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## The Discovery of Inscriptions and the Legitimation of New Cults

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The practice of inscribing texts on permanent media such as stone or bronze was probably one of the most characteristic and enduring practices in the Greco-Roman world. Today, these inscriptions constitute elements essential to our understanding and knowledge of ancient society. On the one hand, the everyday, ordinary aspect of these texts gives us a less idealized picture of the classical world; on the other hand, the materiality of the medium makes distant antiquity more real, more accessible. The discovery of new epigraphic evidence is always exciting, and gives scholars an opportunity to display their skill in deciphering.

In antiquity, finding and re-using inscriptions, whether genuine or forged, played an important role in shaping and understanding the world: then as today, the reinterpretation of ancient inscribed texts allowed a reconstruction of the past, which was then employed as a way to manage the present. Poets, historians, and antiquarians quoted and discussed inscriptions, in both Greek and Latin, with a whole range of motives.<sup>1</sup> This paper examines the circumstances in which inscriptions were discovered both in pagan and Christian antiquity and focuses on the ways they were used in the legitimation of new cults.

<sup>1</sup> See the contributions of Higbie 1999; Tronson 2000; Boardman 2002 (index *sv* ‘inscriptions’); Haake 2004; Zizza 2006; Pownall 2008. For the uses of archaeological sources in Greco-Roman Antiquity in general, see Schnapp 1993, 57–73; Boardman 2002.

In the Greco-Roman world, religious practice was so conservative that it relied mainly on oral tradition, with the exception of a few marginal areas where writing was used:<sup>2</sup> for example, inscribed sacred calendars, cult regulations, records of divine epiphanies, and sales of priesthoods. As shown by Baumgarten, however, the written texts were often used to feign antiquity, and thus to invent a tradition in order to legitimate invention.<sup>3</sup>

Among these inscribed documents of ancient religion, oracles played a prominent role in justifying past events or seeking approval of present situations. The practice of publicly inscribing oracular questions and/or answers, both genuine and bogus, is attested throughout antiquity, from the sixth century BC to at least the fourth century AD.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, divine prescriptions on stone were re-used long after their production, often in a context totally different from that of their original use. Accounts of the discovery of inscribed oracles are to be understood within the broader context of the well-attested theme of the discovery of books for purposes of political or religious propaganda.<sup>5</sup> It is enough to mention here the text which Agesilaus claims to have found in the tomb of Alcmena (Plutarch, *On Socrates' Daemon* 5) or the bronze tablets about Caesar's fate excavated in Capua (Suetonius, *Iulius Caesar* 81.1–2).

We shall see that discovering oracles on stone was not only a literary *topos*. On the contrary, there is good evidence that shows how the discovery of old prophecies was used to stage the reappearance of oracles announcing or demanding the introduction of a cult. As the classical world lived in and for the past, the introduction of something new was felt to be fearsome and disturbing. The (re) foundation of cults, therefore, needed to be justified by recourse to a traditional authority.

Pausanias (4.26) records, for example, the Messenian legend about the restoration of the mysteries of the Great Gods in Andania during the fourth century BC. The reintroduction of the cult, together with the re-establishment of Messene, was legitimized by the discovery of sacred texts contained in a bronze *hydria*. It was claimed that this

<sup>2</sup> See Beard 1991; Henrichs 2003, 207–66.

<sup>3</sup> Baumgarten 1998, 122–43.

<sup>4</sup> See Somolinos 1991; Athanassiadi 1989–90; Busine 2005a.

<sup>5</sup> See Speyer 1970.

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vessel had been dug up on Mount Ithome by one Epiteles from Argos, thus instructed by a dream. Inside the hydria Epaminondas is reported to have found some rolled-up tin on which ‘was inscribed the initiation to the Great Gods’.

If this roll had ever existed, it is difficult to decide whether it preserved an early oral tradition or whether its contents were a late reconstruction put together to legitimate the resumption of the Andanian mysteries after an interval. What can be stated with certainty is that the detailed account of the circumstances in which the sacred texts were discovered appears to be a significant component in the process of validating the restoration of the mysteries.

In the following cases, written divine prescriptions, discovered in private and public spheres, were employed to validate the building of a new place of worship. In Thessalonike, a worshipper of Sarapis is said to have found a text placed under his pillow while he was asleep. This letter (ἐπιστολά) was the confirmation of a dream about a divine recommendation to found a Sarapeion in Opous.<sup>6</sup> The material on which the letter was written is not specified. The inscription, however, clearly established the authority and pre-eminence of the physical document over the oral story given in the dream (lines 16–17: ἰδὼν τὰ γεγραμμένα σύμφωνα τοῖς [vac. ὑπὸ Ξεναινέτ]ου εἰρημένους). According to L. Bricault, the inscription, which dates from the first century AD, was most probably located somewhere in the sanctuary dedicated to Sarapis and might be a copy of an earlier text dating from the third-second century BC.<sup>7</sup>

At Praeneste, Cicero cites the town’s local ‘annals of Praeneste’ to explain how the oracular complex of Fortuna there was founded after the discovery in a rock of pieces of wood inscribed with old characters (*perfracto saxo sortis erupisse in robore insculptas priscarum litterarum notis: De Divinatione* 2. 85–86). Again, it was a dream that led to the excavation of the tablets.

