



Η ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ

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The Neokoroi* are a group of Hellenic pagans who feel called to a path of service and devotion to the gods. We support mysticism, hard polytheism, and tend to favor Reconstructionism as an approach to developing Hellenismos, while also recognizing the importance of personal experience and local cultus. We are especially dedicated to fostering communities, festivals, and public shrines, and providing guidance and information on religious matters – all to ensure the strength and longevity of the worship of the Greek gods.

He Epistole (a “message” or “letter”) is published four times a year. We offer articles, hymns, prayers, poetry, reviews, information, rituals, community notices, fiction, recipes, and anything else of interest to the Hellenic pagan community. We welcome feedback and submissions from guest writers.

He Epistole is a free publication and can be found in many locations nationwide. If you would like the newsletter delivered to you directly, subscriptions cost \$16 per year – contact us for more information. And please contact us if you would like to distribute copies in your area – in return you receive the issues in electronic format for free. Back issues can be downloaded in PDF form from the website for free.

To contact the editor, email: info@neokoroi.org – or visit the Neokoroi website: www.neokoroi.org
We have even more articles online, as well as information on the gods, photos, links and more!

Our next issue will be coming out in September 2006. The deadline for submissions is August 20th. Advertising space is also available.

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*The word *neokoros* is derived from the Greek words *naos* (temple) and *koreo* (to sweep) and originally meant “the one who swept the temple” or “the temple keeper”. It was a humble position, but an important one, for it was the neokoros’ responsibility to make sure that the temple was kept clean and free of any pollution, and also to tend to the daily service of the god in whose temple he or she served.

Of Oracles and Seers: Reviving the Mantic Arts with Hellenismos

by Aristotimos

Many cast lots, but few are seers. —Philochoros

Several issues ago in *He Epistole*, I wrote an article about divination and the casting of lots. I examined its history within ancient Greece and some modern applications within Greek polytheism. I promised that I would write another article about oracles and the mantic arts. At long last, here it is.

While there is some information about the ancient practice of divination in Greece, there is a mountain of writing and archeological data about oracles. What is it about this subject that has eclipsed almost every other subject in the minds of modern scholars? How can an institution that has been extinct for nearly fifteen centuries continue to inspire and captivate the imagination? Even if modern people don't believe in the gods or prophecy, they can't help but feel a shiver of something "other" when they hear the name Delphi.

From the outset of this article, I want to make an important distinction about what is and is not an oracle. I will not be dealing with the topic of omens. An omen is an event which captures the attention and portends a future event or outcome. Usually an omen has a clearly defined and well known meaning. For example, sneezing at an inauspicious moment may be a sign of bad luck. Omens often become common cultural folklore or popular superstition. A black cat crossing your path (in the U.S.) is considered bad luck. As Michael Wood points out:

"To indulge our appetite for signs and omens, as I shall suggest later, we need only superstition of the loosest and vaguest kind. For the consultation of oracles, we need a god or an agency we are willing to treat as a god, and we need an organized practice and inquiry."

Omens may come from the gods, but they fall into a similar category with synchronicity and psychic phenomena. I will be dealing strictly with oracles that are messages communicated from a deity, within a ritual format.

So what exactly is an oracle? Willow Moon, a Feri practitioner, defines them as "prophetic revelations from either a god or spirit, usually associated with a particular place." The word oracle originally meant *the place of sacred speech*, but its use also refers to the giver of the message, the holy place where the message is given or even the message itself. When one says that a priest/ess is an oracle one understands that they are acting as a channel or telephone for the god who speaks through them. Oracle is also related to the Latin word *orare* which means to supplicate or to pray. Clearly deity, shrine and priest are all involved with the process of oracles. A more skeptical approach might be as Mr. Wood suggests:

"If we are skeptical, we say that this is just what the god is: the sum of our missing knowledge. His oracles are precise mirrors of our needs, marking all the places where our available knowledge doesn't seem enough."

Oracles were delivered throughout the ancient world. Ammon spoke to petitioners in Egypt. Zeus answered questioners at Dodona through a sacred oak tree. Apollo's voice could be heard at Didyma and Delphi. Even Hades and Persephone had their own oracles for those seeking advice. So how was it accomplished? The most frustrating thing about our ancient sources is that they don't tell us. Historians, philosophers and writers of the time never felt the need to tell their audiences the specifics. Delphi, in particular, was so well known that it seemed redundant to write down what was common knowledge. This is much to our loss. We are given fragments, clues and hints, but nothing definite.

Now there is a difficult fork in the road. There are no exact rituals for us from the ancients. As modern practitioners of Hellenismos, there is a fifteen hundred year gap in the art of having the gods speak to us in an institutional manner. We are bereft of information and traditions. Worse yet, there are no permanent sanctuaries or temples for our gods. We are even without a clearly defined hierarchy or priesthood. What are modern Hellenes to do? Is it possible to revive the mantic arts in the modern day?

