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THE AKANTHOS COLUMN AT DELPHI¹

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¹ For helpful criticisms I wish to thank Dr. Oscar Broneer.

² Porphyry, *Vit. Pythag.*, 16. Pythagoras wrote another epigram for the tomb of Zeus in Crete (*ibid.*, 17).

³ Hesychios, *s. v.*

⁴ Müller, *F.H.G.*, III, p. 152, no. 16.

⁵ Herodotos, I, 174.

⁶ Pausanias, X, 11, 1.

⁷ Herodotos, *loc. cit.*

⁸ Diodoros, V, 56.

⁹ Herodotos, I, 144.

¹⁰ Cicero, *De nat. deorum*, III, 54: the fourth Helios according to the theologians.

¹¹ Pausanias, X, 11, 1.

¹² Steph. Byz., *s. v.* *Ἀκανθος*.

¹³ Strabo, 809, 35.

¹⁴ Athenaios, 679 f.



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THE AKANTHOS COLUMN AT DELPHI¹

According to an elegy which Pythagoras is said to have written at Delphi, Apollo, the son of Seilenos, was slain by the Python and buried in the so-called tripod which received its name from the fact that the three daughters of Triopas mourned him.² That this strange reversal of Delphic tradition was Pythagorean is suggested by the statement of Hesychios that the Pythagorean name for the tripod was *τρίοψ*.³ The only other record of the death of Apollo is that of Mnaseas who assembled and published the oracles of Delphi.⁴ He says that Apollo was killed by a thunderbolt of Zeus, and was carried out to burial. In this version Apollo may have been confused with his son Amphiaraios, who entered the earth through an opening made by a thunderbolt. Be that as it may, the Delphic elegy may not be dismissed as a later fancy of no value.

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akanthoi upon the flower of which were set garlands of pomegranate and vine. Their sepulchral character is proved by a story attributed to Demetrios.¹⁵ When the Ethiopians who were on their way to Troy learned of the death of Memnon, whose mother was the sister of Helios, they placed garlands upon the akanthoi in the sanctuary at Abydos. These garlands were probably of pomegranates and vine like those just previously mentioned in Athenaios. The akanthos here reveals a distinctly sepulchral significance, while the description of its flower as *εὐφειγγής*¹⁶ suggests a solar character. The theory of a Rhodian origin for the akanthos of Abydos¹⁷ is especially interesting because on the island of Rhodes Helios, Apollo, and Dionysos were considered by some to be one and the same deity.¹⁸ The discarded etymology which derived the name of the city *Κνίδος* from *κνίς*, *κνιδός*, "nettle," has very much in its favor.

With this mythological background one may turn to the akanthos column at Delphi (Fig. 1). The theory of Keramopoulos¹⁹ that the Ampeliotai of Libya dedicated the column, that the leaves are not those of the akanthos but rather of the silphium plant, and that the three maidens are the Hesperides cannot be true. There is no mention in ancient literature of any architectural use of the silphium, whereas there is of the akanthos. Further there is no reason for making the Hesperides of Libya dance about the tripod of Apollo at Delphi. The theory rests on the slender basis that according to one Alexandrides of Delphi²⁰ the Libyan city of Ampelos sent a stalk of silphium to the Pythian sanctuary. The akanthos shaft was apparently very rare in ancient Greece. The Delphic example is dated with certainty before 373 and may be as early as 400.²¹ That the dedication at Delphi was appropriate is shown by the akanthos column with superimposed tripod in a painting on a red-figured crater from Thebes.²² Near by are figures of Apollo and Dionysos. Here the tripod is

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 680b.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 680b

¹⁷ Crusius in Pauly-Wissowa, *R.E.*, s. v. *Akantho*, col. 1147.

¹⁸ Dio Chrys., *Or.*, XXXI, 570r. It is significant that all three were represented in the gables of Apollo's temple at Delphi.

¹⁹ *Jour. Int. d' Arch. Num.*, 1907, pp. 302 ff., 307, 309 note. 'Οδηγὸς τῶν Δελφῶν, p. 129.

²⁰ Müller, *F.H.G.*, III, p. 107.

²¹ Praschniker, *Zur Geschichte des Akroters* (1929), pp. 48 ff., who lists the various opinions as to the date of the column. An earlier example of a fluted but curved stalk with rings of leaves is furnished by the acroteria of the Parthenon, although they may have been somewhat later in date than the temple. A much greater resemblance to the akanthos column in general composition is seen in the silphium of Cyrenaean coins. The stalk of the silphium here is not only extremely thick and straight but is vertically ribbed in a way to suggest flutes. Very common is the type with three rings of leaves, a number found also on an Athenian lekythos. Athenian sepulchral stelae share with the Cyrenaean coins the representation of two leaves in profile to right and left, and a third midway between these and bending forward in foreshortened view. The silphium was well known in Athens in the days of Aristophanes as a plant of great value (Aristophanes, *Plutus*, 925). Aristaïos, the son of Apollo, was said to be the first to cultivate the silphium.

