' (Herodotus 4.131–2). And once read the message can be falsified and rendered harmless, if only by withdrawal – unlike the messages of divinity. The prophecies of the divine powers often make use of what the Greeks called an *adynaton*, an impossibility ('When a mule sits on the throne of Media, then, tender-footed Lydian, run . . .'), but in divine language the seeming *adynaton* may be fulfilled and an apparent 'never' may mean 'one day'. When the Pelasgians intend a promise which will never actually be fulfilled, they agree to surrender Lemnos to Athens 'when a ship sails from your land to ours in a single day when the North wind is blowing'. But Miltiades long afterwards reads the message differently and sails from Athenian territory in the Gallipoli peninsula to Lemnos – he makes good his

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The comparisons, by which a man is made to seem the analogue of a god, are ironic preparation for what comes now:

> . . . there Patroklos, the end of your life was shown forth,
> since Phoibos came against you there in the strong encounter
> dangerously, nor did Patroklos see him as he moved through
> the battle, and shrouded in a deep mist came in against him
> and stood behind him, and struck his back and his broad shoulders
> with a flat stroke of the hand so that his eyes spun. Phoibos
> Apollo now struck away from his head the helmet
> four-horned and hollow-eyed, and under the feet of the horses
> it rolled clattering, and the plumes above it were defiled
> by blood and dust.
>
> (Homer, *Iliad* 16.787–96 trs. Lattimore)

Patroclus has been touched by divinity and his helmet is off; it was Achilles' helmet, and now that Patroclus' wearing of it has doomed him to death, like an animal ritually adorned, the gods transfer ownership of it to Hector, doomed next to die. Patroclus is unwounded but he has begun to die; nothing can save him, as nothing can save the sacrificial victim once the hairs are cut.

Here are hints of a darker, altogether more uncanny aspect of divinity than that seen in the divine assemblies of Olympus. In the Homeric poems they remain hints, but in the world of fifth-century tragedy they are developed into a complex image of dark and light, of human and alien, of the 'self' and the 'other' in the notion of divine power.

In the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus a major theme is the extent to which the past controls and determines present and future. In *Agamemnon*, as the action advances so our sense of the well-springs of the action moves remorselessly backwards into the past: a year, ten years, a generation, perhaps even to the founding of the house. *Agamemnon* is haunted by the presence of the past. But by the end of the trilogy it is not the human past but creatures from the remotest antiquity of the world itself that have come to haunt the

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motivation of power; he counters Oedipus' appeal to the *polis* by asserting his own membership of it (630); and throughout the play he displays a politician's circumspection in anything that affects the *polis*: he will not venture an opinion (569) or a decision (1438f.) without adequate knowledge. Power and a sense of responsibility to the community are things he understands. By total contrast, Teiresias inhabits another world of consciousness; it is above all his complete unawareness of what the city demands of him, his inability to respond to Oedipus' repeated and emphatic use of the word 'city' (five times in forty lines) in appealing to him, that both understandably triggers Oedipus' accusations and seems to place him outside the human community of Thebes. He is Apollo's slave and denies himself status within the *polis* (411). Moreover in opposition to Creon's transparently political language, Teiresias speaks in riddles and thus shares the language of the Sphinx and of Apollo himself.[23] It is as if he does not belong among men.

The issue of belonging as it applies to the communities of men and to the space through which Oedipus moves in his recollected experience is another central part of Sophocles' meaning, and gradually the sense of place in the play is used to reinforce our awareness of the existence of another world than the world we see. Above all it is Oedipus' belonging which comes into question. At the outset of the play, though from elsewhere, he is firmly of Thebes; he belongs there; he is its rescuer from the inhuman Sphinx and now the holder of its power. Beyond Thebes, place seems at first unimportant. The question where Laius was killed is answered only by 'not in Thebes'; beyond that the question seems unimportant. But as the play proceeds its 'geography' grows slowly more complex and more disturbing; is Oedipus rather of Corinth, whose king's son he takes himself to be? Or, as Teiresias asserts, is he a man lost, one who does not know where he is or with whom he lives? By degrees the image of other places, of the cross-roads ('the three ways') and of the mountain (Cithaeron), take on ever greater definition and come to haunt Oedipus' mind and memory as constituting and standing for that other world to

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course the distinctions are not hard and fast: some of T. S. Eliot's poetry is difficult to classify, and so is Christian rock music, but at least a rough dividing line can be drawn with some confidence.

The Greek situation was radically different. There was no universal sacred book telling religious stories in an 'orthodox' version, no standard liturgy such as we find in the Book of Common Prayer or the Missal, no concept of the sabbath, though of course there were plenty of festival holy days, ritual forms of words for different cults, and sacred texts associated with particular groups such as the Orphics. There were also a great many types of specifically religious song addressed to gods – hymns, paeans, processionals and so on, intended for particular deities and occasions. But the festivals for which they were designed were not held 'in church' – the temples were essentially places where the cult statues lived[1] – and associated with the festivals was a great range of literature and music which might be similar in form but was not obviously religious in content. Indeed it was often performed as part of a competition: tragic and comic plays and dithyrambic song and dance at festivals in honour of Dionysus, and recitations of epic poetry by rhapsodes, as at Delos or the Panathenaia at Athens.

All this makes the 'sacred'/'secular' distinction very difficult to apply. How, for instance, should an Aristophanic comedy be defined? On the 'sacred' side one could mention the fact that the comedies were performed at important festivals in honour of Dionysus, in the holy space of the god's theatre. His statue was brought to the theatre for the performances, which were presumably intended to please him, as entertainments that he would enjoy watching, and at the same time to conduce to his greater glory, since his worshippers were devoting a great deal of time, money and competitive energy to these productions. Besides, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the specifically cultic aspects of the Dionysiac festivals – the sacrifices and procession – were taken very seriously.[2] Of course these were also occasions of great popular celebration and civic pageantry, but there is no

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taste for comic poetry, who promote civil discord, take bribes, or betray their city. This is followed by the 'festival' proper, with songs to 'Her who saves' (*Sōteira* – presumably Persephone), to Demeter, and finally to Iacchus again. The song to Demeter is interesting: it combines straightforward hymnic language with a direct appeal for victory in the dramatic competition:

> Queen Demeter, stand before us,
> Smile upon your favourite Chorus!
> Grant that when we dance and play
> As befits your holy day,
> Part in earnest, part in jest,
> We may shine above the rest,
> And our play in all men's eyes
> Favour find, and win the prize.
>
> (trs. D. Barrett)

The element of 'play' already much emphasized in the Initiates' songs comes out most strikingly in the Iacchus hymn, which ends in a frolicsome way with jokes about the Chorus' costumes and a reference to a 'pretty little girl' whose breast is seen peeping from her torn tunic. The scene reaches its climax with Dionysus and Xanthias joining in the dance – a thoroughly lively and extremely bawdy comic sequence, but not one that uses religion in order to mock or denigrate it. On the contrary, the religious elements seem to have a very direct function as well as being brilliantly exploited for the comic purposes of the plot. We ought certainly not to overlook the close links between the songs and dances of this scene and the real-life forms of cult activity. For instance, the appeal to Demeter for victory suggests that the hymns might be felt to have effective religious power as well as being part of the light-hearted make-believe of the play.[8]

Clearly there is no hard-and-fast dividing line between sacred and secular in a scene like this one; though perhaps it was bound to be a complex case, since the god Dionysus is a character in the play, and the play was composed for his festival. But even when

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Persephone' (367–9) might be taken as implying that initiation was not altogether divorced from moral considerations, even at this early period.

Later, in any case, it was thought to be paradoxical that the satisfaction of purely ritual requirements should act as a passport to happiness after death. This view stimulated the celebrated protest of the Cynic Diogenes, who asked why the thief Pataikion should be better off than Epaminondas in the after-life, merely because he had been initiated. The same objection is made in Plato's *Republic* to the idea which was current at the time, that by performing certain rites of purification in accordance with instructions ascribed to the mythical figures of Orpheus and Musaeus, one could avoid the consequences of one's misdeeds and escape punishment after death (363a–66b). As a reaction to this sort of criticism it was natural that the moral connotations of the Mysteries at Eleusis should come to be emphasized much more. Thus for example in Aristophanes' *Frogs* the chorus of initiates in the underworld sing of how they alone have light and joy, because they have not only been initiated but have also behaved piously towards both citizens and strangers alike (454–9).

