

FABLES, RIDDLES, AND MYSTERIES OF DELPHI

by

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What is it which swallows what is before it and what is behind it, as well as anyone who is watching?

The answer is: TIME. It devours the past and the future, as well as all observers.

What I have just asked you is a *riddle*. And we are today at Delphi, which is the most famous place in the world for riddles. Probably more of the world's riddles were written here than anywhere else on earth. For many of the answers given by the Delphic Oracle were given in the form of riddles, many of which became famous because they were so difficult. And a great many of these riddles have been recorded and preserved, so that we may still read them and try and solve them. In fact, many of the Delphic riddles had a profound influence upon Greek history and culture, as historians have pointed out for two and a half millennia.

At Delphi also there is an association with fables. For it was here that the most famous of all writers of fables was said to have died. - I refer to the story, which in fact was greatly distorted and is probably untrue, - that Aesop was thrown from the cliff Hyampeia here at Delphi as he was reciting his fable about 'The Eagle and the Scarab Beetle' (Fable 4 in *The Complete Fables* as recently published in English by myself and my wife Olivia.) Apart from the fact that a man would not necessarily recite a fable as he was being thrown from a cliff, - surely he would interrupt the tale to protest! - the story of Aesop being murdered by the Delphians appears to be as false as many of the other stories which clustered around the name of Aesop in popular tradition. For instance, it was said that Aesop knew King Croesus, but their dates do not match and he could not have done so. It is indeed highly likely that Aesop came to Delphi, and there may have been some political tension connected with his visit. But I doubt the truth of the story that the Delphians concealed a valuable object in his baggage and then seized him and pretended to discover it, thereby accusing him of stealing from Apollo, so that they

could execute him. This seems to me mere folklore. And if more of the writings of Aristotle had survived, we would probably know the full story of the real Aesop. Aristotle did say in surviving fragments of his lost *Constitution of Samos* that he had discovered that Aesop was not a Phrygian from what is now the Turkish coast, - which most people of his day believed, - but that in fact he came from the obscure town of Mesembria on the Black Sea coast of Thrace very far north of Byzantium (in what is today Bulgaria) and had been seized there either by pirates or in a military campaign and along with the other inhabitants sold into slavery. But Aesop was not a slave who laboured in the fields. He was a secretary and even practised as a lawyer on the island of Samos, where he lived much of his life. He probably came to Delphi on an important mission and even told some fables, but I believe we can ignore the probably false tale of his murder here.

It is very appropriate to discuss Aesop and his animal fables here today because animals were so important in the poetry of Angelos Sikelianos, the man who tried to revive the Olympic and Delphic Ideals. Sikelianos was brilliantly successful with the Olympics, and we are here today trying to re-live the Delphic Ideal of culture, but unfortunately culture has less world appeal than sport.

Animals are constantly mentioned by Sikelianos, especially horses. I presume he liked riding. Sometimes he mentions Pegasus, the horse with wings. And of course sometimes he was thinking of the suicide of Pericles Yannopoulos, who rode his horse into the sea near Eleusis. In Sikelianos's poem 'The Sacred Way', about the road from Athens to Eleusis, he gives a very touching description of two chained performing bears belonging to a gypsy whom he met on the road. The pathos of this poem reminds me of the fables of Aesop, for in both the animals are suffering and are representative of ourselves, for we too are so often chained, and each of us is one of those chained bears, but also each of us is a Prometheus in his own way. Sikelianos says near the end: 'And as I walked my heart asked in anguish: "Will the time, the moment ever come when the bear's soul and the gypsy's and my own ... will feast together?"' In Sikelianos, as in Aesop, we wonder if peace will ever come, if the animals will be freed, - if *we* will be freed. Sikelianos speaks of 'all the primaeval suffering for which, throughout the human centuries, the soul's tax has still not been paid. Because the soul has been and still is in hell.' But he sees hope and the poem ends by saying of the time when all shall be freed: 'a murmur spread through all the air above me, a murmur, and it seemed to say: "It will come."'

