

Julian and the Last Oracle at Delphi

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THE SO-CALLED ‘last oracle’ at Delphi represents a landmark in the struggle between paganism and Christianity.¹ The romantic tale of Julian’s attempt to restore classical paganism and the oracle’s confession of its own powerlessness in the face of triumphant Christianity has struck a responsive chord down through the ages and has found its way into modern works of literature.² Quoting Swinburne’s translation of the oracle, J. B. Bury described it as a “sad and moving expression of the passing away of the old order of things,” while the hexameter verses of the oracle have been called the “the last fragment of Greek poetry which has moved the hearts of men.”³ For the historian, the story of the last oracle is significant because it purports to record an attempt by Julian to rebuild the temples of Greece and because it implies a surprising centrality of old-fashioned Olympian paganism in the conflict of religions in the fourth century.

Only two independent sources preserve an account of the last oracle. One of these is the twelfth-century historian George Kedrenos.⁴ In his words, Julian “sent Oribasius, physician and quaestor, to rebuild the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Arriving there and taking the task in hand, he received an oracle from the demon”:

εἶπατε τῷ βασιλεῖ· χαμαὶ πέσε δαίδαλος αὐλά.
οὐκέτι Φοῖβος ἔχει καλύβαν, οὐ μάντιδα δάφνην,
οὐ παγὰν λαλέουσαν, ἀπέσβετο καὶ λάλον ὕδωρ.

¹ The following will be cited by authors’ names alone: C. M. BOWRA, “ΕΠΙΑΤΕ ΤΩΙ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙ,” *Hermes* 87 (1959) 426–35 (= *On Greek Margins* [Oxford 1970] 233–52); H. W. PARKE, “Castalia,” *BCH* 102 (1978) 199–219; Claude VATIN, “Les empereurs du IV^e siècle à Delphes,” *BCH* 86 (1962) 229–41.

² E.g. Gore Vidal, *Julian* (New York 1962) 301–03, whose account conforms well with the details of the story as we have it. Vidal explains the silence of the contemporary sources by suggesting that Julian asked Oribasius to keep the incident a secret between the two of them. Ironically, one of the many tourist shops that line the main street of modern Delphi has the text of the last oracle, painted on ceramic tile, on its front wall.

³ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*² 1 (London 1931) 370; F. W. H. Myers, in Evelyn Abbot, *Hellenica*² (London 1898) 447.

⁴ This assumes that Kedrenos is independent of Philostorgios; see discussion below.

Tell the emperor that the Daidalic hall has fallen. No longer does Phoebus have his chamber, nor mantic laurel, nor prophetic spring; and the speaking water has been silenced.⁵

The value of this evidence, of course, depends on the authenticity of Kedrenos' sources and the degree to which we can accept the story as at least representative of fourth-century thought. Perhaps surprisingly, most modern authorities have accepted the authenticity of the oracle, either *in toto* or in some of its several parts.⁶ There is, however, good reason to regard it as a Christian forgery since the story admirably suits the purposes of apologetic, which saw in the occasion a dramatic confirmation of the truth of the new religion. The oracle is thus to be classified with stories of contests between Christian holy men and their demon adversaries and it fits into a long tradition of using oracles as 'evidence' in religious conflict.⁷

Thus, genuine oracles were frequently cited to prove a particular point, and false oracles were composed, frequently to bring discredit on the oracular source. Such practices had a long tradition among pagans, while Jews and Christians, with their emphasis on a prophetic interpretation of the Old Testament, found the practice particularly appealing.⁸ Thus, according to one account Augustus consulted the Delphic oracle on the question of his successor. The Pythia supposedly refused to answer, saying only that "a Hebrew boy bids . . . that I leave this house and go to Hades . . ." ⁹

While admitting the place of the last oracle in Christian apologetic, we cannot simply dismiss it as a pious forgery. Our other source for the story is the *Artemii Passio* of John of Rhodes, written about the tenth century.¹⁰ The *Artemii Passio* drew heavily on the ecclesiastical history of Philostorgios (died *ca* 426), and this is almost certainly the

⁵ Kedrenos 532 Bonn. Cf. H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford 1956) no. 476 (I 289–91, II 194–95); J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley 1978) Q 263 (353); P. Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes* (Paris 1950) 190–95.