I do believe that it is possible to form a modern practice of oracular work within Hellenismos. Our ancient sources do give some guidelines. What we are lacking, we can glean from other faith traditions and modern institutions. Wicca, other reconstructionist religions and even indigenous religions such as Tibetan Buddhism, contain trance possession and oracular work.

Before we delve too deeply into creating a personal discipline, there is one other point I must make. There is a difference between seers and sibyls. Being a seer necessitates building a relationship with a particular deity and preparing one's self to be a clear channel for the god/dess to communicate through. Sibyls, in popular literature and tradition, play on an opposite set of principles. Sibyls are heralds. Michael Wood again:

"Scholars distinguish very carefully between pythias and sibyls. Pythias answered specific questions, were literally inspired by the god, and spoke in his name and person. When they said 'I' they meant 'he.' Sibyls offered generalized predictions usually of disaster, although provoked by the god; they spoke in their own name and person."

So let us begin in earnest. As I pointed out, the ancient oracles were always tied to a sacred site of some sort. This place (a temple, cave or grove) was attached to a particular god, sometimes through myth. We Hellenes don't have access to the ancient sacred sites. What is needed to develop our modern oracular practices is to discover or create our own sacred spaces. We may lack public temples to the gods, but we can set up private altars in our homes. We may even choose to set aside a room, corner or shelf devoted solely to oracular work. Another option is to seek out a sacred or numinous space in nature. This takes a bit more intuition.

While I do have an altar to Apollo in my home, I was fortunate enough to find a public park that was nymph-haunted. These spirits of the land and I eventually developed a repertoire and they assisted me with divination and oracular work on their lands. They were genius loci or spirit beings if a particular location. I could not communicate with them away from the site. So, if you want to practice seership out of doors I encourage you to put on your hiking boots and get looking. It is hard for me to put into words what you should be looking for. If a place's beauty stuns you and you find yourself returning again and again, that is a good signal. Just be aware that some of these places have an "otherness" that may feel uncomfortable. Bring offerings to the spirits of the place. Never assume, just because it is *your* favorite tree that the nymphs will work with you or even want you there. Respect the spirits and conduct yourself as if you were in someone's home. That is exactly where you are!

After the creation of sacred space for a god or spirit, the next step is to cultivate an understanding and relationship with them. Hellenismos has several practices to do this. We have the notion of *kharis*. We can offer libations, food offerings and hymns that are pleasing to our gods. We can also acknowledge them through prayer and invocation. This may not seem like much, but it is the foundation stone upon which the Greeks grew their temples and cultus to the gods. I would also encourage an open-ended time to hang out with the spirit in the sacred space you have created. Talk, out loud if you like, to the deity. Explain why you are here and what you would like to do. Make sure to take time to listen as well. Sometimes the god will pick you and let you know what to do.

As you develop your relationship with the god/dess, your intuition will grow. In my own experience, what started as a still, small voice in my mind grew into significant dreams, synchronicities and a sure knowledge of the gods. You may begin to notice subtle changes in yourself as you nurture this two-way communication. You might begin to be drawn to activities that the deity presides over. One friend told me she started buying floral print dresses after working with the Kore. She was disturbed because she always hated flower patterns! This is one sign that the spirits are working their influence upon you.

Now we have explored sacred space and working with a particular god. What remains is the most difficult part. Even the language we use to speak about trance and possession seems to be inadequate to understand the inner workings of spirit. How do we develop a trance state that allows the gods to speak through us? If you have worked to create holy space and a relationship with the deity, you have already come a long way down the path. This process needs to be approached with caution and care. No one should open themselves totally to an invading spiritual entity without experiences of a lesser degree. We start with a narrow channel that repetition and *kharis* open further. Remember what the myth of Semele warns us of: no one can handle the totality of what a god/dess is. Total possession by a god rarely happens, but it can.

The path to becoming a channel for the gods is found by using the tools of trance. What I mean by this is entering into an

altered state of consciousness where we lose awareness of ourselves to some degree. With practice, we lose more and more of ourselves and let the gods in, to a greater extent. Some ancient magicians called this process theurgy. A good start is to go back to Wicca's roots. Gerald Gardner wrote of eight paths to working magick in his *Book of Shadows* in 1953. We can use all of these paths to reach out to the gods. We can even use some of these in conjunction with one another. They are;

- Meditation and concentration
- Astral projection or journey work
- Rituals, charms, runes and chants
- Incense, drugs and wine
- Dancing and drumming
- Blood control and breath control (altering your circulatory system)
- Scourging (Focusing your attention on a physical sensation and moving past it)
- Sacred sex by yourself or with others

These practices coupled with prayer and invocation to the gods to enter into you and your work is all it really takes. Well, that and loads of trial and error. You will need to survey what paths to altered consciousness work best for you. I have used them all at one time or another to some success. Meditation and dancing do not work well together, but dancing and chanting do. You will have to explore all of this on your own. This is all I can really tell you about growing a path to the gods for oracular work. What I have given you is a bare bones account, a skeleton if you will. Through practice and perseverance you will flesh it out and breathe life into your mantic work.