Here in Greece you have human suffering imprinted onto every inch of the soil. At every site struggles and deaths have taken place, and souls have cried out in despair. But also glory has been felt, transcendent experiences have elevated the human spirit, beautiful locations like this one at Delphi have inspired and given hope. You are drenched in tradition here, - the hands of all the dead are about your throats at every

moment, but also the wings of countless angels flutter about your heads and you can walk in the light and breathe the good fresh air - everywhere except in Athens, that is.

The oldest recorded Greek riddle is the famous riddle of the Sphinx of Thebes, which was solved by Oedipus: *What walks on four legs in the morning, on two in the afternoon, and on three in the evening?* The answer is: MAN. For man crawls on all fours as a baby in the morning of his life, walks on his two legs in the afternoon of his life, and in the evening of his life hobbles with a stick, so that he then could be said to have three legs.

Why were such riddles so important in ancient times? For one thing, they did not have television and they were not confronted with the nightly riddle of all that nonsense.

But seriously, it was Aristotle who made the first real study of the cultural importance of riddles in ancient Greek culture, and it can be said with certainty that riddles were one of the great secrets of the Greek genius, especially the ones which emanated from here, Delphi.

The Greeks in ancient times were very conservative about their traditions and their religion. So the oracular statements of Delphi and the other official oracles such as Dodona and, - prior to the 7th century BC when it was still functioning as an active oracle, Delos, - tended to combine the conservative and the radical in a marvellous way. In terms of tradition the oracular statements were always extremely conservative, so that they never threatened established rituals, but reinforced them, like a strengthening of the bones. But while bones need strengthening, muscles need exercising. So the oracular statements also provided extreme examples of mental agility and challenged the best brains of Greece to try and figure out their meanings by solving the riddles which they stated. This, I believe, is one of the secrets of Greece's greatness.

It was that greatest of Greek philosophers, Aristotle, who first figured this out and stated it explicitly. In his book on *Rhetoric* he wrote: 'Well-constructed riddles are attractive (because) a new idea is conveyed, ... The thought is startling, and ... does not fit in with the ideas you already have. ... The effect produced ... is a surprise.' [III, 1405/1412]

I believe that the ancient Greeks achieved intellectual greatness because they mastered the art of making statements by unexpected and novel means. Fables and riddles were essential in this, for they conveyed meanings indirectly, with the suddenness and glaring nature of lightning flashes. Since Delphi produced more such riddles than anywhere else, Delphi thus became *a centre of new thinking*. Fresh ideas were stimulated by this means. The classic example of this is the famous Delphic riddle reputed to have been solved by Plato: The inhabitants of Delos were told that Greece would be at peace if they could double the altar at Delos. But

when they tried doubling the lengths of all the sides, they got an altar eight times larger, not double. They then realised that sophisticated geometrical principles had to be taken into consideration, and the task was not at all simple. Plato was consulted, as he was a noted geometer, and he explained to the Delians that they should study geometry, which was the true message of Apollo. This is a particularly clear example of the kind of fresh thinking which was being continually stimulated by the Delphic oracular riddles.

A more typical example of a Delphic riddle was the one given to the Spartans, and preserved by Herodotos. Delphi told them that they would defeat the Tegeans only when they had brought back the bones of Orestes the son of Agamemnon. [I, 67.] But no one knew where this Orestes had been buried. So the Spartans again enquired of Delphi and were told that Orestes was buried somewhere at Tegea, 'where two winds by hard compulsion blow, and blow answers to blow, and woe lies upon woe.' - But the Spartans, not noted for their intellectual agility, had a great deal of trouble figuring this out, and a large proportion of their leading citizens applied their brains to this matter of state for a long time, as the future of Sparta seemed to be at stake. - It was by forcing people to think like this that Delphi encouraged the habits of deep thought and analysis, engendering a mode of creative genius which was to raise Greece to the highest level of all Western cultures for philosophy. Note that the riddles of Delphi were generally phrased within an arch-conservative tradition: legendary personages were treated as real, and the Orestes who may or may not actually have existed was in the case of the riddle assumed to have been real. This meant that no resistance to the fresh thinking would be encountered by the most reactionary members of the society, for the most conservative ritualistic views appeared to be supported by the riddles. No doubt was ever thrown upon tradition, but tradition was ingeniously turned to the use of innovation. This was simply brilliant, and resolved the problem of constructive cultural growth in a manner which has not, in my opinion, been excelled since that time anywhere in the world.