⁶ E.g., Thompson; Parke and Wormell (*supra* n.5) I 289–90.

⁷ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971) 80–101: "the rise of the holy man has something to do with the silence of the oracles" (99–100, *cf.* 93). On the continuing oracular function of pagan holy men and the 'proof' that their prophecy allowed, *cf.* the Eleusinian hierophant Nestorios at the end of the fourth century (Eunap. *VS* 475–76, Zosim. 4.18).

⁸ Pierre Batiffol, "Oracula Hellenica," *RBib* n.s. 13 (1916) 175–99; A. D. Nock, "Oracles théologiques," *REA* 30 (1928) 280–90; *cf.* Clem. Al. *Protr.* 1.10; Eus. *PE* 4.3.7; August. *Civ. Dei* 19.23; Lact. *Inst.* 4.13.

⁹ Parke and Wormell (*supra* n.5) I 288–89, II 209; Eus. at Kedrenos p.320; Jo. Mal. p.231; Nic. Cal. 1.17.

¹⁰ Migne, *PG* 96.1251ff; Joseph Bidez, *Philostorgius Kirchengeschichte*² (Berlin 1972).

source of the passage in question. Thus, the story of the last oracle was known in the early years of the fifth century, within plausible memory of Julian and his activities.

The relevant part of Philostorgios' text apparently dealt with the confrontation between Julian and the Christian official Artemios, who had been brought from Egypt to Antioch where he was beheaded in 362.¹¹ Artemios said to the emperor:¹²

Know then that the strength and power of Christ are unconquerable and invincible. Indeed, you yourself have been informed of this by the oracles which Oribasios, physician and quaestor, brought you from [the temple of] Apollo at Delphi. And I shall remind you of the oracle, whether you want it or not. It goes as follows:

The text of Philostorgios then reproduces the three hexameters found in Kedrenos. Kedrenos, however, cannot be completely dependent on Philostorgios, for his text contains information about the mission of Oribasios not found there. Either Kedrenos based his version on another source or he simply invented details himself.

In 1962 Claude Vatin published an important article on the activity of fourth-century emperors at Delphi, and he had occasion to discuss the last oracle at some length (229–41). In the end Vatin cast significant doubt on the text of Kedrenos and argued that the oracle concerned not Delphi at all, but rather the sanctuary of Apollo at Daphne near Antioch. Vatin accepted the words of the oracle itself as genuine, but noted the differences between the accounts of Kedrenos and Philostorgios. The latter, he observed, makes no mention of an imperial mission: from this Vatin concluded that Oribasios consulted the oracle on a purely private matter. Centuries later Kedrenos wished to enliven his history and simply made up the story that Julian had wished to rebuild the temple and that he sent Oribasios to supervise the task. Secondly, Vatin noted the references in the oracle to prophetic water: *παγὰν λαλέουσαν* and *λάλον ὕδωρ*. This, he argued, is in direct contradiction to what we know about Delphi, where oracles were always delivered by the Pythia and where the Kastalian Spring was only a part of the rites of purification prior to the consultation. Prophetic water was of course not unknown in antiquity, but never, he says, at Delphi.¹³ In fact, we know that the

¹¹ Amm. Marc. 22.11.2; Julian *Ep.* 10; Thdt. *HE* 3.4; *Chron.Pasch.* 363 Bonn.

¹² Philostorg. 7.1 (77 Bidez) = *S. Artemii Passio* 35 (Migne, *PG* 96.1284).

¹³ W. R. Halliday, *Greek Divination* (London 1913) 116–44; on the growth of the popularity of oracular water in the Roman empire see Robert A. Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Serapis* (Leiden 1981).