This moral emphasis was strengthened at Athens by the claim (which was probably first made in the mid-sixth century B.C.) that the people of Attica had been the first to receive from Demeter not only the Mysteries but also the science of agriculture. She had instructed Triptolemus, one of the rulers of Eleusis, in this art, and he in turn passed on this knowledge to the world in general. It was said that this had led men to live a settled and civilized life, forming societies and learning how to unite for mutual benefit. Demeter herself was worshipped as *Thesmophoros*, which was taken to mean 'Bringer of law', and Triptolemus himself was regarded as one of the earliest law-givers. As a consequence it was not possible to receive the favour of this deity, either in life as the giver of the wealth of the earth, or after death, unless one behaved in a civilized manner towards one's fellow-men as well as the gods.

The picture which Aristophanes paints in *Frogs* of the life of the initiates after death is similar to earlier descriptions of Elysium or the Islands of the Blest. By contrast those who are punished for crimes committed while on earth lie in mud and filth (*Frogs* 145–51). In other accounts they may, like the sinners Tityus, Tantalus and Sisyphus in Homer's Underworld (*Od.* 11.576–600), be condemned to the perpetual performance of useless tasks. In Polygnotus' picture of the underworld at Delphi, for example, a man named Oknos ('Sloth') was shown plaiting a rope, while a donkey stood next to him and ate it as he plaited it, and some women who were depicted carrying water in broken pitchers were identified on the painting as the uninitiated (Pausanias 10.29.1–2; 31.9–11). We already have here something similar to the later Christian ideas of Paradise and Hell in such portrayals of the after-life. Evidently notions of this kind were already widespread by the end of the fifth century B.C. It looks as if there was no very clear attempt in such cases to distinguish between ritual and moral requirements. The initiates were rewarded and the uninitiated suffered punishment after death, but at the same time rewards and penalties were allotted to those who had lived morally good or bad lives on earth. In both cases this implied some form of judgement of souls after death. In the reference to Minos as judge of the dead in the *Odyssey* (11.568–71) it looks as if he is simply settling disputes among them, as he had done on earth. He appears again as a judge, together with Rhadamanthys, Aeacus, Triptolemus and other unnamed heroes, in Plato's *Apology* (41a), but it is only in Plato's *Gorgias* (523e ff.) that the first three of these are named as judges who assess men's lives on earth after they have died. Earlier, however, Aeschylus already mentions this idea of judgement, and ascribes it to the god of the underworld (Aeschylus, *Supplices* 230–1; *Eumenides* 273–5).

In such popular portrayals there is no indication that life on earth is more than a single stage in the soul's existence, which is followed by judgement after death and assignation to an appropriate sphere of further existence, happy or unhappy. But if one

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indicated by the fact that in the classical period we meet with only a few very oblique and uncertain references to it.[4] This related how the rebellious Titans, the generation of gods who were older than Zeus and the other Olympian deities, had torn in pieces the god Dionysus, who in this myth was the son of Zeus and Persephone. Then the Titans ate his limbs, but his heart was rescued by Athena and a new Dionysus was formed from it. The Titans themselves were burnt by the lightning of Zeus, and from the soot men were born. Thus mankind has a share in what Plato calls 'the old Titanic nature' (*Laws* 701c), and pays the penalty for this ancestral crime. But men have also inherited a share in the divine nature of Dionysus. Consequently those who held such beliefs paid particular attention to the worship of Dionysus, calling themselves *Bacchoi* after this god, and believing that the rituals of his cult had special power to free them from fears of what might await them after death.

It is not easy to say how far these ideas of reincarnation and of man's ancestral guilt won acceptance at any time from the Greeks. But they were clearly familiar to both the philosopher Empedocles and the poet Pindar in the early fifth century, and they left a deep mark later on Plato. More important, however, in the long run was the emphasis on the divine character of the soul (*psychē*). The early Greek philosophers before Socrates held a very wide variety of views on the nature of the soul. Some said that it consisted of fire, others of air, others again that it was composed of various kinds of atomic particles which could be dissolved on death, whilst another school argued that it was only a harmony of bodily constituents, and so ceased to exist when the body perished. Uncertainty on this subject is reflected in the literature of this period, where a whole spectrum of different views can be discerned. Thus for example the idea that the soul is composed of air or *aithēr* and returns to it after death is echoed by Euripides (*Supplices* 531–6, 1140; *Helen* 1014–16, etc.), and also in a famous epigram on the Athenians who were killed in 432 B.C. at Potidaea

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influence on later popular thought, by contrast with the impact of Plato's teaching on the subject.

This very brief sketch of early Greek views about death and life after death will have shown the lack of any universally accepted dogmas on this subject, in contrast to the relative uniformity of actual practice in the matter of funeral and mourning customs which seems to have prevailed throughout antiquity. At the same time it is possible to see how the various views which we have considered can be related to each other. It is not so much a question of independent strands of thought and belief, but rather of a nexus of interrelated ideas. The Greeks themselves did not see a direct conflict between the older 'mythological' views of the early poets and those later ideas which we have considered. Although the Homeric poems present a one-sided picture, one can catch glimpses of other beliefs in them, such as the possibility of punishments or rewards after death. The idea that the heroic dead can continue to have some influence over what goes on in the world of the living is one which the Homeric poems seem to have relegated to the background, but it was clearly not new at that time. The notion of special favours after death for initiates into the mystery cults of Demeter and Persephone is really only a particular version of the general belief that individual deities could reward those whom they loved in various ways, and, as we have seen, the moral aspect of these cults, although more emphasized in the classical period, may have been already to some extent implicit from the beginning.

Belief in reincarnation is a very striking development, and this does look like something quite novel. Yet here again it does not contradict earlier views and can in fact be seen as a development from them. Equally, the strange myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans has many elements which recur elsewhere. Opposition to Dionysus is a fundamental feature of the stories about this god (as in Euripides' *Bacchae*, for example, or earlier in the story of his persecution by King Lycurgus of Thrace at *Iliad* 6.130–40), and dismemberment is a fate usually suffered by

Dionysus' opponents (e.g. Pentheus). The Titans are the opponents of the Olympian gods already in Hesiod's *Theogony*. The idea that men suffer as a result of a crime committed by their remote ancestors is an extension of the general Greek belief that guilt can be inherited and continue over a series of generations. Thus although at first sight this story of Dionysus and the Titans seems to stand apart from the normal course of Greek mythology, one can see how a myth of this kind could have been created within this framework.

Finally there is the most significant of all the developments in this field, the belief in the originally divine nature of the soul and its immortality. There is clearly a great difference here between the Homeric idea of the soul as little more than a shadow or image of the body, and Plato's insistence that the soul represents the real and enduring personality. Yet even this might be viewed rather as a shift of emphasis than as a radical contradiction. The Homeric poems allow glimpses of the idea that divine parentage or some other relationship with the gods might enable one to escape death and become immortal. This privilege, severely restricted in Homer, is as we have seen more widespread in other early epic poems. But if all men in general, rather than merely certain heroes, could be seen as having some element of divinity in their origins and hence in their nature, it followed that there must be a part of oneself which shared the divine characteristic of immortality. Clearly this must be the most important part, and consequently it was essential to recognize its existence, to define (if possible) its nature, and to ensure that its interests were made paramount in one's life and not impeded by other aspects of one's personality. From this one arrives quite naturally at Socrates' insistence on the need to care for one's soul, and (by a further stage of analysis) at the Platonic and Aristotelian emphasis on the rational or intellectual element of the personality as the divine part which has been designed to dominate the rest.