One last bit of wisdom about consulting oracles. Two sage men gave some very good advice. Xenophon and Socrates have the last word here about what to do when asking answers of the gods:

- Do not approach the oracle with frivolous questions.
- Use oracles only for things you cannot know the answers of.
- Do not add or take away to the words the oracle speaks to you.
- Detached inquiry and interpretation is best.
- Be detached from the answer but obey it unswervingly.

Sources

The Road to Delphi: Scenes from the History of Oracles by Michael Wood

The Art of Divination by Willow Moon

Have you Been to Delphi?: Tales of the Ancient Oracle for Modern Minds by Roger Lipse

When Oracle Speak: Understanding the Signs and Symbols All Around Us by Diane Skafte

The Inspiration of Conflict

by Bronto Sproximo

Does Atlas tire of his burden?

All the weight of the world,
Literally on his shoulders.
What would happen,
And if he should stumble?

One of the Deathless Ones,
More far-seeing than I,
With pity for my current state,
Took my complacency
Replaced it with change.

Phobos and Deimos
Made sport of my dread.
Took amusement from my plight.
Saw joy in my defeat.
Filled my heart with despair.

I raised my eyes
To the blue sky.
Searching for answers
Asking for hope
Looking for courage.

Ares, their father
Heard my words
And understood.
He called his sons
To hear his words.

"Look to this man.
He who praises us
He who has given
His blood and sweat
Training and in battle."

"He offers his victories
As gifts to honor us.
He shows children my path,
He teaches adults self-reliance,
And delights your mother."

"We will send to him,
Three soaring vultures.
Let them circle over his head
If this man is a man
He will see and know."

Three great vultures
Flew low over my home,
Where the gods are libated.
Where my words praise them
And illuminate their path.

Seeing the great birds
Reminded me of
The gift of Fear
The reason for Panic
And the path of their father.

I shouldered my burden.
And took to my feet
Smiling at the skies
My hands raised
In thanksgiving.



Khthonic vs. Olympian Worship

by Gitana

In ancient Greece the people worshipped a variety of gods.

Some were associated with the sky and others with the earth. The differences between these two types of gods are most apparent when we look at cult practices associated with each type. It is the purpose of this article to highlight those differences.

First, let's discuss what these two classes of gods were. The "Olympic" deities were the ones associated with the sky or the heavens. The gods typically labeled as "Olympic" were of course the 12 gods of Mt. Olympus. Other gods that fall into this category are Dionysos, Helios, Selene, Asklepios, Nike, and others. The Khthonic gods are the ones linked with the Underworld, including Hades, Persephone, Hekate, Ploutos, etc. In this group one could also include the heroes and ancestors. Even though they aren't deities, their cult was the same as that for the Khthonoi.

Now, let's focus on the different practices in worship. The time of day is one obvious contrast. The Olympians were honored at large city-wide festivals during the daylight hours. The Khthonic deities received their worship mainly in the late evening hours, or even at night.

Rituals occurred in different places. The Olympian deities were worshipped in a temple, which was always raised off the ground, usually by three steps. The Khthonoi usually had their sanctuaries in caves, as such places were believed to be entrances to the Underworld. Sometimes they would also have a *thólos*, a round building, around an offering pit.

Altars were also different. For the Olympians, a *bomós* was used. This was the raised altar located just outside the temple. At the Khthonic sanctuaries, only a low altar was used, called an *eskhára*. Often, no altar was used. Instead, a pit in the earth, *bóthros*, was used so that offerings made direct contact with the earth.

The word for "sacrifice" for the Olympians and the Khthonoi was also not the same. When speaking of the Olympians, the word *thúein* was used. This word is related to those that refer to incense or fragrances. Since the Olympian gods were believed to live above us, the smoke from the sacrifice, or the smell of incense would rise up to them. In contrast, the word for a khthonic sacrifice was *enagízein*. This word is related to *enagés*, meaning "to be under a curse."¹ The associated root word, *ágos* (sometimes *hágos*), has this double meaning of both holy and cursed at the same time.

When sacrificing an animal to the gods, a white animal was often selected for the Olympians. White was, just as it is now, associated with purity. By contrast, black or dark colored animals were offered to the Khthonic deities. The animals for the Olympians were killed with their throats pointing upward, so that the blood would splatter upward, and onto the altar. For the Khthonoi, the throat pointed downward, to fall directly on the ground.

We can also generalize about the types of animals offered: oxen were common for the Olympians, and rams and pigs were the most common for the Khthonoi. There were, however, many exceptions to the rule. We find that particular gods had certain animals that were offered to them most often.

Parts of the sacrificial animal were placed into the fire for the Olympians; the rest of the animal was divided up for the priests and the participants. For the Khthonic deities, however, the entire animal was sometimes burned, and the people did not take a portion. This was not always the case, though.

