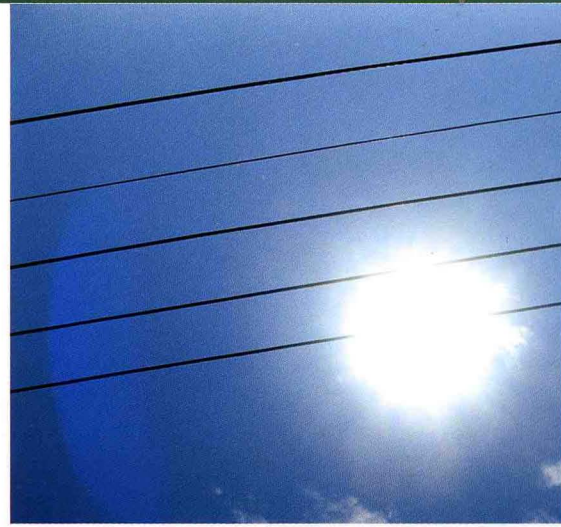


# Apollo's Sacred

# Trees

by Barbara Davies



Bay leaf wreath hanging on the wall as seen on an Ancient Greek vase

Through the ages, visitors have approached Cyprus' shores worshipping the goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite, born from sea foam at Petra Tou Romiou, near Kouklia. But during that era when the ancient gods and goddesses were so much more alive in the hearts and minds of men, Apollo was revered throughout the entire Greek world. Between them, Apollo and Aphrodite were the two most highly revered of the primary gods, and the most representative of the aspirations and attitudes of the ancient Greeks.

Historians and archaeologists agree that Apollo was the Greek counterpart of the Egyptian sun god, Ra, and his predecessor, the Babylonian sun god, Sharmash. Born in a flood of golden light on the island of Delos, and parented by Zeus and Leto, Apollo was the Greek sun-god of light, whose vibrant energy was essential to all life. In addition, he was worshipped as the god of prophecy, healing and music.

All Greek deities had associations with specific plants and animals of the natural world. Apollo's began

at birth when, in Homer's "Hymn to Apollo", his mother grasped the trunk of a palm tree, to give her strength for his delivery. Although there are more than 2,700 species in the palm family, Apollo's palm must be the Cretan palm, *Phoenix theophrasti*, described by the botanist and philosopher, Theophrastus (late 4<sup>th</sup> to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.) and bearing his name. The species' name, Phoenix is the ancient name used by the Greek epic poet, Homer for the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) indicating that it was from Phoenicia (modern Syria and Lebanon). The geographer and historian, Pausanias (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) suggested that Apollo's palm was brought to the Greek world by the advanced Bronze Age Minoans (3000-1100 B.C.) via trade routes from North Africa. Vestigial groves may still be found on Crete and Cyprus, in out of the way locations at lower elevations.

Theophrastus tells us that the unusual, winter-flowering dogwood tree, Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*), was the hardwood cut from Apollo's sacred groves on Mt Ida in Troas, Asia



Spring time in Cyprus. A hill covered with young pine and cypress trees.



Sun-god Apollo still plays on the strings of nature.

Minor, to build the Trojan horse. Thus, Apollo's support determined the fate of the siege to reclaim Helen and fix Greek control of the region. The botanist noted the cherry's hardness compared to that of horn. In honour of their patron, Apollo, Greek shepherds often fashioned their crooks, or staffs, from its sacred wood.

The most well-known of Apollo's sacred trees must be the daphne or sweet bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), cultivated since ancient times and of great symbolic significance. At a young age, legend says, Apollo was called upon to slay the terrible dragon-serpent, Python, sent by Zeus' wife, Hera, to torment her love-rival, Apollo's mother, Leto. Python was guardian of an oracle site and, when Apollo slew Python, he also took over the site, establishing the most important oracle of ancient times and site of Apollo-worship, Delphi.