Kastalian Spring at Daphne in Syria was prophetic, and Vatin concluded (235–38) that the reference in the oracle must be to that site. Further, to complete his argument, Vatin pointed to the well-known story of Julian's unsuccessful attempt to revive the prophetic function of the oracle at Daphne (Amm. Marc. 22.12.8).

It is clear that Julian was particularly interested in the temple of Apollo at Daphne, which was the site of the oracle and which could boast Bryaxis' chryselephantine copy of the statue of Zeus at Olympia (Amm. Marc. 22.13.1). The emperor entrusted his uncle Julian, as *comes orientis*, with the task of restoring the temple itself and sent him detailed instructions how to proceed, dispatching one of his own priests, Pythodoros, to organize the cult before his own arrival at the sanctuary.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Julian's expectations were disappointed and on his arrival he found "no incense, not even a cake, and not one animal for sacrifice" (*Mis.* 361D–362A). Further, the Kastalian Spring at Daphne failed to prophesy, and Julian blamed this on the burial of the bodies of St Babylas and his companions in the vicinity.¹⁵ The emperor had these removed, "using the same ritual by which the Athenians purified the island of Delos," and the oracle may have resumed its prophetic function for a time.¹⁶ This revival was, however, short-lived and in October of 362 the great temple of Apollo at Daphne was suddenly and mysteriously burned.¹⁷

Given Julian's well-documented interest in Daphne and the tradition of prophetic water there, Vatin's arguments about the last oracle seem reasonable if not entirely convincing. Key to his position is the suggestion that Oribasios, mentioned by both sources in connection with the oracle, received the message in response to a personal question. Oribasios was, of course, the personal physician of the emperor and one of his most trusted confidants.¹⁸ Some of his medical writings survive, and he wrote an historical memoir which served as both

¹⁴ Julian *Ep.* 29; Liban. *Ep.* 694.6–7.

¹⁵ Amm. Marc. 22.12.8; Thdt. *HE* 3.12.4; Philostorg. 7.8. It was in fact Julian's brother Gallus who had caused Babylas' remains to be buried near the temple. This situation was another 'contest' between a Christian holy man and a pagan establishment.

¹⁶ Amm. Marc. 22.12.8. Modern authorities generally assume that Julian's attempt to revive the oracle was a failure, but Philostorgios (7.12) says specifically that after the removal of the relics the oracles, "beginning with that at Delphi," were allowed by the Christian God to function for a short time.

¹⁷ Amm. Marc. 22.13.1. Julian blamed the Christians for the fire (22.13.2) and closed the great church of Antioch in retaliation (*contra* Polymnia Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian and Hellenism* [Oxford 1981] 206).

¹⁸ *PLRE* I 653–54; Eunap. *VS* 498–99; Julian *Ep.* 4. The *PLRE* questions the statement of the *Suda* that Oribasios was made quaestor, but this is confirmed by both Kedrenos and Philostorgios.

stimulus and source material for Eunapius of Sardis in his study of the reign of Julian (which was in turn the basis of the surviving accounts of Ammianus and Zosimos).¹⁹ If, with Vatin, we accept the story of Philostorgios (without the ‘additions’ of Kedrenos), there still seem to be good reasons to connect the oracle with an official mission from the emperor. In the first place, a striking parallel can be seen in the assignment of the emperor’s uncle Julian to restore the temple of the god at Daphne. Secondly, the account of Philostorgios implies that Oribasios had brought back the oracle(s) specifically for Julian (σοι . . . παρὰ τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς Ἀπόλλωνος ἄρτι κεκόμικεν). Indeed, the oracle was pointedly directed toward the emperor (εἶπατε τῷ βασιλεῖ), and it is difficult to understand why Oribasios would have received such a response had he come simply on a private matter.