²² Figured by Homolle, *B.C.H.*, XXXII, 1908, p. 217.

Apolline, but that on the monument of Lysikrates with its supporting leaves of *akanthos* is Dionysiac. The Delphic shaft with rings of *akanthos* leaves is encircled at the top by three maidens (Fig. 2). They have been called Caryatids and their action

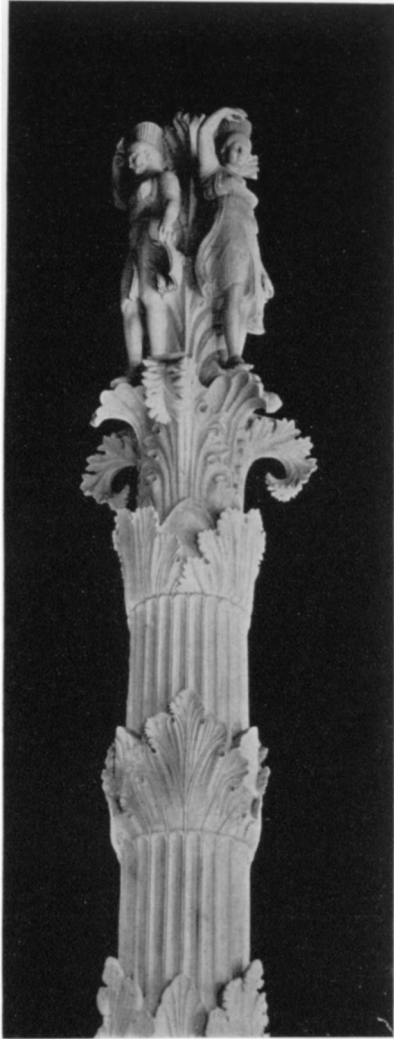


Fig. 1. The Akantos Column at Delphi (Restored)



Fig. 2. The "Caryatids" of the Akantos Column

described as a dance about the tripod which once surmounted the shaft. They are rather the three daughters of Triopas whose statue was set up in the same sanctuary, and their dance is about the tripod as the tomb of the god.²³ It was the dance about

²³ They may be represented with Apollo in an Athenian vase painting (Gerhard, *A.V.*, I, pls. 33-34).

the tripod which accompanied the invocation of Apollo to return from the north, i. e., to come to life again. Such invocation by Alkaios survives in a prose version by Himerios: --- χορούς ἡθέων περὶ τὸν τρίποδα στήσαντες, ἐκάλουν τὸν θεὸν ἐξ Ὑπερβορέων ἐλθεῖν.²⁴ That Pythagoras had this tradition in mind when he wrote his elegy is indicated by the belief of his followers that he was Apollo from the Hyperboreans.²⁵ He was thus identified with the god who spent the winter months in "a paradise of pious mortals"²⁶ and whose epiphany at Delphi was celebrated in February. The epigram interpreted the absence of Apollo in the north as the death of the god. The maidens of the akanthos shaft wear a short garment and a kalathos which should be compared with those of the male dancers on the portal of the heroön at Trysa, a burial place of the late fifth century.²⁷ Perhaps the Lycian prince buried there was identified with the Lycian Apollo and like the god was invoked with a dance.

It follows from this interpretation that the akanthos column was a dedication of Triopian Knidos which built a treasury and set up a statue of Triopas in the sanctuary at Delphi. The sepulchral symbolism of this akanthos of "Nettle City" is the same as that of the akanthos on the base of the omphalos²⁸ which was the tomb of the Python.²⁹ Nor can the appearance of the akanthos shaft in the paintings on the white ground lekythoi of definitely sepulchral purpose be dismissed as merely decorative. In these the column may have one, two, or three rings of leaves springing from the base, middle, and top. The largeness of the cluster of leaves at the base shows that the idea of an akanthos growing on a grave has survived the conventionalization of the stem into a column.³⁰ Further indication of the chthonic significance of this kind of column is given by a vase painting of the underworld.³¹ Within an aedícula sit Persephone and Hades, the latter holding a kantharos.³² The rear columns of the aedícula are Ionic but those in front consist in the lower half of five akanthos clusters, one immediately above the other. This compression is secondary. They were originally spaced on the shaft. Above these is a nude female figure which serves as a Caryatid.

