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Island of Apollonian Light and the Golden Spring

See, they return, one, and by one

—Ezra Pound

Siphnos is a Greek island in the Cycladic cluster. It is small, both in terms of physical size and population. And it modestly “hides its assets from passing ferry passengers behind a curtain of high barren hills.”

Herodotus mentions Siphnos in *The Histories*. It was one of the wealthiest Greek islands by 600 B.C.E. because of bountiful silver and gold mines. The agora and town hall were decorated in expensive Parian marble. And the island had a treasury dedicated to Apollo at Delphi. Siphnos kept the treasury abundant with a yearly tithing of revenues and distributed gold and silver from the mines to its islanders.

A popular account, often incorrectly attributed to Pausanias, relates that the tithing was paid in the form of a solid gold egg.

Early May. Olive trees, figs, juniper, white oleander, tamarisk, bamboo.

A bloom cycle starts. A peculiar blue spatters across the opposite hill one afternoon. Two weeks later, the blue is gone, and deep purple skirts the porch.

By June, half the green dries to a duller shade. Stone walls and terraces stitch the hillsides together. From a peak, the stonework looks like steel webbing cast to outline patches of land.

We cannot know why Siphnos’s ruin came—or even what form it took.

According to the popular version, the Siphnians began offering as their Delphic tithing not a solid gold egg, but a gold-plated one.

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Apollo's anger would have blazed.

Pausanias tells us, more generally, that the island neglected to send its tithing "through [an] immoderate desire of accumulating wealth." As a result, the gold mines were lost in a destructive flood.

According to Herodotus, when the Siphnians were building their treasury, they asked the oracle if their good fortune would continue. The Sibyl replied:

*When on Siphnos the town hall turns white
And so do the brows of the square, then the wise man must beware
The ambush of wood and the red messenger.*

The Siphnians did not connect the prophecy's white town hall with the Parian marble with which theirs was decorated. Nor did they suspect the Samian's vermilion-painted ship that later arrived bearing messengers, of sorts.

The Samians plundered the mines. The piracy may be how the island took its name—from the common noun *σφονοV*, meaning "empty."

In her *Prolegomena*, Jane Ellen Harrison distinguishes between the different rituals of tendance and aversion. The Olympian deities were generally worshipped in a religion of "cheerful tendance." Their motto, Harrison writes, was essentially, "I give that you may give." The Chthonic gods, however, were worshipped in religious acts of aversion. They are the gods of the earth and underworld who are placated and sent away. The creed of aversion is "I give that you may go, and keep away." The religion of riddance is informed not by joy as in that of tendance but by fear and superstition.

About the time when the Siphnian mines were devastated by pirates or floods, the Olympian gods lacked characteristics that we now consider essential to religion, such as mysticism. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates sums it up: "Holiness is then an art in which gods and men do business with each other." In this conception of worship, there is no fear but also no sense of the supernatural. It is a rather dry exchange.

A young girl says that Siphnos is closer to the sun than anywhere else on Earth.

Where does she get her idea? Perhaps she relays an antiquated mythological conception—probably substituting "Siphnos" for "Greece."

Still more likely, she has found a hyperbole that sufficiently expresses her pride and confidence in the superlativeness of her home.

Any website's description of Siphnos will likely use the phrase "the light of Apollo" to describe the sunlight that bathes the island. "The island of Apollo." "Apollonian light." "So small an island / yet touched by the infinite." "Hail soul of islands, divine flower / Stairway to Heaven of gold and glory / Within you exist opaline light and great white wings." "The brilliance of Apollo."

We may think of the Siphnian tithing as tendance—wealth given so that good fortune could be received in return. If the Siphnians stopped offering tithing, it would amount to bad business. Apollo would have no incentive to stop a flood. And if they had the hubris to try fooling a god with a gilded egg, they'd have been gunning for ruin.

