

## Eternal Idol

### Stonehenge 2008

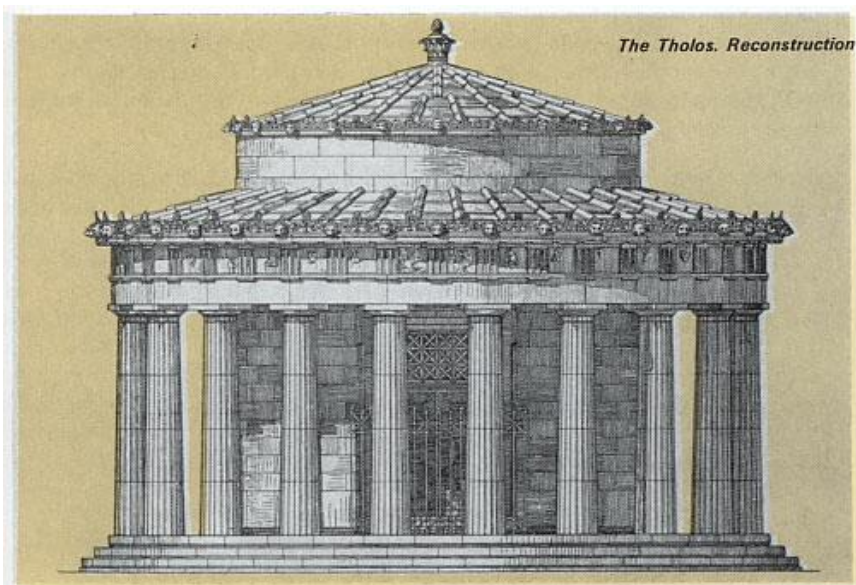
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## Pytheas of Massilia and the Lost City of Apollo - Part III

September 25, 2007 - 2:06 pm



In the fourth century BC, Pytheas of Massilia wrote of a notable temple and a city, both sacred to Apollo, that he had seen in Britain. His point of reference for what constituted “a notable temple of Apollo” would have been a stone structure with uprights and lintels

somewhere in the Mediterranean, but I believe that we can be far more specific than this.

If we can reasonably single out an individual building that Pytheas was aware of when he saw his famous temple, then we can be more certain still that the structure he described was Stonehenge and that the City of Apollo he mentioned twice was the giant Iron Age earthwork we now know as [Vespasian's Camp](#). I believe that the magnificent circular building reconstructed in the drawing above figured prominently in the thoughts of Pytheas when he encountered the temple of Apollo in Britain, but to understand why, we have to recreate another voyage undertaken by Pytheas at some point in the fourth century BC.

Is such a thing possible? Sir Thomas Brown wrote, "What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture." So, with this in mind, let us look at another sea journey undertaken by Pytheas to see if it throws any light whatever on the matter of his temple and city of Apollo. This site deals first and foremost with Stonehenge, but in order to find and inspect the remains of the structure pictured in the drawing above, we shall have to travel far away from the gentle, grassy downs of Salisbury Plain in England to the steep, rocky crags of the valley of [Phocis](#), to the north of the Gulf of Corinth in central Greece.

To begin with, Pytheas of Massilia was so-named because he hailed from the port of Massilia, now called Marseilles, on the southern coast of what is now France. There is a theory that this place was originally a small trading post and that it acquired its name as a corruption of the Phoenician words "Massa" or "Marsa", meaning a harbour or a place to moor boats, and "El", the name of a Phoenician deity. The Oxford Classical Dictionary tell us that Rhodian and other traders preceded the Massiliotes, so the place may once have been known as the "Port of El".

There may be some truth to this idea, but it is beyond doubt that settlers from Phocaea, the most northerly of the Ionian cities in Asia Minor, founded Massilia around 600 BC. By mere virtue of the fact that the Phocaeans successfully established a flourishing city at the opposite end of the Mediterranean in the seventh century BC, it is clear that they were outstanding mariners, while we also learn this from Herodotus, who wrote that the [Phocaeans](#) were the first of the ancient Greeks to embark on lengthy journeys by sea.

So, Pytheas of Massilia was descended from a long line of highly accomplished and adventurous seafarers, the Phocaeans, but what else do we know about Massilia itself? Again, according to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, [Massilia was home to a temple dedicated to Delphic Apollo](#), or the aspect of that deity associated with [Delphi](#), the famous oracular centre of the time.