²⁴ *Or.*, XIV, 10.

²⁵ Diog. Laert., *Pythagoras*, 11; cf. Cook, *Zeus*, II, pp. 222-223.

²⁶ Cf. Jebb on Bacchylides, III, 59.

²⁷ Benndorf, *Das Heroon von Gjölbaski-Trysa*, pl. IV; cf. F. Weege, *Der Tanz in der Antike*, p. 47.

²⁸ Daremberg et Saglio, *Dictionnaire*, s. v. omphalos, fig. 5405. A vase from a grave at Centuripe has an egg-shaped finial (miniature omphalos?) with akanthos leaves at its base (*Metropolitan Museum Studies*, II, 1930, p. 189, fig. 2).

²⁹ Hesychios, s. v. Τοξίου βουνός.

³⁰ Riezler, *Weissgrundige attische Lekythen*, pls. 57, 68, akanthos at base only where it cannot be architectural (cf. *ibid.*, text, p. 123); pl. 69, akanthos at base and middle; pl. 94, akanthos at base, middle, and top; pl. 70, akanthos at base and top; pls. 72-73, akanthos at top only. This type approaches most closely the Corinthian column.

³¹ Baumeister, *Denkmäler*, III, p. 1927, fig. 2042a; Spinazzola, *Le Arti Decorative in Pompeii*, pl. 203. The date of the vase is the fourth century.

³² The resemblance of the Hades to the Dionysos of a Theban krater (*B.C.H.*, XXXII, 1908, p. 217) is striking.

This superposition of the female figure on the *akanthos* is another version of the superposition in the Delphic shaft while the female figure may be the ultimate source of the remark of Vitruvius that the Corinthian column imitated the gracefulness of a maiden. The combination of the Ionic and the *akanthos* shafts in the aedicle is as curious as the combination of the Ionic and the Corinthian in the temple of the Phigaleians. Another significant *akanthos* column was that of Alexander's funeral car.³³ Its canopy rested on columns with Ionic capitals but each column had a gold *akanthos* which reached from its middle point almost to the capital. Alexander was

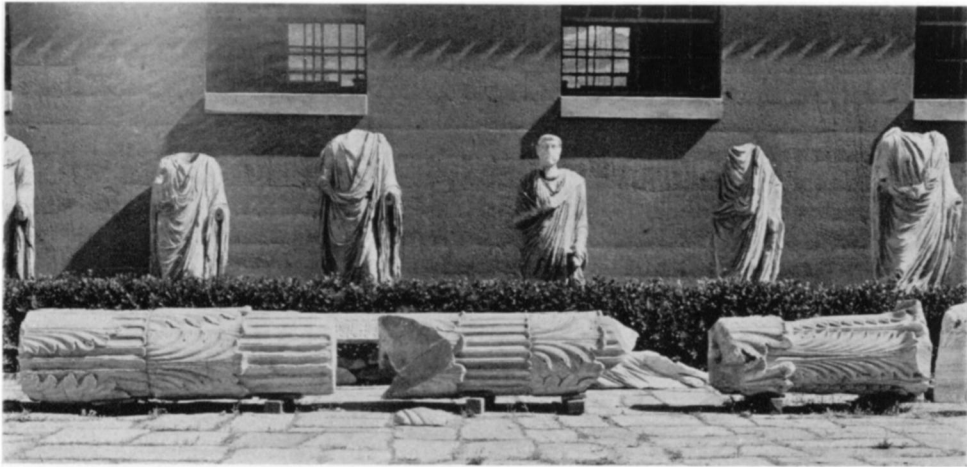


Fig. 3. The *Akanthos* Column at Corinth

buried first at Memphis near which was a town *Akanthos*.³⁴ The *akanthos* of his funeral car and its garlands (including pomegranates?) may have had the same significance as the *akanthoi* upon the flower of which were set garlands of pomegranate and vine at Abydos. The date of the car about 322 B.C. precludes the idea that the *akanthos* was simply decorative. That the *akanthos* of Abydos with its pomegranate and vine was a motif known to Asia Minor is proved by the relief discovered at Pergamon on which a channelled shaft has three sets of *akanthos* leaves from which spring lesser stems with various fruits including the pomegranate and the grape.³⁵ At either side is a *Cybele* on a lion.

³³ Described by Diodoros, XVIII, 26-28.

³⁴ Pausanias, I, 6, 3; Strabo, 809, 35.