Thus one can see how the philosophers, who criticized so severely the ideas of their poetic forerunners, nevertheless tried to

assimilate and re-interpret these ideas in the light of their own assumptions. This process can be observed at work in other areas of Greek religion, as for example in the case of beliefs about the nature of the gods themselves. This perhaps explains why in the field of ideas about life after death, as elsewhere, earlier and more primitive notions survived alongside the more advanced and sophisticated views of the philosophers, and continued to exercise a powerful influence over men's minds throughout the whole course of later antiquity.

4
Greek temples: Why and where?

J. N. COLDSTREAM

This chapter is concerned chiefly with the purpose and function of the temple in the ancient Greek world. First we must enquire how, when, and why the Greek temple, as a free-standing architectural form, came into being. Then we must examine several temples and sanctuaries in various parts of the Greek world, considering not merely their architecture, but their surroundings too, and the widely different cults which they served: cults carried out in the midst of a *polis*, in honour of the city's patron deity and protector; cults practised far away from any city, in a wild mountainous setting; cults connected with the great panhellenic sanctuaries, independent of any one *polis*, and somehow transcending the differences and rivalries between cities; secret cults associated with mystery religions, to which none save initiates had access; cults connected with a god of healing and medicine; and finally, oracular cults, including the greatest oracular shrine of all which claimed to be the centre of the earth. In each case we shall see how the character of the architecture was to some extent dictated by the needs of the cult.

In the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations of the Aegean Bronze Age, the temple as an independent building had been virtually unknown. Indeed, there was then no need for such buildings. Absolute monarchy was the universal rule; the monarch was also high priest, and the 'temples' which served the official cults would be small rooms within his palace, often tucked away in remote corners. In the town beyond the palace walls, his subjects would likewise set aside rooms within their houses for private worship. And far away from the towns, other cults were practised

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on the acropolis of Emporio on the neighbouring island of Chios. Like the Samian temple, it is a long hall with an internal row of columns down the middle, approached by a porch with columns across the front; its width is approximately that of the temple, but its length is only sixty feet. So the grandest of house-plans could be elongated in the service of the gods; but even for the gods it was impossible at this early stage to make the building any wider, since the length of timbers for a simple pitched roof limited the width to an absolute maximum of about twenty-five feet.

Here, then, we have one of the very first public buildings in Greece, in the service of the patron deity. Its erection implies careful planning by the sovereign *polis* of Samos, situated one hour's walk away along the island's shore. The temple must have been a great source of pride to the inhabitants; and yet the centre of Hera's cult still remained outside, round the open-air altar built for burnt sacrifices. And this altar is sited above earlier altars which had existed long before there was any thought of building a temple.

In the early seventh century this temple was destroyed by a river flood, and its successor [2b] shows several obvious improvements. The shape is less absurdly narrow, and the architect now felt happy about spanning the width without the clumsy internal supports; instead he used half-columns attached to the side walls. Perhaps these walls were more solid; at all events, they now rested on a fine stone footing of dressed rectangular blocks. The whole appearance is becoming more monumental. And there is also more thought now for the temple's surroundings. The seventh-century sanctuary was approached through a monumental entrance, or *propylon*. Beyond the altar was a large open space where crowds could gather at festivals. This area lay between the temple and a long open colonnade, or *stoa* – one of the earliest examples known. Its form was very simple: a back wall, and a roof resting on two rows of wooden posts. Here, no doubt, were the booths where visitors could obtain suitable offerings to Hera; here, too, they would find shelter from hot sun and rain.

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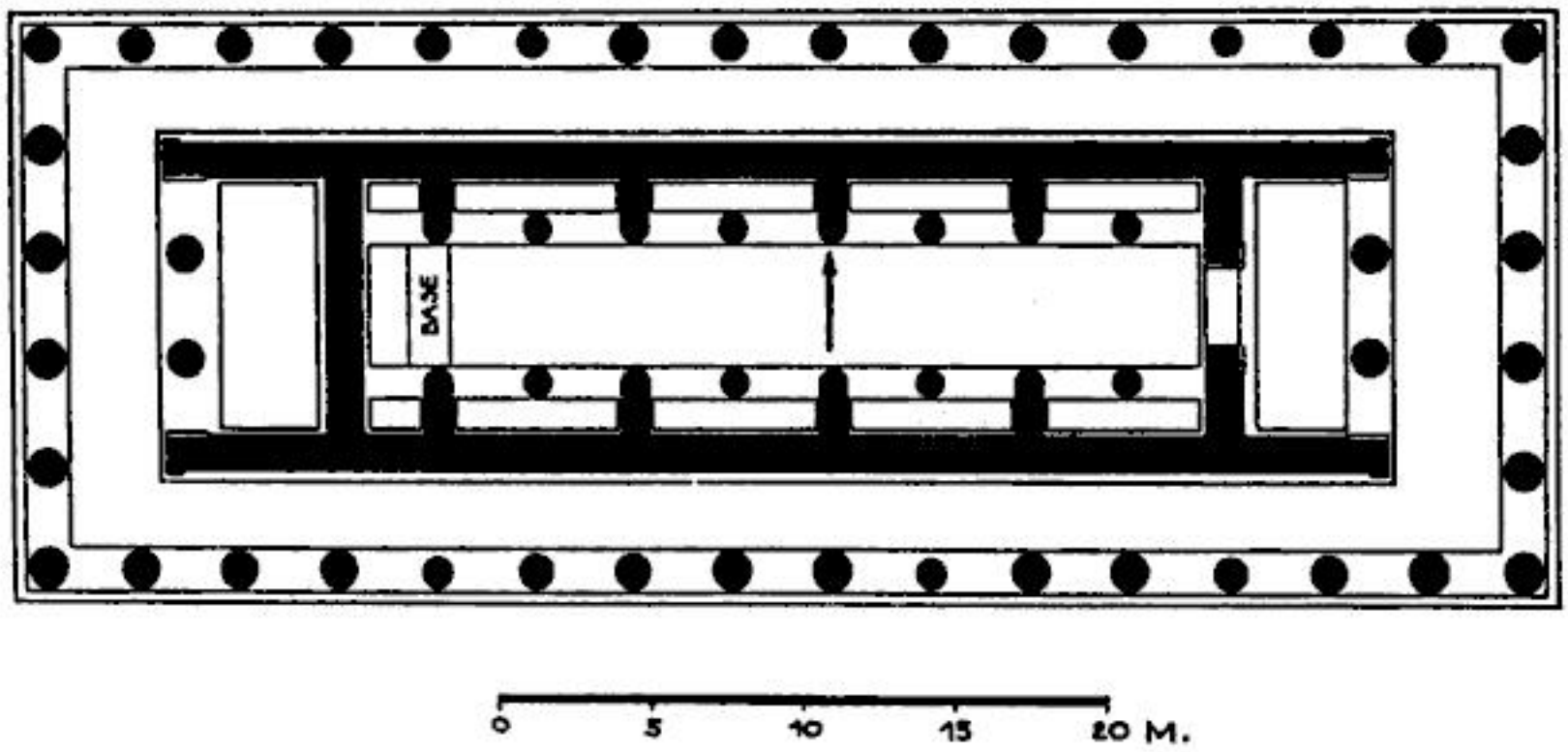
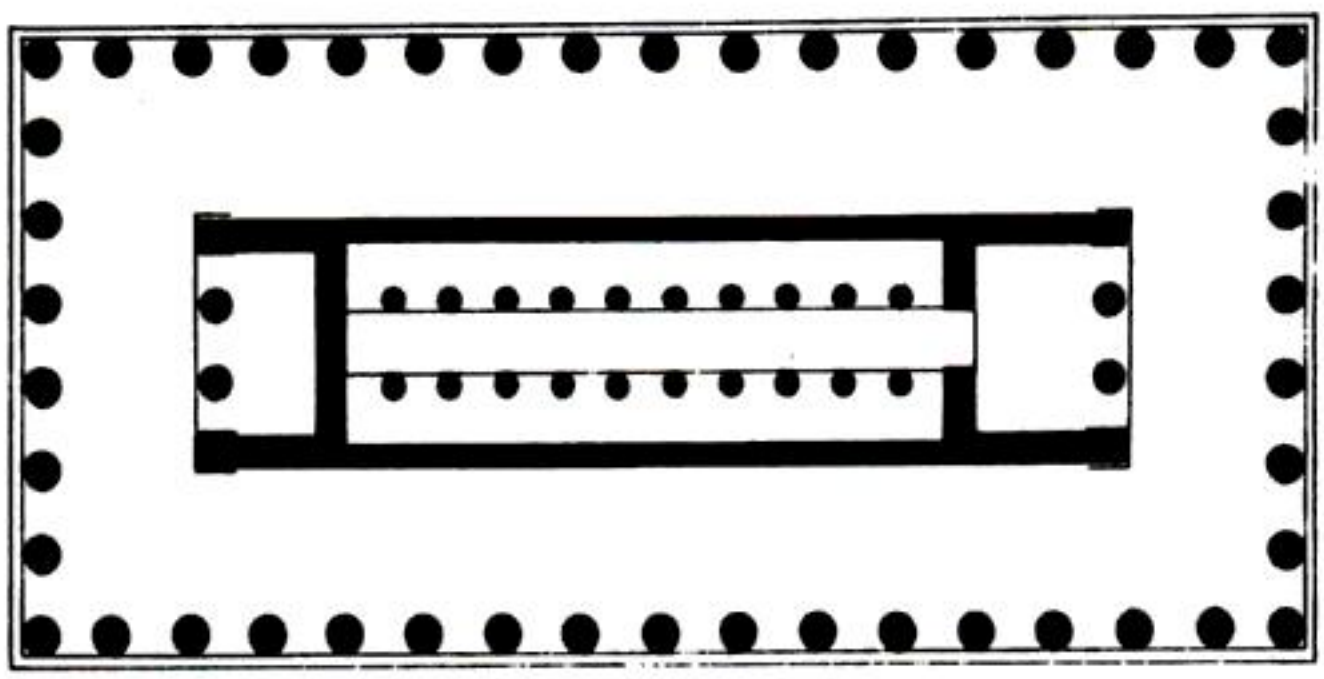