We also know that Massilia was home to a temple of Artemis, the sister of Apollo, while there is a suggestion that the Phocaeans once practised human sacrifice in honour of this goddess. The mother of Apollo and Artemis was Leto, who was said by some to have been born in Hyperborea, the land to which Apollo returned for three months every year, hence his title Apollo Hyperboreus.

That aside, as well as building a temple dedicated to Delphic Apollo, the Massiliotes maintained strong physical links with Delphi, because they kept their treasury there. The Treasury of Massilia at Delphi was built of marble at some point in the sixth century BC and we know that in 396 BC, the Romans deposited a golden bowl there to commemorate their victory over the Veii.

It's perfectly reasonable to assume that Pytheas visited Delphi, if only because he was an accomplished mariner and because the port from which he derived his name kept its treasury at Delphi. As there was a temple dedicated to Delphic Apollo at Massilia, it's reasonable to assume that Pytheas would have wished to visit the far more important temple of Apollo at Delphi itself, but this is just the beginning.



Delphi was the supreme oracle in ancient Greece during the time of Pytheas and responses to questions were given by a woman known as the Pythia, who was believed to be possessed by Apollo when she delivered her prophecies. Delphi was also home to a stone known as the [omphalos](#) or navel stone, which was supposed to represent the centre of the known world.

Advice was sought from the Delphic Oracle both by Greek States on matters of policy and by private individuals on matters concerning marriage, commercial enterprises and others. Pytheas went on to describe a mysterious land named Thule that lay six days' sail to the north of Britain, a land that was afterwards accepted as the northernmost part of the inhabited world, so it is hardly difficult to picture a mariner such as Pytheas wishing to visit the physical centre of the known world to consult an oracle about a sea voyage that would literally take him to the Ends of the Earth.

It is even less difficult to picture Pytheas visiting the Pythia at Delphi when we bear in mind the existence of the temple of Delphic Apollo at Massilia and the Massilian Treasury at Delphi; indeed, it is a virtual certainty that he undertook this journey at some point prior to setting out on his famous voyage around Britain, while even the root of his name suggests an affinity with Delphi, whose original, ancient name was Putho.



This is a virtually identical scenario to the one we find ourselves in when we consider an individual such as the [Amesbury Archer](#), to give just one example of the many people buried in the Stonehenge landscape when the monument was indisputably in active use. The man we now know as the Archer came to the Stonehenge region from as far south as the Alps in 2,300 BC, so when we add this remarkable journey to all the aspects of his burial and his physical characteristics, it is simply perverse to suggest that he never physically visited Stonehenge itself. And so it is with Pytheas and Delphi.

When we return to our study of Delphi, we find that we derive our word Pythian from the word Putho, while the Pythian Games were a highly notable feature of Delphi, as the OCD entry informs us:

“Pythian Games. From early times there had been a festival at Delphi in connection with the oracle of Apollo, with a musical competition consisting of a hymn to the god - a “nomos Puthikos” - sung to a cithara accompaniment”. This of course immediately brings to mind the description of the activities of the priests of Apollo in the temple in Hyperborea, while the OCD entry goes on to explain how the Pythian Games originally took place every eighth year, but in 582 BC, they were reorganised and instead took place in every third year of the Olympiad.

Elsewhere, we read: “The stadium for the footraces lay close under Mount Parnassus, the chariot races were held in the Crisaean Plain, where a hippodrome (or in Latin, a Cursus) was constructed. The prize was a crown of bay-leaves cut in the valley of Tempe. The Pythian Games ranked next in importance to the Olympian.”

Now, I do not know if the Cursus at Stonehenge was ever used for any kind of chariot racing, but as I’ve pointed out in some detail in the first post on Pytheas’ Lost City of Apollo, I certainly don’t think it was out of the question. Curiously enough, William Stukeley compared Stonehenge to Delphi in [Chapter VIII](#) of his 1740 book *Stonehenge, a Temple Restored to the British Druids*; this was after Stukeley had studied the works of Pausanias, while he also mentions Vespasian’s Camp several times in the same chapter. There are many “echoes in the darkness” here, but there are still more when we look closely at the temple of Apollo at Delphi.