Moreover, we know that Julian was interested in Greece, both as the site of his philosophical training and as the home of paganism. Thus, he often referred to Greece as “our own land,” and after his accession he dispatched the hierophant to Eleusis with “gifts worthy of an emperor and assistance for the care of the temples of Greece” (θεραπείαν . . . πρὸς τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἱερῶν).²⁰ This may not have included the rebuilding of the Parthenon, as Travlos has argued, but this testimony at least suggests that such projects were very much on Julian’s mind.²¹

Certainly, Julian had a pressing interest in oracles, too much, in fact, for some of his supporters: for the emperor paganism was not only a cultural phenomenon but a religious experience as well.²² In Julian’s own words, “has not Apollo, the co-regent of Helios, set up oracles in every part of the earth, and given to men inspired wisdom and introduced order into their cities . . . ?”²³ To Julian, Apollo’s oracular function was intimately connected with his activity in establishing harmony and good order among men. It is inconceivable that Julian would exert as much effort as he obviously did at Daphne and

¹⁹ F. Paschoud, *Cinq études sur Zosime* (Paris 1976) 177–79.

²⁰ Eunap. *VS* 476; Julian *Ep. Athen.* 275A.

²¹ John Travlos, ‘Ἡ πυρπόλησις τοῦ Παρθενῶνας ὑπὸ τῶν Ἐρούλων καὶ ἡ ἐπισκευή του κατὰ τοὺς χρόνους τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος Ἰουλιανοῦ,’ *ArchEph* 1973, 218–36; but see W. B. Dinsmoor, Jr., “New Fragments of the Parthenon in the Athenian Agora,” *Hesperia* 43 (1974) 137–51, and Alison Frantz, “Did Julian the Apostate Rebuild the Parthenon?” *AJA* 83 (1979) 395–401. On Julian’s plans for rebuilding pagan structures see *Cod.Theod.* 15.1.3 (362) and J. J. Arce, “Reconstruccion de templos en epoca del Emperador Juliano (361–63),” *RSA* 5 (1975) 201–15.

²² Athanassiadi-Fowden (*supra* n.17) 121–60.

²³ *Or.* 4.152D; cf. *Or.* 6.188A, ὁ τῆς Ἑλλάδος κοινὸς ἡγεμὼν καὶ νομοθέτης καὶ βασιλεύς, ὁ ἐν Δελφοῖς θεός.

ignore the more famous oracular shrine in Greece. One may, of course, throw out the whole of the evidence of both Philostorgios and Kedrenos, leaving the text of the last oracle without any historical setting. The two accounts are, however, in substantial agreement, and an imperial mission by Oribasios to Delphi would at least be in keeping with what contemporaries expected of the emperor Julian.

Vatin's second point is perhaps more significant. In late antiquity Daphne was certainly a celebrated spot, and we have already seen the attention which Julian lavished upon the oracle there. Furthermore, the *Suda* entry on the Kastalian Spring (K 39) mentions only Daphne.²⁴ Crucial to the argument is the issue of prophetic water, which Vatin says cannot be associated with Delphi (236–37). This may well have been true in the classical period, but there is abundant evidence that in late antiquity this situation had considerably changed. Oracular springs, in fact, undoubtedly grew more popular in the eclectic spirit of the Roman empire, and Pausanias even says that the inspiration of the Pythia came from the water she drank, in this case from the Kassotis.²⁵

More to the point, many late authors attribute prophetic power to the Kastalian Spring, either in its own right or as a reflection of the prophetic words of the Pythia. Thus, Clement of Alexandria wrote that “the spring of Kastalia has been silenced . . . ,”²⁶ while Gregory of Nazianzus exulted, “no longer does the oak shine . . . nor does Pythia provide information. Again Kastalia has been silenced, and is silent, and the water is not prophetic but laughable” (*Or.* 5.25).