3 Olympia, temple of Hera, plan.

by a pair of vast lion-panthers. In this building all the essential elements of the Doric order are there; the Greek temple has already reached a monumental maturity at a time when secular architecture was still in its infancy.

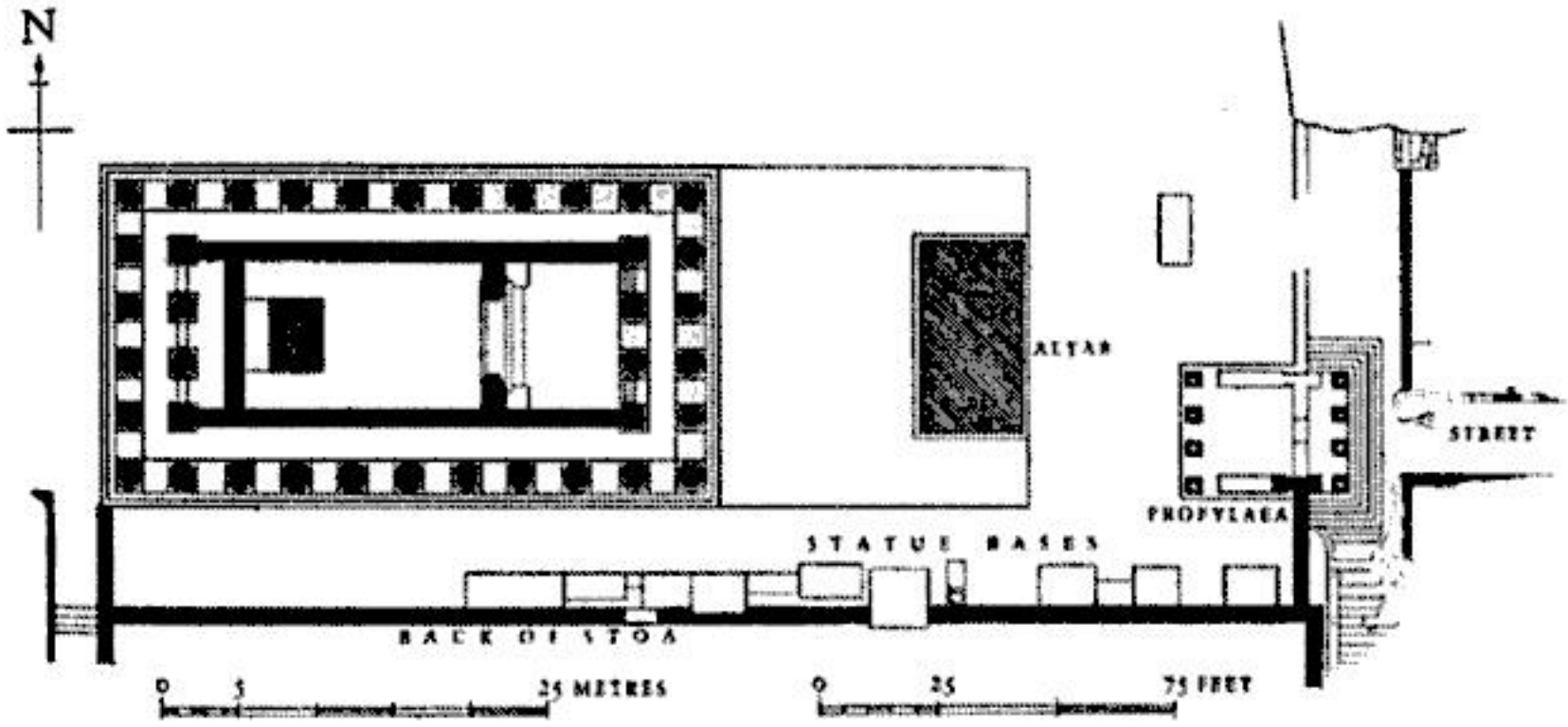
So much, then, for the origins. The next three centuries saw no drastic changes in the ground plan of a Greek temple: a *cella* approached through a porch (*pronaos*), often with a second porch at the back (*opisthodomos*), and surrounded by a peristyle of free-standing columns. There were subtle adjustments in proportions, and interior arrangements might vary considerably according to the needs of the local cult; in the Sicilian colonies the basic plan might be enlarged to a colossal size, while in the eastern Aegean world the Ionic order was usually preferred to Doric. But in general there was remarkably little development in temple design, as can be seen if we compare a late fourth-century plan [5] with those already considered. Let us turn our attention, then, to the setting of these temples, and to the different cults which they served.

The temple just now mentioned is that of Athena Polias at Priene, the Ionic city in Asia Minor, overlooking the river Maeander. The Priene we know is a new foundation of *c.* 350 B.C., replacing an older Priene (as yet undiscovered by archaeologists) which had



4 Kerkyra (Corfu), temple of Artemis, plan and restored elevation.

been deserted after the silting-up of its harbour by the sluggish river. The new city was laid out on a regular grid-plan, in accordance with the method of town-planning established by Hippodamus of Miletus. High up on the slope and not far below the great rocky acropolis, a prominent platform was set aside for



5 Priene, temple of Athena Polias, plan.

the temple and sanctuary of Athena in her attribute of Polias, the protector of the *polis*. Much admired in antiquity, her temple was designed by Pythios who was also the architect of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. Indeed Mausolus himself, while he ruled over these parts as satrap, may have had much to do with the foundation of the new Priene; there was plenty of room for a Carian garrison on the acropolis. But during its most flourishing period in the third century Priene was a completely independent *polis* with its own democratic constitution. Almost the whole city has been excavated, and a model reconstruction [6] shows the temple of Athena in its urban context. The grid-plan consisted mainly of private houses in blocks between streets, usually four to a block; two whole blocks have been allotted to the sanctuary. On the terrace immediately below lies the open space of the agora, centre of public life, overlooked by the *bouleutērion* where the elected council met; above, to the right, the full assembly of citizens would have gathered in the remarkably well preserved little theatre. There is room in this town for approximately five thousand citizens, a figure close to that suggested by Plato (*Laws* 737e) for his ideal state. Priene is a remarkably pleasant site to visit, partly because everything is kept within the human scale; no building is oppressively large. The temple, with the other public buildings, takes its place amidst the regular plan of court-yard houses.