Libations were also offered differently. For the Olympians a libation container was held in the hand and a little was poured out in a controlled manner. They would be poured directly on the ground, or a little into the altar fire. These were known as *spondai*. However, for the Khthonoi, the containers were placed on the ground, and then were tipped over, so that all the contents spilled quickly on the ground. These were called *khoai*. The subject of libations is a little puzzling. The liquid, for both the Olympians and the Khthonoi, ultimately ended up on the ground, where one would expect a khthonic offering to go, but not an Olympian. This practice even troubles one of the best known contemporary scholars on Greek religion. Walter Burkert writes, "Libation is a quite peculiar way of 'giving': you pour out wine on the soil, and there it stays: How are the gods in heaven to get any of it?"² When it is poured into the fire, we can understand that the Olympians would receive it. I suggest that the act of holding the container up high and pouring it out slowly allowed it has more contact with the air. Thus, exposing the liquid to the

air as much as possible was meant to make it available to the gods, who also lived up in the sky.

Prayer was another area where we see different practices. To pray to the Olympians, one would hold one or both hands up with palms facing upward. For the Khthonic ones, hands are lowered, palms facing downward, or hands would be placed directly on the ground. However, in the cases where a cult statue was present, prayers would often be directed toward the statue, no matter if it were of an Olympian or Khthonic deity.

Of course, whenever one tries to give a set of "rules" about Greek religion, another can find plenty of exceptions to those rules. Some of those exceptions are quite fascinating, I think. Some of the Olympian deities had khthonic aspects. Zeus Meilikhios and Hermes Khthonios are two that come to mind right away. And how should we characterize Kore, as Olympian or Khthonic?

We should also note that Khthonoi were sometimes honored together with Olympians in some sanctuaries. Also, some Olympian temples had an adjoining altar for khthonic offerings. So, even though on paper it sounds as though the two groups of deities never crossed paths, in practice things were not quite so black and white. However, we are just speaking of generalities here, and in that sense, the differences are clear.

For more information on this discussion, please see W.K.C. Guthrie's *The Greeks and Their Gods*, chapter 9, section 1, and Walter Burkert's *Greek Religion*, chapter 4, section 3.

Notes

ⁱ Khthonic deities were often called upon to aid in curses, especially in those known as *defixiones* or curse tablets.

² Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982, p. 41

New Neokoroi Mantis

The term *mantis* (pl. *mantikoi*) covers all types of diviners and oracles in ancient Greece. People who, through divinatory methods or direct inspiration, ascertain the words or will of the gods and transmit them to other people. Neokoroi is now providing official mantikoi for the benefit of the community - both our group and the larger Hellenic polytheist population. Here is the profile for the newest Neokoroi Mantis:

Name: Aristotimos

Location: Bellingham, WA

Email address: precilla81@hotmail.com

Website: www.angelfire.com/oz/aristotimos

Types of divination: Tarot, Bibliomancy, Homeric and Limyran Oracles, pendulum, trance possession and oracular possession as well as scrying and prophetic dreaming.

I have been reading Tarot for the past nine years and performing bibliomancy for thirteen years. I began my work with trance possession, shamanic journeying and oracular trance in 1999. As part of a devotion to Apollo, Hermes and Antinous, I spent one day every week for a year and a half giving tarot readings on a donation basis in several public venues (2004-2005). I currently act as the oracle for the Ecclesia Antinoi, which involves trance possession of the Roman god Antinous for oracular purposes.

Syncretism and Eclecticism in Hellenismos

by Sannion

*I*t seems like syncretism is the new black. Everywhere you look someone is talking about hyphenating their faith. You've got people who are interested in Greco-Egyptian, Greco-Roman and even Greco-Celtic fusions, all of which have a solid historical basis behind them. However there are also people who are interested in fusing their Hellenism with doses of Taoist philosophy, Lakota practices, and Hindu deities - to say nothing of those groups and individuals who are eyeing the monotheistic religions for material to harvest.

This represents a profound - and at times amusing - shift from the way things were just five to seven years ago. Back when I first joined the lists - around '99-'00 - if you even suggested that Zeus and Jupiter were the same you'd be subjected to scathing attacks from all corners. And if you so much as posted a non-Greek text, for instance to highlight the similarities between Buddhist and Stoic thought, why you were as good as labeled a Wiccan in many people's eyes. And now, some of the one-time staunchest defenders of traditionalist Hellenismos are in the forefront of the syncretic wave. What gives?

Well, I think there could be a couple reasons for this monumental shift.