Vatin naturally noticed these two texts, but he attributed them both to Daphne, the former in reference to Hadrian's closure of the spring and the latter to Julian's failure discussed above. Vatin may be correct in the earlier of these two cases, but there are many other texts that clearly refer to prophetic functions associated with the Kastalian Spring at Delphi. Thus, Themistios speaks of ἐν τῷ Παρνασσῷ ἐκ Κασταλίας τὸ μαντικὸν πνεῦμα (*Or.* 4.53a), while Nonnos describes how the “babbling rill of Kastalia . . . that never-silent spring, bubbled with wisdom in its water” (ἀσιγήτοιον δὲ πηγῆς Κασταλίας λόλον οἶδμα σοφῷ πάφλαζε ρεέθρῳ) (*Dion.* 13.133–34). Contemporaries may have thought that the waters of Kastalia echoed

²⁴ Antioch was frequently known as ἡ πρὸς Δάφνην (cf. Hierokles *Synekd.* p.39 Honigmann), but this was apparently the city's official name, attested as early as 204 B.C. G. Downey, *History of Antioch in Syria* (Princeton 1961) 582; P. Herrmann, *Anatolia* 9 (1965) 40.

²⁵ Cf. *supra* n.13; Paus. 10.24.7.

²⁶ *Protr.* 2.11.1 (= Eus. *PE* 2.3.2). On this whole topic see also Parke.

the prophetic utterances of the god. Thus, Nonnos says that “Kastalia marked it, and her inspired water bubbled in oracular rills” (καὶ ὀμφήεντι ῥεέθρω Κασταλῆς πάφλαξε νοήμονος ἔνθεον ὕδωρ) (*Dion.* 4.310). Claudian also provides important evidence on this question. Thus, he says that when Apollo returns to Delphi, “the sacred ripple revisits the face of the waters, a clearer echo resounds from the shrine, and the now-inspired rocks tremble to the voice of prophecy” (*VI Cons.* 33–34). Speaking of the narrow escape of Greece from the ravages of Alaric in 396, Claudian says to Delian Apollo: “now that Delphi is safe and fear has been dispelled, wreath your avenger’s head with flowers; no barbarian foe sets profane lips to Kastalia’s spring and those prophetic streams” (*castalios latices et praescia fati flumina*) (*In Ruf.* 2 praef. 5–8). Finally, in his discussion of the Babylas affair at Daphne, Sozomen noted that the Kastalian Spring there was prophetic and “is similar in its effects to the fountain at Delphi” (*HE* 5.19).

Thus, under closer scrutiny all objection to the Delphic origin of the oracle evaporates and we are back to the text as it stands in the sources. This, however, is obviously not to claim historicity for the entire incident. The story fits into the needs of Christian polemic too neatly to deny at least some editorial work in the transmission of the account. But exactly how are we to understand this transformation, and can we suggest anything of the original events which may have underlain the story as we now have it? Parke, for example, suggested that when he reached Delphi Oribasios found the temple in ruins but thought it “very unsatisfactory to return to Julian with nothing to show for his mission. So he or someone associated with him produced the verses which we know” (213).

C. M. Bowra, however, concluded that the oracle cannot have been composed during Julian’s lifetime since it “presupposes the ruin of the temple and it is addressed to a public which would take this for granted” (432). Bowra argued that the unknown author of the ‘oracle’ was a Christian who took his lead from Gregory of Nazianzus: “he was clearly a well educated man with a real talent for poetry and a taste for Christian polemic against Julian’s memory. He was moreover sufficiently acquainted with the old religion to know the precise nature of the oracular rites at Delphi. His δαίδαλος ἀνλά is the temple of Apollo, and his καλύβα . . . is the inner sanctuary. The prophetic bay-tree must be that which was said to have grown in the temple . . . The παγὰ λαλέουσα and the λάλον ὕδωρ are correctly distinguished, the first being the Castalian spring and the second the stream of Cassotis near the temple” (433).