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For a complete contrast to this urban setting let us examine the temple of Zeus at Olympia, built in the 460s B.C. through the initiative of the neighbouring city of Elis. Olympia, one of the great panhellenic sanctuaries of the Greek world, was the scene of the Games held every four years from 776 B.C. almost continuously until late antiquity. Olympia was never a *polis*; but some administrative buildings were made necessary by the sheer scale of the festival, which must have been one of the most powerful unifying forces in an otherwise deeply divided Greek world. The central part of the sanctuary is the Altis, the sacred grove, dominated by the old temple of Hera which we have already mentioned, and the early classical temple of Zeus, one of the largest on the Greek mainland. Its surviving ruins will not bear any reconstruction *in situ*; the original stucco coating of the columns has nearly all worn off, leaving the shelly and crumbly limestone exposed. Even so, the vast Doric capitals lying on the ground, six feet across, are sufficiently impressive. A reconstructed elevation [7] shows the position of the celebrated sculptures: the pediments, the east end portraying the fatal chariot race between Pelops and King Oenomaos over which Zeus himself presides as arbiter; at the west end, the battle between Lapiths and Centaurs in the presence of Apollo; inside, above the entrances to the porches, are the metopes showing the labours of Heracles, six at each end. The plan [8] is completely orthodox, but the chief interest here lies in the arrangements inside the *cella* to receive the cult statue. If we think back to the first primitive *Hekatompedon* of Samos over three centuries earlier, a *cella* one hundred feet long might seem rather prodigal for housing a crude wooden image in the form of a plank. At Olympia the case is very different: a much larger temple is barely able to accommodate a cult-statue which became one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. This is the colossal gold and ivory (chryselephantine) statute of the seated Zeus [9], which Pheidias was commissioned to design some thirty years after the temple was built. This colossal figure, over forty feet high, is now known to us only through imitations on coins and other small

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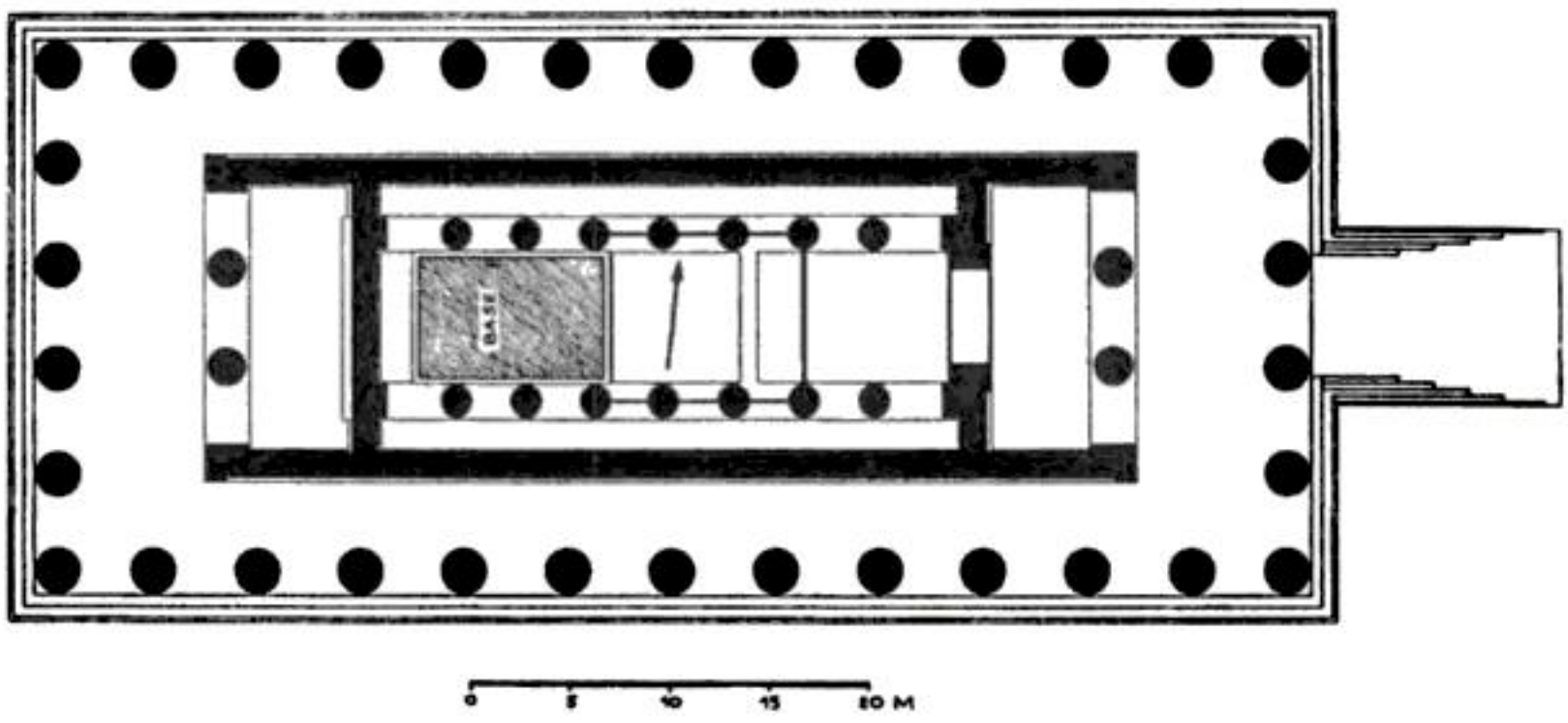
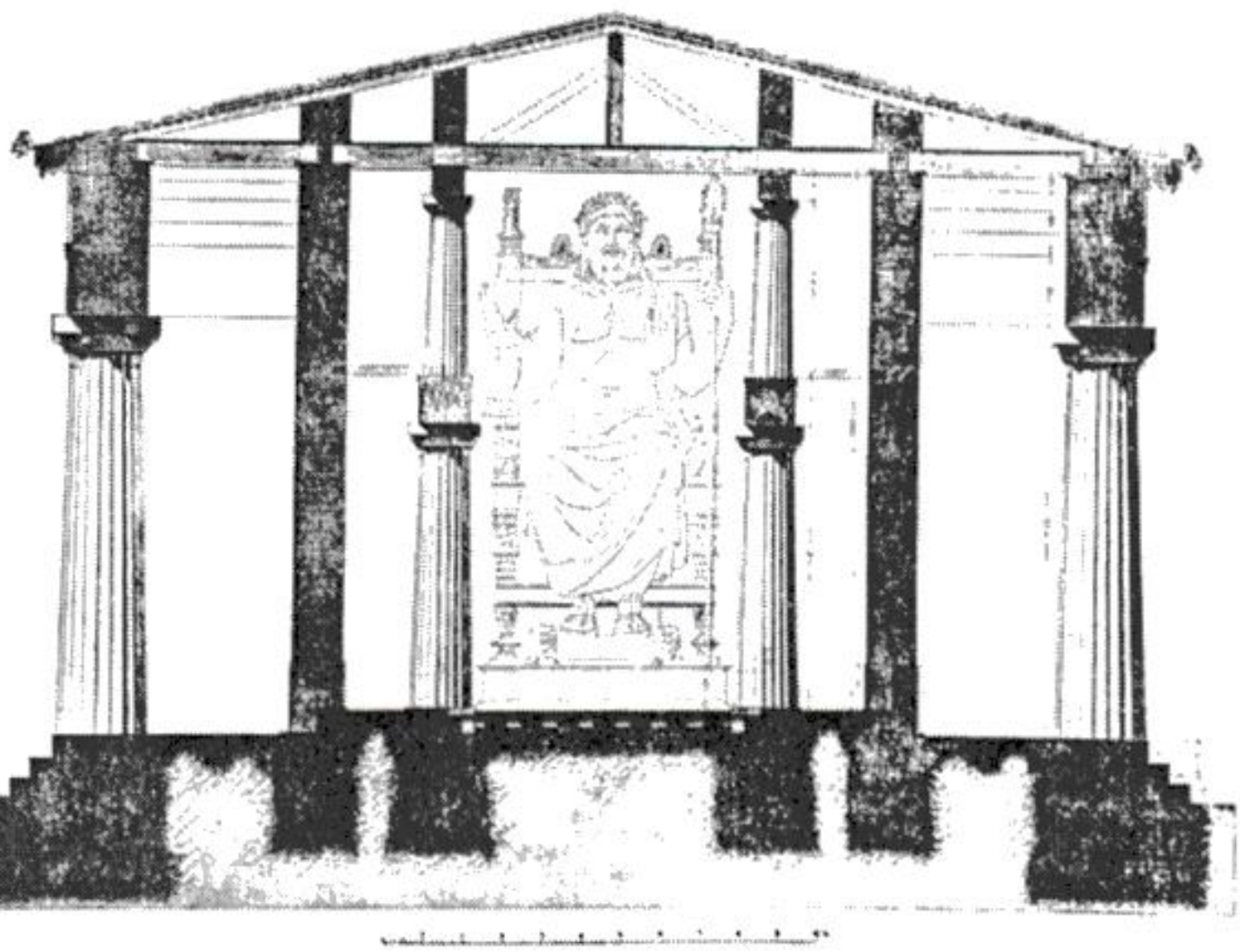