One important factor was the migration of some of the noisier hardliners. Some left Hellenismos altogether, or at least the Hellenic polytheist lists, or started their own lists with like-minded individuals so that they wouldn't have to be constantly subjected to the irritant of the 'fluffy epidemic' as they often termed the views of their ideological foes. Others simply grew up. In the beginning, we were still sorting things out, defining ourselves by the things that we weren't, as opposed to articulating what we are. Now we've been around for a while, and have a stronger sense of ourselves and so we no longer need to be quite so vehement in our definitions. On the personal level, many found less bellicose ways to communicate their opinions, and started focusing more on their own thing, what they did and believed, as opposed to policing the thoughts of others. And a lot of us began researching more of what the ancients actually said about their religion, as opposed to getting our information second-hand through academics with agendas to push, and we discovered that the sort of exclusivism and 'purity' of thought and action which everyone was so concerned with in those first days is almost entirely absent among the ancients. For instance, Herodotos and Diodoros frequently identify the gods of foreign people with their own. Bendis, Kybele, Sabazius and Isis were granted official, state-rites at Athens at a relatively early date - and many of the Olympians originally came from lands outside of Hellas: Apollon from Asia, Ares from Thrake, Aphrodite from the Near East, and Dionysos from any of a dozen different places depending on which theory you accept. Additionally, Alexander's conquests brought Hellenic culture, language, and religion to every part of the known world at the time, and the Greek successor kingdoms that followed in his wake were established as far apart as India, Afghanistan, Syria, Babylon, Egypt and the bulk of Asia Minor. Considering this, one must either accept syncretism as a natural part of Hellenismos, a

response to the collision of cultures and ideas in a pluralistic world - or else place an end-cap at the fourth century BCE - which cuts off a great deal of beautiful art and poetry, and pretty much the whole development of Greek philosophy. Few individuals, however purist their inclinations, are willing to do that.

Another factor which contributed to this shift in our community was the gradual realization that there is a difference between syncretism and eclecticism. (Okay, obviously everyone hasn't realized this, or I wouldn't be writing this article, now would I? But there are certainly a lot more today who grasp this than there were in '99!) I am perhaps one of the most syncretic individuals in our community, with my fusion of Greek and Egyptian religion under the aegis of recreating the *polis* religion of Alexandria and the research I've done tracing the currents of Dionysos' worship that ran through Asia Minor, Egypt, India, and even parts of the Near East such as Syria and Palestine. But I don't think there's anyone around (even among the many enemies I've collected over the years) who would call me eclectic. So what's the difference?

Syncretism is derived from a Greek word that originally had political connotations: *sugkretizo* which meant a confederation of different Cretan communities which had combined in opposition to a common enemy. There are two important elements which distinguish syncretism from eclecticism: the simultaneous fusion and distinction of the different elements combined. This may seem contradictory, but hear me out.

Syncretism is the blending of two distinct elements, in my case Greek and Egyptian elements. This is not done haphazardly or carelessly. Great thought is put into it and the individual must be familiar with these concepts, what they actually mean, how they work, what they are complimentary with and what they are opposed to. He does not assume that all things are interchangeable, that the ancients all basically believed the same things. He carefully distinguishes a Greek idea from an Egyptian and tries to understand what that idea meant in the cultural, religious, and political climate in which it came into being. Those ideas which are harmonious he blends, those which are not he respects their differences, and does not diffuse or render them down into an easily-palatable mush, but finds a way to work with them as they are. The fusion, which is fundamental for syncretism, comes through experience, through living and working with these ideas and integrating them into a recognizable system, something that ceases to be entirely Greek or Egyptian, but is now Greco-Egyptian. And this he clearly and honestly labels as such, not claiming that his creation is something that it is not. Take the creation of a syncretic deity such as Serapis. Serapis has elements of the Egyptian gods Asar and Hapi, as well as the Greek Zeus, Haides, Asklepios, and Helios. Serapis is not simply Asar or Zeus under a different name - he has become something else entirely, which must be understood on his own terms, as his own being. And so must all successful syncretisms.

Now, eclecticism is a different creature altogether. Eclecticism in my experience (and I readily accept that a self-identified eclectic may have an altogether different experience and understanding of things) is characterized by its casual and haphazard approach. It is almost as if they are children running through a toy store, wowed by all the pretty, shiny things they see. Each one seems to him the best ever made, and he absolutely must have it - until he comes across the next new toy, and the old one is discarded and completely forgotten. The eclectic rarely spends the time necessary to understand the deeper meaning of things or how they work. At best he has only a casual and superficial knowledge of things - and at worst it is nothing but a fetishizing of names, as if by plastering a label on something you will imbue it with all of the supposed qualities of that name. When combining diverse elements there is rarely any thought put into how well these things might work together, or if in fact they possess completely antithetical natures. While this approach would be considered bad form in music or art - in religion, especially religion dealing with powerful entities who possess unique minds of their own, this can be downright dangerous. I can only wonder at the temerity of white, middle-

aged suburban housewives who go to weekend seminars on shamanism and never think that those Native spirits might still be holding a grudge for the things her ancestors did such as the Trail of Tears.

So, if elements within our community are moving towards a more syncretic approach, I see no problem with this - and not just because I'm a syncreticist myself! - provided it does not turn into eclecticism, which I heartily and vociferously condemn. Now I admit that from the outside it can be difficult to distinguish between the two. But time usually tells. Do they stick with it? Have they put in the necessary research? Do they understand what the concepts actually mean, and how culture shaped them? Is it something integrated into their lives or just the spiritual equivalent of a fashion statement? There's no hard and fast rule here, and we have to judge it on an individual basis. Which really is true of all things. There are plenty of poseurs who never venture outside of the mainstream Hellenic field - and frankly I'll take a sincere syncreticist over them any day!