Crucial to Bowra's argument are his assumption that the temple must have been destroyed and his date for that event. On the basis of a passage in Himerius, Bowra concluded that the temple was still standing in 361 and that it continued intact until at least 384.²⁷ Destruction, however, must have taken place shortly after that date, since the oracle must have been composed and included in Philostorgios' *Ecclesiastical History* before the latter's death *ca* 426. Arguing from the present state of the temple, Bowra suggests that destruction came through "the violent hand of men, which razed it to its base and left only the main platform and the steps" (433).

In fact, this evidence does not support Bowra's conclusion of violent destruction during the reign of Arcadius (A.D. 395–408). The weight of scholarly opinion today de-emphasizes the conflict between paganism and Christianity in the sanctuaries of Greece and suggests that in most places paganism slowly died out, to be replaced by Christianity only at a much later date; Alison Frantz has even argued that the Parthenon was refurbished at exactly the time Bowra suggests the violent destruction at Delphi!²⁸ Some conflict may, of course, have existed, but there is no archaeological evidence to support Bowra's dating. The temple of Apollo was certainly deliberately dismantled and its metal clamps ripped violently from their places, but there is no evidence to date this event and it is likely that it took place long after the deconsecration of the temple, perhaps in the Byzantine dark ages or later.²⁹

Even less does the literary evidence for the destruction of the temple support Bowra's view. Thus, a law of A.D. 424 suggests that the games at Delphi may still have been celebrated as late as that time, when, by any reckoning, the 'last oracle' must have been generally known (*Cod.Theod.* 15.5.4). While this does not prove that the temple was still standing at that date, it does show that some of the original institutions and functions of the sanctuary had survived until that time. Even more problematic is Bowra's use of Claudian in these chronological considerations. Thus, he is willing to accept Claudian's evidence (given in 398) that the temple was still intact in 384, but he makes no mention of several other passages that suggest the

²⁷ Bowra 427; Himerius *Or.* 12.6; Claud. *IV Cons.* 143–44.

²⁸ See e.g. J.-M. Speiser, "La christianisation des sanctuaires païens en Grèce," in Ulf Jantzen, ed., *Neue Forschungen in griechischen Heiligtümern* (Tübingen 1976) 309–20; Alison Frantz, "From Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens," *DOP* 19 (1965) 187–205, and *supra* n.21.

²⁹ For solid evidence about the destruction of another Greek temple, see Stephen G. Miller, "Excavations at Nemea, 1978," *Hesperia* 48 (1979) 74.

survival of the pagan sanctuary at least until the very end of the fourth century. We have already mentioned Claudian's reference to the prophetic waters of Kastalia in his poem in honor of the sixth consulship of Arcadius (A.D. 404), and two other passages speak of Delphi, apparently assuming that the oracle was still functioning at that time.³⁰ Nonnos, too, as mentioned above, knows nothing of the destruction of Delphi well into the fifth century. It is true that the evidence of these poets cannot always be trusted and their references to Delphi may be more romantic than realistic, but the point is that they cannot be used to support a destruction of the temple at any time between 384 and 426.

Thus we are left in something of a dilemma: there is no good evidence to suggest a destruction of the temple of Apollo at any time between the reign of Julian and the earliest report of the oracle, in the text of Philostorgios. How, then, are we to interpret the words of the oracle (*χαμαὶ πέσε δαίδαλος ἀνλά*)? Perhaps the solution is to posit some time, between 361 and 426, when the temple and the apparatus of the oracular cult can be said to have fallen on bad times; thus, Bowra may have been correct in seeing this passage as crucial for the understanding of the oracle, but he may have been wrong in reading the text too literally.