8 Olympia, temple of Zeus, plan.



9 Olympia, temple of Zeus, cross-section through *cella* showing position of cult-statue.

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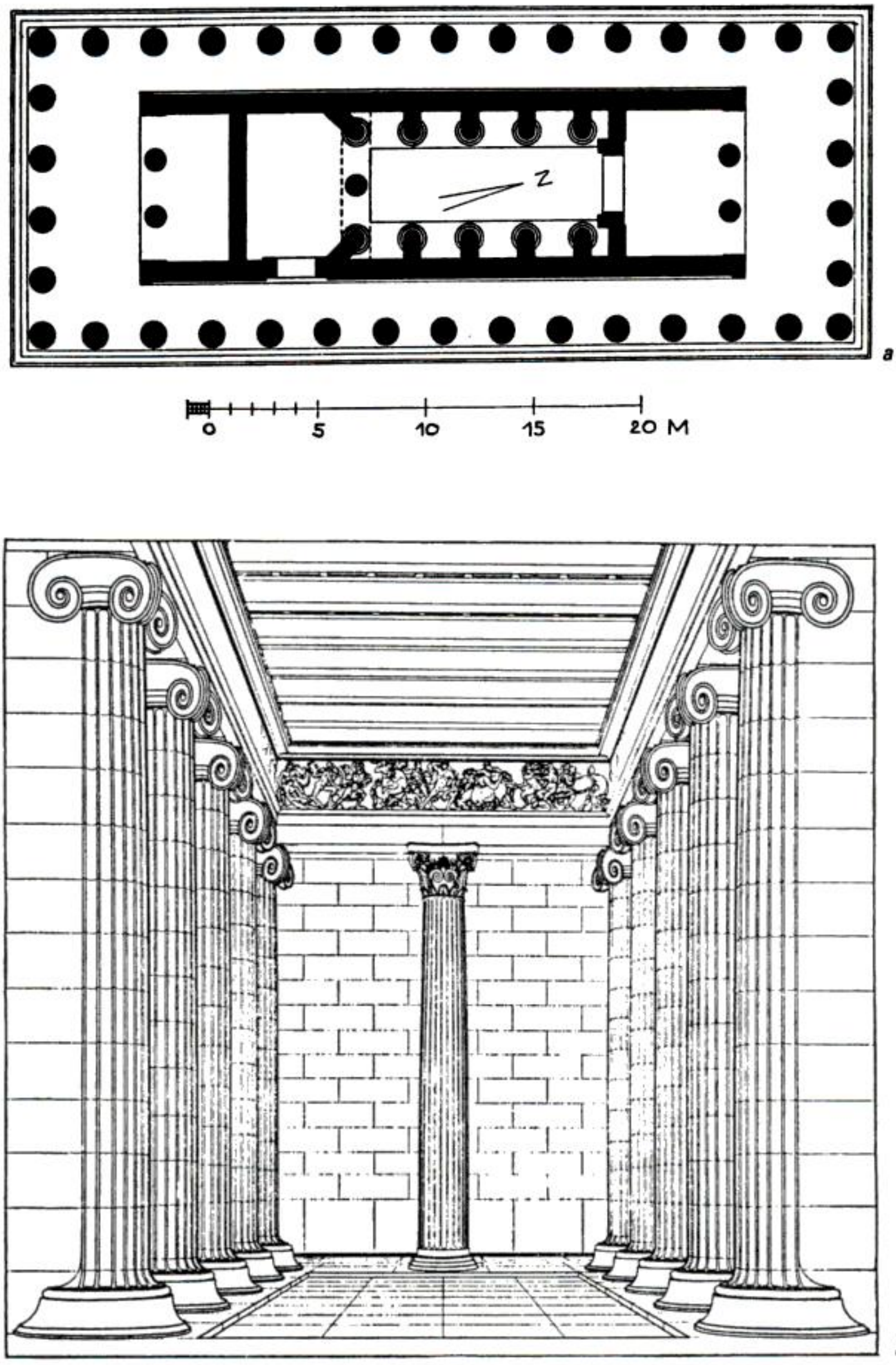