To Apollon

by S. A. Victory

Come my Dear One and bring thy
silver lyre. Thy muses are all
awaiting thee. Let go now your
golden bow our hearts tire of
war and woe. Let us to beauty
now attend. Sing to us of the sun
and moon - Of gentle rains and
scented pines - Of roses and of
dahlias too. Remind us of poetry
and the blessed winds. Show
for us Poseidon's power, where
thy dolphins frolic in joy! Grant
that we may look and see, that
bird favored by thy Sire and from
him learn also to soar free. Bring
to us epiphanies of mind, spirit
and flesh. Oh, most Beloved!
Bring to our eyes enjoyment
and restraint. Keep us under
thy eye and yet let us run free.
Ever in thy love - ever in thy
heart - gracious Apollon let us
be who we are. And in thy
regard let us flourish!

Hêsykhia: Divine Silence

by Seirios

Apollon - while receiving much prestige over the ages as being the god of all things clear, bright, and pure - is really only half realized. While it is true that in the Hellenic world Apollon was the god of the sun, clarity and truth- this is looking at Him only from the surface. It is not looking deeper into His mysteries, His nature, nor His spirit.

It is a well-known fact that Apollon arrived to the Mediterranean from Anatolia. Historians and scholars will agree that His strongest cult centres were originally here; Miletos and Didyma serve as a testament to that fact. It was also in Anatolia that Apollon became associated with the sun, and where His cult of the iatromantoi began.

The iatromantoi were a priestly-sect of Apollon Oulios. They were healers, but also prophets. Originally the title given to Apollon meant "deadly", "destructive", "cruel". The Greeks however gave a new meaning to the title; they explained it as meaning "he who makes whole". As Peter Kingsley, author of *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, so eloquently puts it, "That, in a word, is Apollo- the destroyer who heals, the healer who destroys."

The iatromantoi, were priests of Apollon who knew His nature, and understood His spirit. As noted before, they were priests, healers, and prophets. What separated the iatromantoi from other priests of Apollon was in the way that they worshipped, and the responsibility they had to pass on the Apollon's mysteries.

The iatromantoi understood that a circle connected everything. The sun, the moon, the seasons and stars they all traveled in a circle. Even water does, from evaporation to condensation, which eventually comes back to the earth in the form of precipitation. They understood that Apollon was the same way; He too was a circle, a *kyklos*, He too was interconnected.

A poem was written by Parmenides that tells of how he was led to the underworld by the daughters of the sun- "...young women, girls, daughters of the Sun who had left the mansions of Night for the light..." This in its self seems very paradoxical, the daughters of the Sun living in the underworld. However, it is not. At the roots of mythology there is the belief that the Sun comes out of the underworld and returns every night- "The source of light is at home in the underworld."

That must be understood first before you are to understand the iatromantoi, and Apollon. Since Apollon is the god of the sun, He too is at home in the underworld. The story of Orpheus' descent into the underworld relates to this fact. Before he could enter the underworld, Orpheus first had to be taught the mysteries of Apollon; he had to learn the songs and incantations that would allow him to travel there. And at Hierapolis His temple was right above the cave leading to the underworld.

Caves were very generally associated with entrances into the underworld. The Greeks, Romans, and even Maya held the same belief. The iatromantoi knew of this and their healing practices were based on it. Another epithet of Apollon is *Phôleutêrios*, which means "Apollon who hides away in a lair". Apollon was not only the god of healing and the god of the sun; He was also the god of incubation, just as His son Asklepios after Him. A lair, in Greek, especially ones where animals lay down to hibernate, is known simply as a "*phôleos*". The iatromantoi were known as the lords of the lair, *pholarchos*.

An iatromantis was one who went to a *phôleos* to receive an oracle on how to heal a patient. They would lie in the cave for hours, possibly even days, in a state of complete stillness and silence- *hêsykhia*.

This divine silence, *hêsykhia*, was valued by many- including the Pythagoreans. In order to be initiated into Pythagoreanism one would have to go for months, maybe years, in state of silence. The point of this was to turn your beliefs upside down, to replace them with new ones and to find truths about yourself and the world. Many of the iatromantoi were also Pythagoreans.

Apollon is the god of oracles, shamanism, and visions as well as being a god of healing and the Sun. The iatromantoi consulted Him to find a cure to a sickness; they waited for a vision, an oracle. The Hellenic world was extremely influenced by the oracles of Apollon. His largest cult centres were oracular centres- Didyma, Miletos, and Delphi for example. However, it is important to remember that His oracles were also riddles.

Countless times people would find themselves in trouble when taking His oracles as being otherwise, as being perfectly clear and bright. In truth Apollon is a god of riddles and ambiguities. Everything is a riddle, which needs to be solved. Life itself is a riddle, this is something that the Pythagoreans, the iatromantoi, and early philosophers all realized and valued.