The Christian historian of the fifth century AD, Hermias Sozomen, said of the oracular riddles that they 'were intelligible only to the few who by their erudition were able to understand more important truths than those commonly taught to the people.' Even if this elitist view were true, those erudite few learned a great deal in the process. But I maintain that the riddles percolated down to the lowest levels of society, and that in many famous cases, whole populations chattered about the riddles in the marketplace and at dinner parties for months on end. This must have had a profound effect upon society.

Fables are another, less drastic, example, of saying things by indirect means. Instead of describing interactions between people, fables generally describe interactions between animals. But everyone knows that the animals represent people. A fable is thus a riddle in milder form.

When we hear the fable of the Raven and the Fox, the riddle associated with it is: who is really the raven and who is really the fox?

It is the use of unfamiliar ways of expressing the familiar that stimulates the imagination and causes us to grow mentally. This is what riddles and fables always did. But it should be obvious that the other chief method of stimulating us in this fashion is poetry. For the essence of poetry is the juxtaposition of astonishing and unexpected images. And this brings us back to a great poet like Angelos Sikelianos. What could be more unexpected than this:

Breath like a lily that the north wind has frozen.

It is true that one's breath in winter emerges sometimes almost in the shape of a lily, which can be seen in the cold. And if lilies were blooming in winter, the north wind might freeze them. But who would normally think of such an association? And yet, that is the job of the poet. The unexpected image shocks us, stimulates our imagination, and thrills us. Then we are free to grow, for we have broken out of another layer of the chrysalis of conformity.

I have already mentioned that Sikelianos often uses animals in his imagery, in the tradition if not in the same manner as Aesop. Here is a classic example from his poem 'The Consciousness of Faith':

*Like a peasant
who assists the birth of his cow -
and she from the pain groans like a wild beast -
plunging the hand into her bowels
until the calf slips
in one movement
to the floor of the shed ...
thus was I covered with blood
assisting with all my soul the birth of the gods,
mysteriously!*

*Red still,
like the moon in its rising,
I held in my embrace
the holy children
from the womb of the goddesses!*

This marvellous translation is by Philip Sherrard, whom I was fortunate to know slightly. Sikelianos's poetic imagery is as authentic to the life of a farmer as most of the fables of Aesop, and just as timeless. Speaking as one who has witnessed such animal births in sheds, and who has lived much of his life in the countryside surrounded by farmers, I can appreciate the full impact of what Sikelianos wishes to say. Whether a pure city-dweller could do so I do not know, as I am not one, and I cannot imagine being one. My wife and I frequently watch unassisted births of

calves from our windows, in the pasture opposite our country house. And each time it is a miracle, which moves us deeply, as it moved Sikelianos.

But let us turn now from such subtleties to much more astonishing and drastic matters, - to things which are certainly very different indeed from what they seem, and which concern not only Delphi but potentially the whole of human civilisation and its origins. I refer to the mysterious foundation of Delphi, of its location, of the myths of its origins, and of the true significance of these things which superficially may seem obscure and of little relevance, since they are largely unknown.

No one knows when Delphi was really founded. Traces of Minoan occupation at Delphi have been found by archaeologists, and go back to at least 1500 BC. But this appears by no means to have been the true beginning of the sacredness of this site. Before all of this, there was apparently an earlier phase, higher up the mountain.

For the original site of the oracle was not here at Pytho at all, but was much higher up at an obscure location known as Lykoreia. This information is preserved by the ancient geographer Strabo, as well as by scholiasts of both Pindar and Apollonius of Rhodes. There seems to be no doubt of its truth. Lykoreia is where the ark of Deukalion was said to have landed after the Great Flood. An alternative Greek tradition is that the ark of Deukalion landed on Mount Tomaros at Dodona. As all Christians know, the ark of Noah landed on Mount Ararat, according to the Bible.