11 Bassae, temple of Apollo: (a) plan, (b) interior of *cella*, restored.

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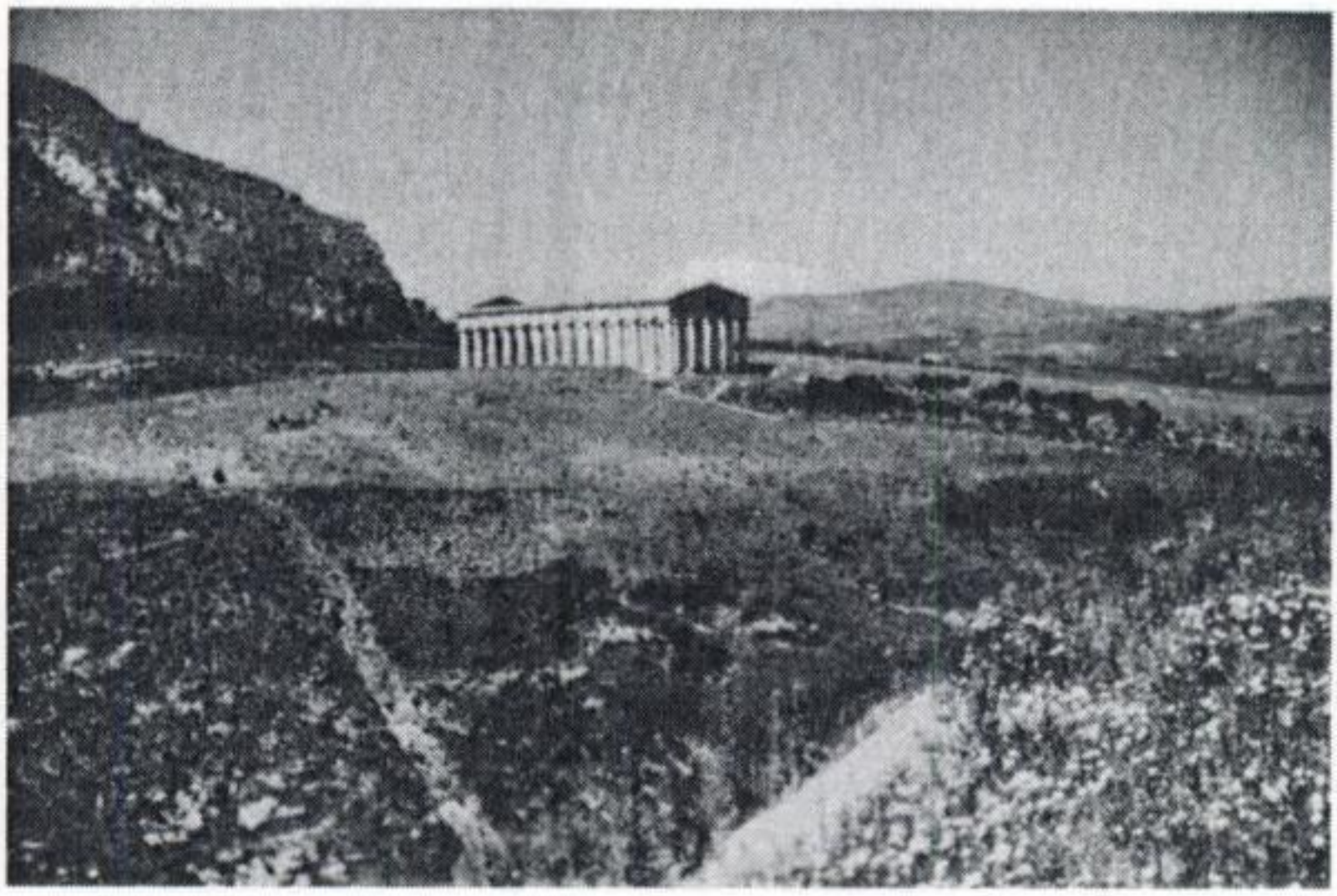
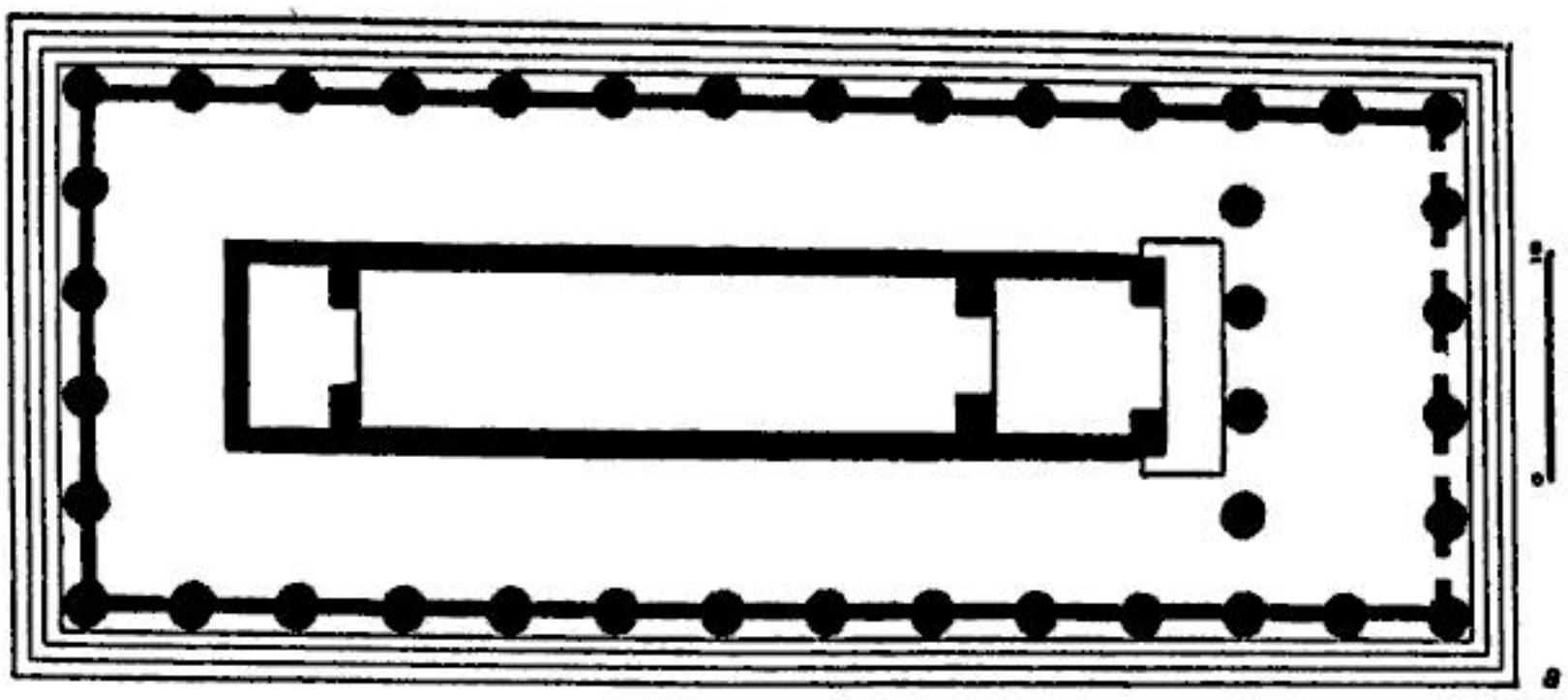


12 Segesta, the temple.

with consequences which were to prove disastrous for Athens. The fine-looking temple, possibly designed by an Athenian architect not long before these events, gives us a similar impression of the Elymian character; for it was never finished. It is an empty shell. The *peripteron* was erected, but the funds appear to have run out before the *cella* could be constructed. The columns of the *peripteron* had been smoothed, ready for fluting; but no fluting had been achieved. Since Sicily possesses no fine marble, these columns of shelly limestone would eventually have received a coating of white stucco. Furthermore, on the stepped foundations of the stylobate, one can still see the bosses by which the blocks had been lifted into position; on a finished temple these bosses would have been removed and the blocks properly dressed. Although we know nothing of the cult for which the temple was intended, it gives us some impressive evidence of the spread of Hellenism through religious architecture; it also reveals one way of building a Greek temple – though not necessarily the only way: that is, from the outside inwards.

Among the ruins of neighbouring Selinus, the remains of eight

Doric temples attest the astonishing prosperity of the city in archaic and classical times. One of them, Temple G, is one of the largest known anywhere in the Greek world, 361 feet long, 164 feet wide, and with columns eleven feet in diameter. This grandiose building, however, was still incomplete when the city was captured and destroyed by the Carthaginians in 409 B.C. Here we shall single out for attention the archaic Temple F for its unique plan [13]. Instead of forming the usual open colonnade, the external columns are joined to one another by stone barriers, leaving narrow doors for admission only on the short eastern side. This unusual enclosing of the *peripteron* implies some kind of mystery religion, to which not everyone had access. And yet there was