³⁵ *Altertümer von Pergamon*, VII, pl. XL; text VII, pp. 317-323. It was not determined what kind of monument received this relief. What are in origin *akanthos* columns frame a painting of a *Maenad* with thyrsus and panther in a Pompeian painting (Beyen, *Die pompejanische Wand-decora-tion*, Taf. 46, no. 106; Walters, *Art of the Romans*, pl. XLI). The connection of the *akanthos* and the vine seems to survive in four columns in the cathedral of Monreale. In these the *akanthos* is at the base while the vines twine around the shafts (illustrated by Eisler, *Orphisch-Dionysische My-sterien-Gedanken in der Christlichen Antike*, Taf. XIII, abb. 86). From the Corinth of St Paul the *akanthos* column may have found its way to Rome and the church of Sta. Prassède.

The solar character of the Triopian Apollo and the relationship of Akantho and Helios suggest a reason for the selection of the name Corinthian for the *akanthos* capital. The temple of Apollo at Corinth occupied a commanding position while tradition said that Briareus awarded its acropolis to Helios whence Corinth was known as the City of the Sun.³⁶ This coincidence makes significant the discovery there of an *akanthos* shaft (Fig. 3)³⁷ and of a fragmentary column, half *akanthos* and half Caryatid(?)—(Fig. 4).³⁸ The Corinthian order perhaps borrowed its *akanthos* capital from the *akanthos* shaft of the solar Apollo. Then the earliest known

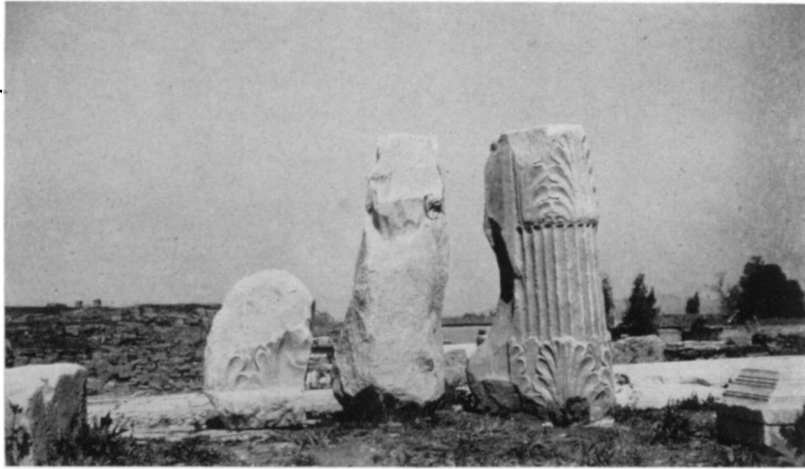


Fig. 4. Fragments A, B, C of an *Akanthos* Shaft
on the "Bema" at Corinth

appearance of the capital in the temple of Apollo at Phigaleia³⁹ would be quite appropriate. Its presence there in an interior colonnade of the Ionic order must have been due to some special consideration. One may conjecture that the *akanthos*, especially its flower which was *εὐφειγγής* "brilliant,"⁴⁰ as the symbol of the solar Apollo dictated the use of the new capital. If the Phigaleians thought of their Apollo Epikourios as the Hyperborean whose periodical return from the gloomy north brought light and vegetation to mankind then the old explanation of the unusual orientation of his temple may be true. It faced the north, the direction from which he came with light to his people. Iktinos the architect probably brought the type of the Corinthian capital from

³⁶ Steph. Byz., *s. v.* 'Ηλίου πόλις.

³⁷ Cf. Broneer, *A.J.A.*, XXXIX, 1935, p. 66, pl. XVIII, 2; the column lies in the foreground. A capital with fragmentary draped human figures (*ibid.*, pl. XIXa), between which appears the upper part of an *akanthos* leaf, has been tentatively assigned to the *akanthos* shaft.

³⁸ Cf. Broneer, *Αρχ. Έφ.*, 1937, p. 127.

³⁹ Cf. Dinsmoor, *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, IV, 1933, p. 212.

⁴⁰ This flower occupies a conspicuous position on the Corinthian capital discovered at Epidauros.

Athens where Kallimachos was credited with its invention. The date of the latter is not definitely known but is usually placed in the late fifth century. Perhaps in his youth he furnished Iktinos with the model.