What is the significance of these three 'ark landing' sites? Do they have any connection with one another? - Indeed they do! Mount Tomaros and Mount Ararat are on precisely the same line of latitude, despite being thousands of miles apart. It seems incredible that the Greek ark and the Hebrew ark could have come to rest on mountains which shared the same latitude line. - What have the Greek and Hebrew traditions to do with one another?

But the mystery deepens when you realise that Delphi is precisely one degree of latitude south of both Mount Tomaros and Mount Ararat. And the other great archaic oracle centre of Greece, the island of Delos, is precisely one degree of latitude further south again.

Surely there must be some strange tradition behind all of this? The division of the circle into 360° goes back to the Babylonians, and so degrees of latitude are not modern at all, but are of indeterminate antiquity. Thus the integral degree separations are not arbitrary and are not artefacts of a modern system of measurement which have arisen by coincidence. The conclusion which thus seems inescapable is that *they were planned*.

But planned when and by whom??

The story of the ark and the Great Flood go back to Sumerian times, long prior to 2500 BC. I have myself translated *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which preserves these traditions. My translation was produced on stage at the Royal National Theatre in London. The Epic was originally written for dramatic presentation, 2000 years before Aeschylus. Greek drama thus began at Sumer.

And it was not only Greek drama which began there, but the Greek story of the ark, and of the legendary figure who was called Deukalion by the Greeks but Ziusudra by the Sumerians, Utnapishtim by the Babylonians, and Noah by the Hebrews.

The question obviously arises: how was it that at the earliest stages of Greek culture, or of whatever it was which preceded Greek culture in Greece, even before the Minoans, obscure mountain locations were found, and apparently scientifically surveyed with precision, which could correspond with other geodetic points thousands of miles away? Herodotos records that Dodona was founded from Egyptian Thebes. [II, 54-7] Perhaps we should take him seriously and not dismiss his claim. Such extremely ancient origins can no longer be dismissed; scientific evidence is accumulating which indicates that things are not necessarily what they seem. History may actually be a fable, and what we thought were fables may be truths. Research continually pushes back the frontiers of civilisation's known origins. Even in the case of Aesop, whom I was discussing a moment ago, we can now demonstrate that at least one of his fables was Sumerian in origin and existed an incredible 2000 years before Aesop! If we can prove that one of Aesop's fables is that old, why not the story of Deukalion as well? And why not also the founding of Delphi? Not of the classical site where we are meeting today, of course, but the older one at Lykoreia, where scientific excavations are obviously urgently required. At the moment we have little idea of what an advanced state of early science must have been required to survey mountain tops so accurately over thousands of miles that sacred sites thousands of miles distant from one another could nevertheless be precisely correlated on a large-scale map.

Who would do such a thing? And why?

In our perplexity, and lacking answers as we do at present, perhaps we should feel that we are brothers with Sikelianos, who in his poem 'Rehearsing for Death', expresses his own certainty that 'Memory has no end here and no beginning ...', and who experiences his own psychological plunge into the abyss of uncertainty by saying:

*I held the great pearl in my hand, took spring
into my heart, and felt the scarlet roses
of my fever suddenly become
a crown, felt my black bed become a ship,*

*the unhurried ship of God, and my struggle
the navigator of my mind among the stars.*

*... the earth sailed among
the stars, the earth sang psalms, and my bed's prow
climbed toward the pole, crushing the waves of time,
and beginning, voyage, end were all
a cataclysm of celestial light before me.*

[translated by Philip Sherrard and Edward Keeley]

When truly great enigmas confront us, when riddles too great for us to solve taunt us with their impenetrable mystery, we must first, like the citizens of Sparta try our best to work out the answer. But sometimes the ultimate truth, surpassing even the highest science, is the poetic truth, and the beginning, the voyage and the end become all, as we perilously steer our ship towards that 'cataclysm of celestial light' which may, if we are lucky, grant us one day some true illumination.