Herodotus's version is different. The Siphnians engaged in bad business not with Apollo but with their marauders. The Samians asked to borrow ten talents. The Siphnians refused, and the Samians pirated over a hundred talents. The island's refusal turned a small price into a large one.

Yet their dealing with the Samians is less striking than their inability to interpret a seemingly obvious prophecy. Does their hermeneutical ineptitude point to moral inadequacy? Surely it was in the oracle's best interest for the island to interpret the prophecy correctly. After all, the Siphnians' inability to do so slighted Apollo's treasury.

While rituals of tendance and aversion seem mutually exclusive, Harrison examines several Olympian festivals and finds connected to them ceremonies that "have little or nothing to do with the particular Olympian to whom they are supposed to be addressed; that they are not in the main rites of burnt-sacrifice, of joy and feasting and agonistic contests, but rites of a gloomy underworld character, connected mainly with purification and the worship of ghosts." In the Apollonian Anthesteria ceremonies, for example, there were superstitious rituals, human sacrifices, and placation of ghosts.

Ceremonies of riddance were held for such chthonic gods as the winds. Despite wind's association with the upper air, sacrifices

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to the winds were buried so that they would be placated to remain in the underworld.

While the tithing to Apollo seems like tendance, ceremonies of its antithetical counterpart could have been performed. What gods might the Siphnians have been trying to avert? Perhaps the misfortune of the flood or the pirates resulted from what Siphnos couldn't ward away. Perhaps they feared certain chthonic spirits imperfectly.

Such a reading is superstitious.

Below the veranda, stone steps down to an olive tree. Barefoot over echinated weeds, a field of olive pits.

One low, thick branch perfectly parallel to the ground, reaching east as if toward first light.

Sitting or, more often, standing on the branch.

Out over blue expanse. Locked in looking.

A more modern Siphnos successfully thwarted a pirate invasion. A surviving seventeenth-century manuscript written by Parthenios Chairetis, a Greek Orthodox monk, relates considerable history concerning Siphnos's church Panagia Chrysopigi—literally “Virgin Mary of the Golden Spring.” The church is named after an Orthodox iconographic form of Mary as the Font of Life. Her golden statue was purportedly found by fishermen who harvested it in their nets from the depths of the Aegean. Today thirty-five miracles have been attributed to her, one of the most significant of which is the protection she offered from pirates.

The monastery Chrysopigi sits on a solid rock island. From even a relatively short distance, the island seems connected to the peninsula behind it, but there is a ten-or-so-foot-wide split between the two. A guidebook says, “the stark white monastery of the Virgin standing on the split rock looks like a moored ship preparing to set sail on the seas.” Legend has it that pirates came ashore nearby and gave chase to a group of nuns. The sisters ran to Chrysopigi praying for protection, and just as the nuns reached its door the ground rumbled and the peninsula rent in half. The pirates fell into the chasm and drowned.

A small bridge now connects the island and peninsula.

Every year Siphnos celebrates the Virgin's miracle on the eve of the Feast of the Ascension. The islanders ceremonially transport the icon around Siphnos from the port town Kamares to Chrysopigi. After Mary's statue of the Golden Spring arrives, a priest says Mass. Visiting Athenians and residents occupy a long dining hall in shifts, enjoying local wine and the island's traditional clay-baked revithada. Attendants express gratitude by boisterously banging silverware and chanting panegyras.

Revelers dance and drink until morning.

The dance of Boreas, the north wind, is an ancient ritual that lives on through the island's festivities. Generally performed by a priest, the dance thanks the north wind for ceasing its winter barrage and propitiates it, that it might keep away.

Old man walking stiffly on bare feet with his pants rolled halfway up his shins. Bloodshot eyes, shirt half open, carrying a walking stick. Spitfire with an explosion of white hair. Over gravel to fill his tin pail at a well.

Mycenaean acropolis, ancient wall enclosing a cliff-perched village, adjacent Apollonia and Artemonas, sun, stones.

Ships setting. Across this blue goes a white sail. When it's gone, it's gone without a trace.