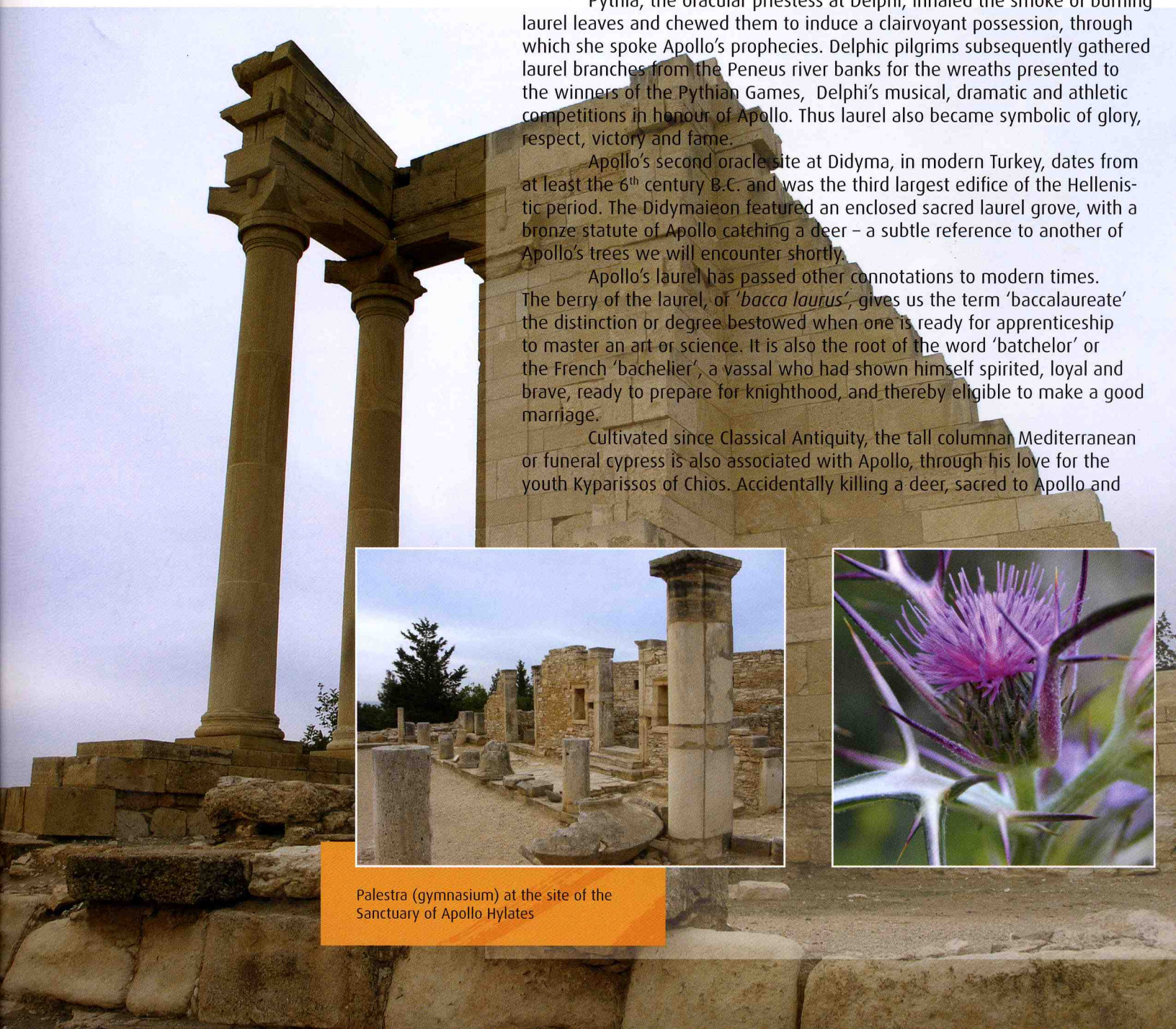
The legend continues that after this heroic event, Apollo went to the nearby river, Peneus, in the Vale of Tempe, to cleanse himself. There, he encountered Daphne, daughter of the river god, and was intoxicated by her beauty. As she fled from his pursuit, Daphne, calling for her father's protection, was transformed into a laurel tree on the bank of the river. Thereafter, Apollo made it his most favoured and sacred of trees. According to Pausanias, the first Apollo sanctuary was built of laurel boughs.

Pythia, the oracular priestess at Delphi, inhaled the smoke of burning laurel leaves and chewed them to induce a clairvoyant possession, through which she spoke Apollo's prophecies. Delphic pilgrims subsequently gathered laurel branches from the Peneus river banks for the wreaths presented to the winners of the Pythian Games, Delphi's musical, dramatic and athletic competitions in honour of Apollo. Thus laurel also became symbolic of glory, respect, victory and fame.