13 Selinus, Temple F, plan and restored elevation.

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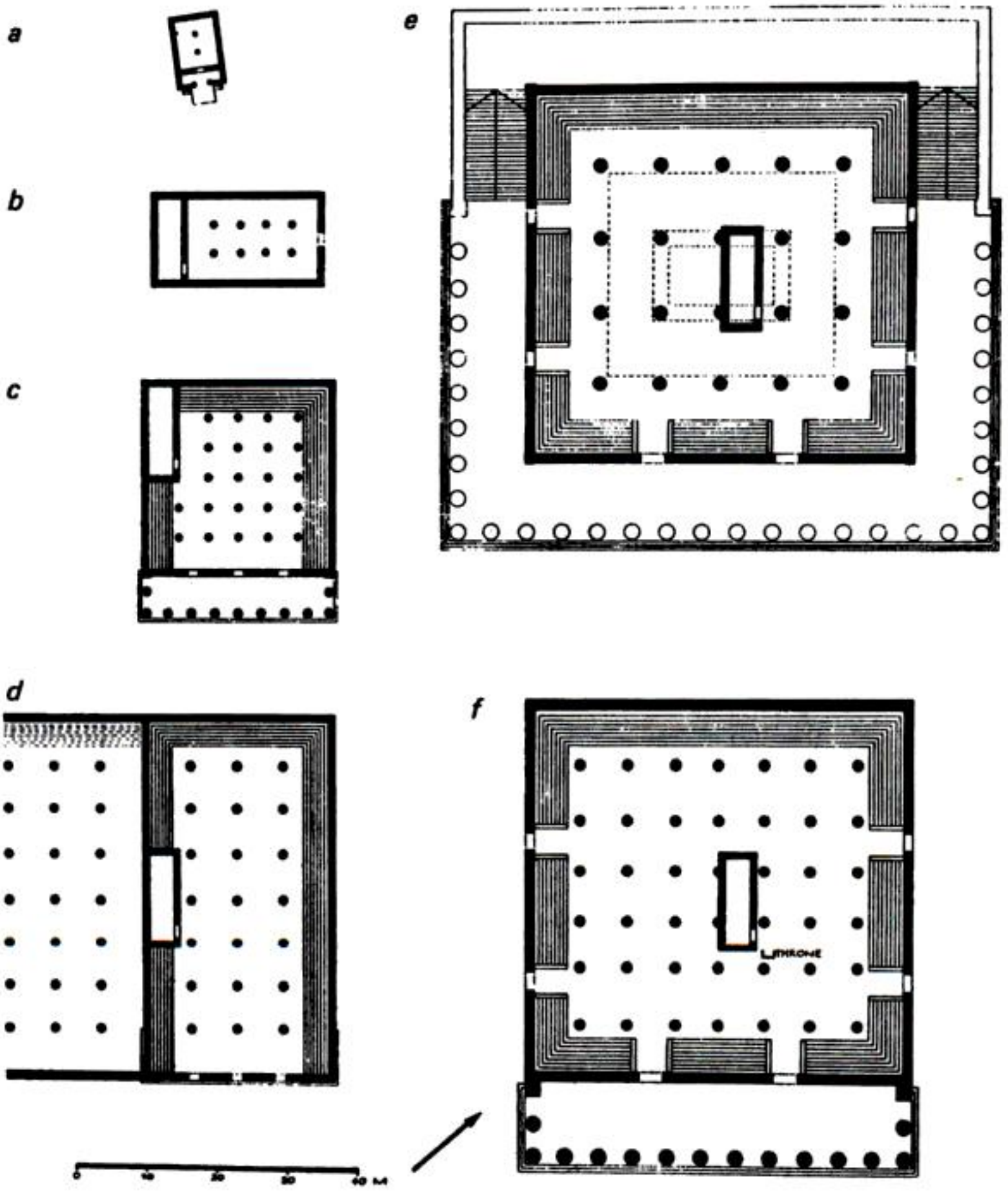
decessor, until by the Periclean age this Hall of the Mysteries occupied the whole terrace, including some steps cut into the rock at the back. This vast temple, another building designed by Iktinos, was supported on a forest of columns, of which the bases can still be seen. In this form, with minor alterations in Roman times, the *Telestērion* stood for eight hundred more years, the place where the secret mystery-rites were celebrated every year.

For the myth which explains the cult, our fullest source is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The poet tells us how, after the loss of her daughter Persephone to Hades, Demeter came to Eleusis as a *mater dolorosa*, disguised as an old woman from Crete. On a stone near the entrance to her later sanctuary, she sat down and wept; that stone became known as the *Agelastos Petra*, the 'mirthless rock'. Then the king and queen of Eleusis took pity on her, and engaged her as a nurse for their young son, the prince Demophon. While nursing the child Demeter planned one night to make him immortal by baptizing him with fire; but the queen caught her in the act and was deeply distressed. Thereupon the goddess revealed herself in her full beauty, and with terrible anger denounced the king and queen for rejecting the gift of eternal life for their son, and commanded them to atone by building her a fair temple and altar. This was done; but Demeter still remained in mourning, and caused a dreadful famine all over the earth for a whole year. At last Zeus intervened, and ordered his brother Hades to release Persephone from the underworld. Demeter now became reconciled to the Eleusinians, and taught them – and them only – the secret mystery-rites of her cult. So there grew up at Eleusis the cult which answers one of the fundamental needs of humankind: the need for food, and hence the need for the rebirth of the corn crops each year. The corn, like Persephone, must stay below ground all through the winter months; but when it grows up in spring, it becomes an earnest of immortal life for mankind, provided that they observe the secret Mysteries. 'Happy is he among men on earth who has seen these Mysteries', says the poet of the *Hymn*; 'but he who is uninitiate and has no part in them never

experiences such good things when he is dead, down in darkness and gloom' (480–2).

As we have seen, the sanctuary had an extraordinarily long life. On the *Telestērion* site nine successive temples were erected [15]. The original Mycenaean building went through two architectural stages, and is thought to have survived all through the Dark Age in a third and fourth stage with the addition of a curved terrace wall,



15 Eleusis, *Telestērion*, successive temples: (a) Mycenaean, (b) time of Solon, (c) time of Pisistratus, (d) time of Cimon, (e) plan of Iktinos, (f) fifth-fourth century B.C., repaired in second century A.D.

and then with a new enclosure. Then, in the time of Solon, a new temple was built, with a 'holy-of-holies' at the back known as the *Anaktoron* or 'Palace', sited approximately over the spot where the very first Mycenaean shrine had been. This *Anaktoron* was to remain sacrosanct for the next thousand years, as the very centre of the mystery-rites. Meanwhile the temple, the *Telestērion*, was rebuilt on a larger scale by the tyrant Pisistratus (who added the rock-cut steps), then by Cimon; then came Iktinos' large square building in the time of Pericles, which was remodelled in Roman times; but every successive *Telestērion* incorporated the Solonian *Anaktoron*, itself a temple within a temple; today it leaves its trace as a narrow rectangle within one avenue of internal columns.

This little chapel is thought to have housed the original primitive wooden image of Demeter; it was also the scene of the climax in the mystery-rites, which occupied nine days in September. The first four were devoted to various preparations in and around Athens: the initiates would bathe in the sea, purifying themselves and also the pigs which they would sacrifice to Demeter. On the fifth day they marched in procession to Eleusis, carrying with them the sacred wooden image of Iacchus, and pausing at the bridge of the river Kephisos to warn off evil spirits. On arrival at Eleusis they rested all through the sixth day, but during the night the Great Mysteries took place, culminating in the initiation ceremony. Of these rites we can know nothing for certain, because officially everything which took place inside the sanctuary on this occasion was a close secret, guarded on pain of death, and never revealed. On the seventh day the initiates rested once again; the eighth was devoted to libations and rites for the dead; on the ninth the procession returned to Athens.

Our only clue to the nature of the mystery-rites is that they took place in three stages: first there were the *drōmena*, things done; then the *legomena*, things said; and finally the *deiknumena*, things displayed. The *drōmena* might have been a sort of nocturnal pageant, re-enacting the sufferings of Demeter on the spots associated with the mythical story. Of the *legomena* we know nothing,

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Greek religion is a subject of absorbing interest, essential for the understanding of history and culture, but often puzzling and elusive. This collection of essays ranges over many aspects of Greek civil life, looking at the ways in which religion manifested itself in institutions, art and literature, and tracing the attitudes that lay behind the manifold cults and customs. It is not meant as an exhaustive introduction to the subject, but as a series of related approaches which will help students to draw the threads together, on lines suggested by Moses Finley in his Foreword to the book.

The titles of the essays are as follows: 'On making sense of Greek religion' by John Gould; 'Greek poetry and Greek religion' by P. E. Easterling; 'Early Greek views about life after death' by N. J. Richardson; 'Greek temples: Why and where?' by J. N. Coldstream; 'The Greek religious festivals' by Paul Cartledge; 'Delphi and divination' by Simon Price; 'Greek art and religion' by Martin Robertson; 'Religion and the new education: the challenge of the sophists' by J.V. Muir.

This book is written for students in the upper forms of schools and for undergraduates studying classics and classical civilization, but anyone wanting an introduction to ancient Greek religion will find it illuminating.

'*Greek Religion and Society* achieves the rare distinction of presenting modern scholarly views in an uncluttered and accessible form that should quickly earn it a place as an essential introduction for both sixth-formers and undergraduates. At the same time it issues a serious challenge to more seasoned students of Greek religion by establishing a conceptual basis for future research in the subject.'

The JACT Review

Cover illustration: bronze statuette of a female figure supporting an incense burner. From Delphi, second quarter of the fifth century B.C. Delphi Museum.
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