Throughout the Roman imperial period oracles were frequently regarded with distrust even by the pagan emperors, and Constantius II, Julian's predecessor, had ordered an end to the practice.³¹ This was coupled with a certain decline in traditional cult practices and is reflected in Julian's remarkable admission that while the prophetic spirit had declined among Hebrews and Egyptians, it had also declined among the pagans: *φαίνεται δὲ καὶ τὰ ἀυτοφυῆ χρηστήρια σιγήσαι ταῖς τῶν χρόνων εἰκόντα περιόδοις* (*Galil.* 198C). Libanius seems to reflect the same situation when he pictures Julian as not waiting for oracles, but "establishing himself in place of the Pythia" (*ἀντὶ τῆς Πυθίας αὐτὸς αὐτῷ καθιστάμενος*) and presumably receiving the advice of the god directly.³² Libanius even implies that, at the beginning of Julian's reign, cult practices were no longer being carried out in the great sanctuaries of Greece. Thus, the orator hoped that Aristophanes of Corinth would return to his homeland from Antioch and tell the Greeks about the magnificent sacrifices that were

³⁰ Claud. *In Ruf.* 2 praef. 5–8 (397); *In Eutr.* 1.327–28 (399).

³¹ Cf. the actions of Hadrian at Daphne, mentioned above, and the attempt to learn the name of Valens' successor through a tripod made of laurel wood (Soz. *HE* 6.35). Constantius II: *Cod.Theod.* 9.16.4 (A.D. 357).

³² *Or.* 13.48; but cf. 12.60.

being carried out there. "Let them pray to see similar things there also, in Delphi, Pisa, Athens, Corinth, and everywhere in Greece, the mainland and islands alike" (*Or.* 14.69).

The best time in which to describe the oracle as having "fallen low," therefore, may be in the early part of the reign of Julian, exactly where the texts of Philostorgios and Kedrenos seem to place the story of the last oracle. Julian not only sought to revive the pagan cults in general, but, as we have seen, he was particularly concerned about the recovery of the oracles. This may have been partially connected with his desire to secure favorable oracles for his forthcoming Persian campaign. Theodoret says specifically that this lay behind the confrontation at Daphne and that Julian sent "his most faithful friends" to consult the most important oracles of the empire on that issue.³³ Oribasios, certainly one of Julian's closest friends, may have been the one sent to Delphi, but there he may have encountered a priesthood that was aware of its own difficult situation as well as its own heritage in exacting favors from well-placed suppliants. The original oracle, then, may not have been a Christian forgery, but a request from the Delphic priesthood for imperial aid: the temple had "fallen" and there could be no oracle until Julian produced substantial assistance. In this case, the priests had certainly overstated their case, but the plea apparently had the desired effect, because shortly thereafter Julian received an oracle encouraging him to undertake his war against the Persians (*Philostorg.* 7.12). Indeed, despite Julian's words about the decline of the pagan oracles, there seems to have been a surfeit of oracular activity during the last month of the emperor's life. Philostorgios notes that this revival began with the oracle at Delphi, and he reflected contemporary Christian discomfort in pointing out that the Christian god had simply allowed this temporary reversion to the earlier order. Among these oracles were apparently several concerned with the health of the emperor's uncle Julian, who had fallen ill after his desecration of the altar of the great church of Antioch.³⁴ As the emperor approached the Persian frontier this oracular activity continued—or at least the pagan sources point to oracles warning him of pending doom and promising apotheosis in a *πυριλαμπές ὄχημα*.³⁵

³³ *HE* 3.21; Kedrenos 538 Bonn; E. A. Thompson, "The Last Delphic Oracle," *CQ* 40 (1946) 35–36.

³⁴ *Philostorg.* 7.12; *Thdt.* *HE* 3.10–13. Despite the assurances of the oracles, however, the *comes* Julian died with great suffering.

³⁵ *Eunap.* fr.26–27; *Suda* s.v. Ἰουλιανός; *Zonar.* 13.13. *Cf.* *Amm. Marc.* 25.3.9, and *HA Carus* 9.1, which reports an oracle that no emperor would proceed beyond Cte-

Such a reconstruction is of course only hypothetical, but it does seem to fit best the chronological considerations required by the text of the oracle and its appearance in the history of Philostorgios. As Parke observed, the last oracle has a “literary elegance and a note of pathos” completely unlike Christian forgeries. Furthermore, as Bowra noted, the author of the oracle was remarkably familiar with the details of Delphic oracular ritual: the pagan priesthood is a better candidate for this than a hypothetical Christian poet of the early fifth century.