Apollo's second oracle site at Didyma, in modern Turkey, dates from at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and was the third largest edifice of the Hellenistic period. The Didymaieion featured an enclosed sacred laurel grove, with a bronze statue of Apollo catching a deer – a subtle reference to another of Apollo's trees we will encounter shortly.

Apollo's laurel has passed other connotations to modern times. The berry of the laurel, of '*bacca laurus*', gives us the term 'baccalaureate' the distinction or degree bestowed when one is ready for apprenticeship to master an art or science. It is also the root of the word 'batchelor' or the French 'bachelier', a vassal who had shown himself spirited, loyal and brave, ready to prepare for knighthood, and thereby eligible to make a good marriage.

Cultivated since Classical Antiquity, the tall columnar Mediterranean or funeral cypress is also associated with Apollo, through his love for the youth Kyparissos of Chios. Accidentally killing a deer, sacred to Apollo and



Palestra (gymnasium) at the site of the Sanctuary of Apollo Hylates



his twin sister, Artemis, the boy's grief transformed him into a cypress tree (*Cupressus sempervirens*). The Ancients considered this a 'male' plant, because of its exceptionally hard wood. It was used for construction of sarcophagi and sanctuary doors, as at Artemis' Temple at Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Even into modern times, it is planted in cemeteries as a symbol of perennial remembrance. The Athenian statesman and poet, Solon (late 7<sup>th</sup> to early 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) engraved the text of his legal reforms on tablets of the durable wood, indicating the strength and endurance of law.

The principal tree planted to form sacred groves or woodlands near Apollo's temples and sanctuaries, the cypress' straight, hard wood also made it the preferred choice for the extensive naval building needed to support the Greek world's military and trade dominance. For thousands of years, the wood was felled to use and to ship to Egypt and the continent, causing serious concern over deforestation, as attested by a decree of the Venetian State in 1514, then the controlling power in Cyprus, Crete and beyond, forbidding further export of cypress wood. It takes a strong leap of the imagination to envision the verdant tree cover which once cloaked these now-arid Mediterranean islands.

Although Mycenaean and Aegean influences had touched Cypriot culture much earlier, Greek Achaean culture and language became truly embedded here from about the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C. A circa 1000B.C. inscription from a Kouklia tomb bears the earliest Greek script found on Cyprus and it was probably about this time that the

Apollo cult and all its traditions became firmly established on the island.

Apollo's presence and blessings were always invoked at the founding of a new city. Thus, a Sanctuary of Apollo Hylates (Apollo of the Woodland) was built for the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. founding of Nea Pafos (New Pafos, our modern-day Pafos) as attested by an inscription there from its High Priest Tarvas. The scant remains of this site rest on private property. Other ruined Apollo sites are recorded at Amasos, Eristia, Tembros and Tamasos.

However, the largest and most significant historic religious centre in Cyprus was the Sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion (Curium). Apollo's eponym Hylates (of the Woodlands) is found only on Cyprus, thus highlighting his affinity with his sacred trees, and the more heavily forested character of the island at that time. The Sanctuary of Apollo Hylates dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., when Cyprus was a prosperous Greek island of ten city-states. Although various outside cultures subsequently ruled Cyprus, the Apollo site flourished until the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. when its demise was sealed by violent earthquakes and the flowering of Christianity.

Extensive excavation and limited restoration have created a complex and evocative picture of the Sanctuary's activities. Of particular interest, though sometimes overlooked, is a paved, circular walkway around seven rock-cut pits for sacred trees, used for ceremonial dancing, in the west enclosure. In Apollo's symbology, these are the seven planets which rotated around Apollo in his manifestation as the sun. The ceremonial dancers would have taken on this celestial aspect in their terpsichorean rhythm, as they moved around what were most probably seven *Cupressus sempervirens* trees. A visitor at the site today will find a few native rosemary and pine tree, but with little effort it is easy to imagine its earlier, wild majesty.



Rosemary shrubs at the site of Apollo Hylates



British Royal Air Force trying to trace god Apollo.