The story which Vitruvius tells about the Corinthian capital confirms the theory as to the importance of the *akanthos* at Corinth. A maiden described as a *civis Corinthia* died. Upon her tomb her nurse (*nutrix*) placed a *kalathos* containing the girl's favorite cups and covered it with a tile. Underneath the *kalathos* at its middle point there chanced to be a root of *akanthos*. In the spring the root sprouted sending shoots up the sides of the *kalathos* until they reached the tile and were there curved down to form volutes. At this moment Kallimachos happened along and was so delighted with the effect that he made columns with *akanthos* capitals among the Corinthians.⁴¹ The monument of the Corinthian maid must have been a mound of earth to permit the *akanthos* to grow. The plant was probably placed there as a symbol like another Apolline symbol, the tripod, which occupies the same position on the tomb of Glaukos in a vase painting.⁴² The two symbols occurred together in the *akanthos* shaft at Delphi. The basic idea of this dedication is then that the daughters of Triopas dance about the tomb of the solar Apollo which is marked by the tripod and the *akanthos*. The sculptor availed himself of poetic license when he placed the tripod and the dancing maidens at the top of the *akanthos* column.

The *kalathoi* of these maidens bear in relief a ray pattern. It is really incorrect to speak of them as wearing a *kalathos*. The rays are solar and worked in relief as a matter of expediency. To have carved each one free would have been much more difficult and would have exposed the rays to fracture. The intention of the artist is readily realized when a series of dancers is cited from vase paintings. These have been collected by Cook.⁴³ In the earliest, dated 450-440,⁴⁴ each ray is separately indicated against the black background as it is on a krater from Ceglie,⁴⁵ but in other examples the rays are painted in black on a fan-shaped background. This headgear is called a *kalathos* by Cook, but the crown of the wearer's head may be seen above the "*kalathoi*" in some cases.⁴⁶ From this intermediary came the *kalathos*-shaped background for the solar rays which is illustrated by the dancers of the Delphic shaft. The appropriateness of the solar rays for the Triopian maidens is quite obvious.

The solar character of Apolline worship at Knidos and Rhodes is reflected by their names. Knidos, "Nettle City," and Rhodos, "Rose City," like the city *Akanthos* both take their names from prickly plants or rather their flowers which appear as symbols

⁴¹ Vitruvius, *De arch.*, IV, 1, 9.

⁴² Murray, *White Athenian Vases in the British Museum*, pl. XVI.

⁴³ Cook, *Zeus*, III, pp. 995-1003.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, fig. 805.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pl. LXXI, 1-2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, figs. 808-809. There was a dance called *kalathiskos*.

of light. The rose in Homeric times had already furnished the Dawn with the epitheton “rosy-fingered.” The ancient description of the flower of the *akanthos* as “brilliant” has been noted. The connotation of solar light in the name *Rhodos* was very old. One tradition made *Rhode* the wife of *Helios*.⁴⁷ The island of *Rhodes* was colonized from the *Argolid*. *Argos* meant “The Bright City” (from *ἀργός*). The most important temple in *Argos* was dedicated to *Apollo Lykeios*, whose appellative may describe him as a god of light rather than as a wolf.⁴⁸ *Danaos*, who had a daughter *Rhode*, was credited with the foundation of this temple. A colony founded by *Rhodians* especially from *Lindos*, *Gela*, was in its turn given a name of the same sort as its grandparent *Argos*. *Hesychios* defines *γέλα* as *αὐγὴ ἡλίου* and *γελεῖν* as *λάμπειν, ἀνθεῖν*, thus closely associating the ideas of light and flower. The mythical *Argive* king *Gelanor*, the displaced rival of *Danaos*, has *γέλα* as the first component of his name. *Gelas* was a *Carian* word for king. The all important light of the sun seems thus to have determined the names of three ancient related cities. This old tradition justified the erection at the city of *Rhodes* in later times of a colossal image of the solar *Apollo*.

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⁴⁷ *Apollodoros*, I, 4, 6. It is not surprising to find on the *François vase* in the scene of *Achilles* and *Troilos* that *Apollo* and *Rhodia* appear beside the spring where the young *Trojan* was ambushed by *Achilles*. *Furtwaengler*, troubled by the presence of *Rhodia*, suggests that she is possibly a *Trojan* maid (*Griech. Vasenm.*, I, p. 56). But the presence of *Thetis* because of her relation to *Achilles* justifies the presence of *Apollo* as the father of *Troilos*, as he was according to one tradition. *Rhodia* is added as perhaps the consort of *Apollo* and raises her arms to indicate her horror at the impending slaughter of the youth. It is *Furtwaengler's* theory that the vase painter placed the sanctuary of the *Thymbraean Apollo* near the spring at which *Troilos* was caught. He cites the story that *Achilles* sacrificed *Troilos* at the altar of this *Apollo*.

⁴⁸ *Pausanias*, II, 19, 3.