Apollon was indeed the god of light, reason, and clarity on the surface. Looking deeper though we see something much more profound. Apollon, the god of the sun, has always been associated with darkness and the night. Many ancient mystics wrote on how the mantic arts, incubation in particular, were best to be performed at night or during the earliest dawn.

To assume that Apollon has always been a simple matter of brightness and the Sun is to miss what the statements identifying them really say. Apollon, just like the circle, is much more complicated than what He appears to be on the surface. The circle of life ends and starts at the same point of death, the sun is circles into darkness, and clarity meets riddles. This is the truth of Apollon, the god of the silver bow.

Cold Service

by Diotima

"My lady! The beacon!"

Clytemnestra shook her head, trying to banish sleep, fear and languor in the one movement. Leaving Aegisthus snoring in the furs, she rose to her servant's urgent plea. What beacon? Why disturb her....?

And then the import of the call that roused her worked through a mind clouded with ten years of anger, hate and neglect. The beacon fires were lit. Not the fires of festival or even those of feasting – these fires – which now she could see from the arrow slits in the halls – these heralded...

No.

Surely not? Not after *ten years*? Surely he could not have survived?

Even as these thoughts went through her mind, she was climbing the long stairway to the tower. Her feet raked up phantasms of dust – no one felt the need to come up here other than the queen herself, and she had last been here...

Clytemnestra gripped the rail under her hand, forcing herself to remember that day so long ago...

Decked in her finery, as for a royal wedding, the queen ran up the stone stairs. She could not, would not behave as expected and hide in her rooms until the deed was done. She – and her daughter – had been betrayed by the one they had trusted above all... having prepared for a wedding, the daughter faced death... Sacrificed, to appease an angry goddess; the day that should have seen a mere sign of blood on the marriage sheets would now be marked by heart's blood on an altar.

Barred – for good reason, they knew her well – from the court of sacrifice, Clytemnestra climbed to the tower. She had not even been vouchsafed a final word to her daughter – merely told what would happen and that the girl had acceded to her father's request. No one, of course, had consulted the mother...

And now, even from here, she could only see the men – all men.. milling around. She was too late... too late....

When she again raised her head, when her tears and cries had worn themselves to silence, the ships were already at sea, the longed-for wind appearing as though the goddess had indeed been pleased by the spilling of innocent blood.

Slowly, without conscious thought, she began the mourning rituals... her wedding finery shredded under violent fingers, her cheeks bled at the cutting of her nails... her hair fell from its elaborate shape... where normally it would lie in heavy waves down to her knees, the wind picked it up and lashed it around her...

She watched, keening, until the ships were out of sight – but it was not the now-absent husband she mourned. It was for the small form, which they had not even moved from the altar...

It had seemed to the queen that her heart would break with every passing moment – that her life would end and she would join her daughter in death.

But of course it did not, and she did not. Day followed day, and life in the court and kingdom continued. Officially, of course, her son ruled, but he was still far more concerned about the toy soldiers that peopled his nursery – it was to the queen that courtiers brought their gifts, that other kingdoms brought bribes and complaints, and to whom the people looked to protect them, now that most of the fighting men had sailed with the king. And she, the wife of kings, the daughter of kings, knew her duty and her work. During the day, she stood in the halls in her husband's stead. During the night...

Those first nights; it was only rage, she knew now, that allowed her to survive them. Every waking moment was filled with a sense of loss... it was only as the loss was replaced with anger that it became possible to continue to live. Alone in her chambers at night, she would scream her anger at the absent king.... until silence was forced on her by exhaustion. Then her servants would enter, and prepare her for a few hours' sleep, before the round began again...

So long ago, it seemed now. She had long since ceased to rage in the night – unless at Aegisthus. Hatred for her husband had not so much abated as been pushed into the background, by ten years of ruling a kingdom, raising a son.... She knew she had, some years ago, stopped ever expecting him to return; Aegisthus' presence in her bed was sign enough of that.

Yet now it appeared that husband was returning. The beacon fires would only be lit if his sail had been identified.

Looking out over the wine-dark sea, she picked the sail out for herself, and judged that she had perhaps two hours before the force arrived in the harbour.

Time enough – and more than time.

The square was decked as for a feast – it is not every day that men gone ten years return home. Music sounded, hurriedly erected stands were full; pigs, lambs and the occasional ox roasted over open fires. The people poured in from the countryside as the word spread ever outward...

And in the palace, the queen prepared. Caskets of jewels, so long disused that they were nearly rusted shut, were opened and searched... Her hair, usually tied back without ornament, glittered with pearls and gems. Her chiton was of costly silk, woven with a golden border. Against the advice of her handmaids, who said she looked best in white, Clytemnestra chose a garment of dark red, and jewels to match. Looking at herself in the flattened bronze of the mirror, she knew she

looked her years, but was regal still. Gathering her servants behind her (all but Aegisthus, now banished to the outer buildings), she headed toward the palace doors.