The god [Dionysus](#) was welcomed by the oracle and worshipped at Delphi; according to the OCD - “At Delphi itself Dionysus was received into partnership, his grave was shown in the inner sanctuary, and for three winter months Apollo was believed to hand over the shrine to Dionysus and retire to the far north...”, a journey that we know for a fact that Pytheas undertook, albeit by sea. When discussing the origin of Apollo, the OCD states that there are two principal theories, but it is interesting to read the evidence for Apollo having originated in the north as far as our interest in Pytheas and Hyperborea is concerned:

“He (Apollo) comes from somewhere north of Greece. In support of this, it is urged that his seats of worship are numerous and ancient in the north: the legendary Apolline people, the Hyperboreans, are always thought of as northerners and are real enough to send yearly offerings to Delos which follow a route from the north; and the ritual of the Steptaria points north also.”

Having studied all this, it seems unimaginable to me that Pytheas didn’t visit Delphi before sailing to Britain. His prowess as a mariner, his home city’s devotion to Delphic Apollo, the Massilian treasury at Delphi, the disposition of ancient states and private individuals to consult the Delphic Oracle, the sheer potency of the Delphic Oracle while Pytheas was alive, the links between his name, that of the ancient name of Delphi and the Pythian Games, the belief that Apollo left Delphi each year for Hyperborea in the north, just off the coast of Gaul, the belief that the omphalos stone at Delphi was the centre of the known world - all these things suggest to me that if anyone alive at the time had a good reason and the means to visit Delphi, then it was Pytheas, prior to embarking on his famous voyage.

The ritual of the songs to Apollo and the playing of the cithara at the Pythian Games is so similar to what took place at the temple in Britain that we might be tempted to suppose that Pytheas made the whole thing up, perhaps simply as a tribute to Apollo’s greatness. However, if that were the case, then it seems to me that Pytheas would have described a temple that was rectangular in shape, such as the

one at Delphi, but he did not. He described one that was either spherical, vaulted or circular, while he also said that there was a city and the clear implication, as I've written elsewhere, is that this city was close by.

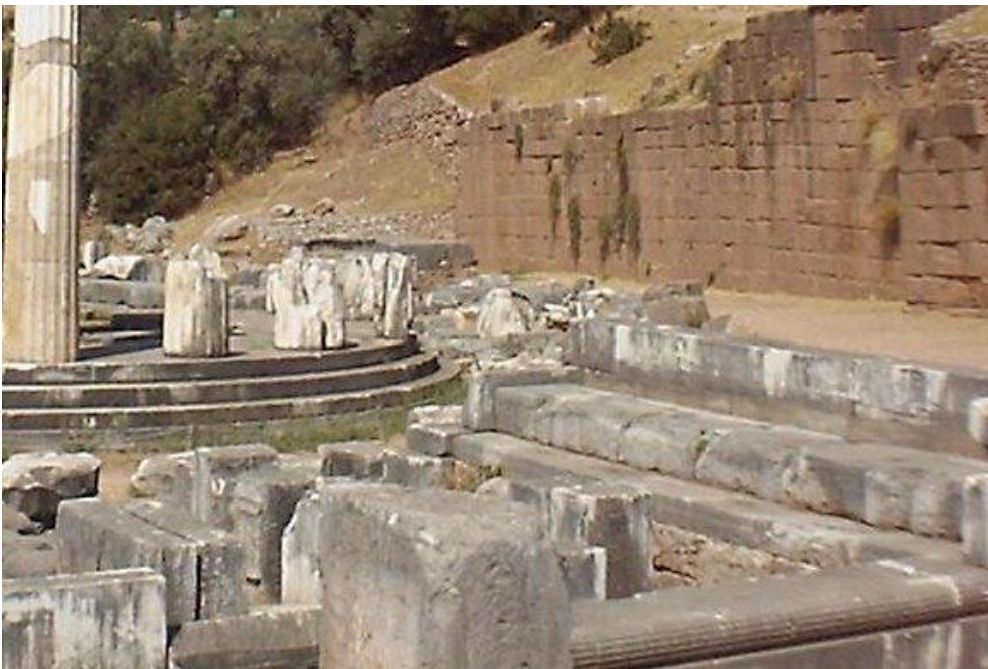
The priests continually played in this temple, which suggests that they came and went on a regular basis from some habitation that was nearby. Furthermore, the city was home to overseers or supervisors of the temple, as well as to kings, and we usually oversee or supervise something that's in plain sight or readily accessible, as opposed to something that's at the other end of the country. If the city and temple had been at any great remove from each other, then Pytheas would have written that the kings and/or priests had *dominion* over the temple or something similar, but he did not.