In the end, what really matters is not the question of the ‘genuineness’ of the last oracle (whatever that may mean of an oracular response in any case). Given the evidence available, we shall probably never be able to solve this question to everyone’s satisfaction. What is more important is, first, that the last oracle was understood by our sources to apply to Delphi in Greece, rather than Daphne in Syria. This is significant for the history of the Delphic oracle and for the struggle between paganism and Christianity in Greece.³⁶ In addition, this story adds further information about the policies of Julian and his intention to rebuild and restore the sanctuaries of Greece—something which is minimized by much of contemporary scholarship.

Whatever the original source and inspiration of the oracle, to the Christian authors the text was a demonstration of the falseness of the pagan oracles and the futility of recourse to them. Indeed, taken together with the oracles on the Persian campaign (which led Julian to his death) and those on the health of the *comes* Julian, these last oracles certainly inspired the observation that the “water is not prophetic but laughable.”

All that said, it is still most interesting that Delphi was seen as a symbol of pagan opposition to Christianity: one hardly thinks that old-fashioned Olympian paganism represented a serious threat to Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. Devotion to the Olympian gods had weakened centuries before, as newer and more personal forms of pagan religion had taken its place. As Christianity gained

siphon. Athanassiadi-Fowden (*supra* n.17: 228) seems to accept these oracles as genuine and suggests that Julian died confident in the promise of his transport to Olympus in the fiery chariot. In any case, these oracles rather than the one under discussion should properly be regarded as the ‘last’ voices of pagan prophecy.

³⁶ Regardless how it has been received elsewhere (*cf.* Parke 213 n.35), much of the scholarship on Greece in this period has accepted Vatin’s argument: *cf.* Speiser (*supra* n.28) 316 n.34: “La fameuse réponse de l’oracle d’Apollon à l’empereur Julien transmise par Philostorgios et Kédrenos doit être certainement attribuée au sanctuaire d’Apollon de Daphni, près d’Antioche, comme l’a bien montré Vatin.”

strength, however, pagans—especially educated pagans—came to see the practices and beliefs of the more distant past as a basis for pagan revival. Even some Christians were inclined to accept the trappings of this pagan antiquarianism, although they vehemently opposed the cult activities that might accompany the phenomenon. Thus, one may speak of a revival of older Olympian paganism in late antiquity; for most this was a cultural rather than a religious phenomenon, but for others—the emperor Julian among them—the old gods lay at the very heart of a truly religious movement. To the degree that this movement (and even its cultural manifestations) represented a threat to Christianity, Delphi could be a convenient symbol of opposition.

Moreover, along perhaps with the Sibyl, Delphi was the pagan oracle *par excellence*, and a Delphic confession of its powerlessness was not only a significant victory for Christianity but also a strong testimony to the historical pedigree of the upstart new religion.³⁷ Such tensions lay behind the seriousness of the confrontation at Delphi and the pride and confidence which accompanied the Christian proclamation of the last oracle—even if the Christians quoted the oracle out of context and failed to see the text as a plea for revived paganism rather than a confession of failure.³⁸

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³⁷ Particularly noteworthy is the mosaic of Kastalia in a central position in a sixth-century church in Cyrenaica: J. B. Ward-Perkins, *RACrist* 34 (1958) 183–92, esp. 190. Ward-Perkins notes that this mosaic was “set in a place of honour as if it had a symbolic meaning,” yet he fails to recognize the symbolism: Kastalia, set among the four rivers of the world, has likewise proclaimed the veracity of the Christian dispensation.

³⁸ Inspiration for this article came from a seminar which I directed at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Thanks are due to all the participants and especially to Judith Binder.