She would not, of course, venture outside the palace to greet him – such would be unseemly even for a young woman, much less a queen of mature years. Rather, she stayed in the shadows of the wide, double doors, watching him approach.

“Ten years”, she thought. “They have not been kind to me, but they have been far worse to you, my husband”. *She watched as Agamemnon approached – the swagger was still there as always, but it was slower, and ...lopsided? Yes, he favoured his left over his right.*

And... behind him? “Ahhh... so there she is”. Gossip of course had run ahead of the main body of men returning – the queen already knew all about her husband’s new wife. “*Apparently she is a seer – we shall soon know her powers*”.

And then there was no time for thought – only for action. As the king – alone now – approached the doors, she signed to the servants on either side of her. A cascade of dark crimson fabric tumbled down the steps, toward the waiting king. Now... will he see the omen?

But of course – he does not, and after some small discussion about whether he is worthy to walk on such costly robes, he does so – saying it is to appease the queen, when all know it is a symbol of his triumphant return, buoyed on the blood of his enemies.

Or... so they think.

Only the new wife, Cassandra, stays outside. Clytemnestra notices her enough only to see the understanding in her gaze... “*Seer then she is... it will avail her nothing*”.

Robed in crimson, she suffers his embrace – and leads the way to their chambers. *Their* chambers, now – again – no longer merely hers.

“My lord – so long away from the comfort of home...” – she points to the tiled room, where all – *all* – was prepared. While he wanted her, his bed had hardly been empty these long years – but a bath – a proper, steaming bath....

Dropping his armour and clothing as he went, Agamemnon made his choice, as she had known – planned – he would.

When he had been scraped, oiled, and immersed, and some minutes settled in the scented water, when, indeed, the bath slave served no further purpose, she appeared at the door, waving the slave away. “I shall serve you, my lord husband”. Almost asleep in the water, he raised an acquiescent hand.

Standing behind him, above the sunken bath, she looks down at the body she had known so well. It was changed – older – new scars crossed old. Remembering her youth, tending some of those wounds, the care she had lavished on him, almost weakened her resolve. But in moving to wipe away a tear, her hand brushed a faint scar of her own – a faint line in her cheek, made that day in mourning....

Brave again, she loosed the pins which held her chiton at the shoulders – the crimson fabric fell softly about her feet.

The movement – the colour – caught his attention on the verge of sleep. He turned a lazy head toward her. She was kneeling at the edge of the bath. His eyes traveled over her body – older, yes, but still pleasing. He had been too long away...

Her hands on his shoulders settled him again in the perfumed water; her hair, falling free, surrounded him. Again on the verge of sleep he replayed a game from long ago, wrapping a thick tress of the jet black hair around his throat, as she had known – hoped – he would do. Lulled by the heat, the steam, indeed, by his own victory and return, he never saw the danger at his own hearth.

“My husband... do you remember?”

Still stroking her hair, he asked, “What should I remember, wife?”

“A beautiful day, my lord – a wedding... and a sacrifice?”

He knew, then, and would have called out for help, but found he could neither breathe, nor speak. The dark tress had become a noose in her hands – strengthened by the water, tightened by grief, and finally, jerked tight by the revenge of a mother wronged. Finally, the dagger she had concealed earlier that day, flashed – once – in imitation of the priest so long ago. The last thing Agamemnon heard was his daughter’s whispered name....

<http://www.neokoroi.org>

We invite you to come visit Neokoroi’s website. Learn about what we’ve been doing for the community, and our plans for the future. Read member profiles, see photos of us, our shrines, our festivals. Download back issues of this newsletter. Learn more about the gods and Hellenismos. And perhaps join the organization, get involved – you could help plan a future gathering, participate in monthly live discussions and rituals, apply for a religious position, build a public shrine, or contribute an article to the site or newsletter.

Lenaia (for Dionysos)

by Oenochoe

*I*n the swirling madness of the dance, your presence is visceral.

I close my eyes but do not see some vision of your face
No, you are in my sweat, and my breath carries your scent
as I shout your name, and fall heavily to the ground.

Here, you are a warm, thick skin around mine
The fur and musk of an animal, with a lover's tender touch.
You cradle me as the fury pours out, and I cry,
knowing this is not the end of it.

Again, the wine slips down my throat – you are inside me.
My legs want to collapse, but you push me forward
All the maddened people are sweeping past me, cups in hand.
I must follow, for your pleasure, I must join them.

All night, I give you all I have to give
My surrender palpable, and tasting of blood.
For all the pain that rends me like a sacrifice,
I love you – my destroyer, you softly brutal god.

Written after a powerful ritual maenadic experience with the Cult of Dionysos at last year's Pantheacon convention in San Jose, CA. Plans are in the works for another Dionysian festival at the 2007 event, and I encourage everyone who can to attend. In addition, there will be workshops and other rituals on Hellenic themes, along with the other pagan paths represented there.