From the evidence I've seen, it's abundantly clear to me that when Pytheas visited Britain, he saw Stonehenge and Vespasian's Camp, which he described as a temple and city sacred to Apollo, but what would he have seen at Delphi? At this point, I would urge you to have a very good look at [Roy George's superb site](#) dealing with the Sanctuary of Athena Pronaia at Delphi before you proceed.

In brief, if Pytheas of Massilia visited Delphi, then he would certainly have seen the aforementioned sanctuary. Even if, for some truly bizarre reason, he chose never to visit the oracle of Apollo, there's every likelihood that a man such as himself would still have had good cause to visit the Massilian Treasury, which was housed within the sanctuary of Athena Pronaia. The name "Pronaia" means "before the temple" i.e. the temple of Apollo, because the sanctuary of Athena lay before the temple of Apollo, as the invading Persians in 480 BC discovered to their cost.

Perhaps the most notable structure in the sanctuary of Athena was the Tholos, the building reproduced as a drawing at the beginning of this post. The Tholos is thought to have been built between 380 and 360 BC, so as Pytheas is believed to have been alive in the latter part of the fourth century BC, it would certainly have been standing in his lifetime.

Massilian Treasury, foreground; Tholos immediately behind.



The Tholos stood right next to the Treasury of the Massilians, the one place that Pytheas is almost certain to have visited, so it's virtually inconceivable that he did not see this architectural wonder at some point prior to visiting Britain. Furthermore, the Roman writer [Vitruvius](#) records that the Tholos was built by Theodorus of Phocaea, or in other words, by a man from the city that founded Massilia, the home of Pytheas.

On his site, Roy George makes a far better job of describing the Tholos than I ever could, so I'll confine myself to a few observations. The name "Tholos" is a general term for a round stone chamber, and while the Tholos at Delphi was regarded as a wonder of the ancient world, no one knows what purpose it served in antiquity. This is something that coincidentally puts it on a par with Stonehenge, but there are further parallels between the ruins at Delphi and those on Salisbury Plain.

We know that the Tholos was circular and vaulted, qualities or properties that would have been described in ancient Greek as "sphairoeides", the same term that Pytheas applied to the temple of Apollo in Britain. Due to its beauty, dimensions and unusual shape, it would also have been "axiologos", or remarkable, or worthy of mention, another way that Pytheas described the temple of Apollo in Britain.

Every now and again, I read lurid headlines announcing the discovery of a new "Stonehenge" in the [Amazon](#), [Russia](#) or [elsewhere](#), but while these structures are invariably fascinating, none of them possess or ever possessed the qualities that make Stonehenge so distinctive,

namely uprights capped by lintels. The Tholos was partially reconstructed in 1938 and by a curious coincidence, the most notable feature of the site, and the one that makes it such a draw for visitors wishing to take photographs, is the fact that there are now standing uprights capped by lintels. Not only that, but the round plan of the ruins, the stumps of former columns and a crescent shape at the centre of the building call to mind the ruins of Stonehenge, so even in the twilight of their former glory, these two structures appear similar in a number of striking ways.



Be all that as it may, there is a compelling body of evidence that Pytheas of Massilia once stood next to the complete Tholos at Delphi and admired it. When we consider the possible candidates for the notable temple of Apollo he saw in Britain, namely Avebury, Newgrange and Callanish, Stonehenge is by far and away the closest in design and appearance to the Tholos at Delphi, so it is little surprise that Pytheas marvelled when he saw it and memorably described a round temple, worthy of mention. If this was the case, then it is inescapable that the nearby Iron Age hillfort of Vespasian's Camp was the place that Pytheas described as the City of Apollo.

Finally, for now, I'm extremely grateful to the archaeologist and photographer Adam Stanford of [Aerial Cam](#) for his permission to use the superb photograph of Stonehenge below. I've seen hundreds of photographs of Stonehenge, but I've yet to see one better than this, while it perfectly captures the essence of a "magnificent sacred precinct and notable temple of Apollo, circular in shape."

Adam's photograph, which came into being as a result of his expertise and no small amount of patience, is a striking illustration of Stonehenge as a future echo of the Tholos at Delphi, at least as far as Pytheas of Massilia was concerned. In a far-flung northern land on the outermost fringes of the known world, an island devoid of the carefully-sculpted masonry and architecture that he was accustomed to seeing in the Mediterranean in the fourth century BC, Pytheas must have experienced a strong sense of *deja vu* when he encountered Stonehenge, while the priests of Apollo singing their hymns and playing on the cithara can only have added to this sensation. Little wonder, then, that he described it as "worthy of mention" to his contemporaries.



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