In both cases, the decision to build a new sanctuary could theoretically have been taken on the basis of written texts discovered after a genuine dream. However, we can reasonably presume that these prophecies were pseudo-epigraphical and produced for the purpose of the foundation.

<sup>6</sup> IG X 2. 255 = RICIS 586.

<sup>7</sup> Bricault 2005, 150.

The following case serves to illustrate that people did not hesitate to produce fake oracular inscriptions at the occasion both of a cult innovation and of the creation of a new sanctuary.<sup>8</sup> According to Lucian's *Alexander or The False Prophet*, forgeries explicitly contributed to justifying the foundation of the Asklepios–Glykon cult by Alexander at Abonoteichos. In chapter 10, Alexander is said to have come to the temple of Apollo in Chalcedon, the oldest in the city. There, they 'would have buried bronze tablets (*κατορύττουσι δέλτους χαλκᾶς*) telling that very soon Asklepios, would move to Pontos with his father Apollo and take up his residence at Abonoteichos. The tablets were discovered at an opportune time (*αἱ δέλτοι ἐξεπίτηδες εὐρεθείσαι*) and this story spread quickly to all Bithynia and Pontos; but to Abonoteichos before anywhere else. As a result, the people of that city immediately voted to build a temple, and began to dig for the foundations'.

Despite its satirical character, this account of the excavation of oracular forgeries constitutes very interesting evidence about the institution of a new cult together with the building of a new place of worship.<sup>9</sup>

Surprisingly, this pagan practice was taken over by Christians seeking to justify re-use of pagan temples. Indeed, the miraculous discovery of allegedly old oracles was integrated into the staging of the foundation of churches as well.

This re-use of oracular texts generated the idea, developed by Christian authors, that their God had inspired some pagan prophets to prepare gentiles for the coming of Christ. As a result, they considered pagan gods as one of the sources of their doctrine.<sup>10</sup> In the fourth century AD, Lactantius and Eusebius initiated recourse to genuine pagan prophecies as a *praeparatio evangelica*. Eusebius and Gregory of Nazianzus were the first to comment on oracles in order to present Apollo as a prophet who predicted the end of polytheism and the victory of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> At the very end of the fifth century AD, the *prooimion* of the so-called Tübingen *Theosophy*, the most

<sup>8</sup> For other ancient epigraphical forgeries, see Chaniotis 1988, 265–72.

<sup>9</sup> On the historical feature of the work, see Weinreich 1921; Sfameni-Gasparro 1999; Chaniotis 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Busine 2005a, 362–73 (with previous bibliography).

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 5.15.6: *περὶ τοῦ ἐκλελοιπέναι αὐτῶν τὰ βωάμενα χρηστήρια*; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina* 2.2.7, PG 37, col. 1571: *Φοῖβος μαντεύειτο θεῶν μόνον οὐκετ' ἔόντων*.

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important Christian collection of pagan oracles, clearly aimed to impart antique status, and so a properly sacred authority to the Christian religion.<sup>12</sup> In the first book, its anonymous author quotes both genuine pagan oracles and pseudo-epigraphical prophecies in order to demonstrate that the pagan gods and prophets had predicted the main doctrines of Christianity, such as the existence of one God and the Holy Trinity.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, some Christian forgers also produced *ex eventu* prophecies about the future precedence of Christianity, allegedly uttered in oracular sanctuaries dedicated to Apollo.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, they might have been reacting against oracles about the end of Christianity produced in pagan circles.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, John Malalas (sixth century AD), for example, records that the emperor Augustus came to the Pythia seeking to know who would be the ruler of the Roman empire after him (τίς μετ' ἐμὲ βασιλεύσει τῆς Ῥωμαϊκῆς). The emperor was then given notice of the coming of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, some oracles attributed to Apollo by Christian sources concern the future extinction of Apollo's own cult and the admission of his own impotence in the face of the new religion. Philostorgius (fourth–fifth century AD) writes that Oribasios, the emperor Julian's physician, came to the oracle at Delphi where Apollo allegedly prophesied that his own 'cabin' would cease to exist.<sup>17</sup> The same prophecy as that delivered to Augustus about the arrival of the Christ is also attributed in the *Theosophy* to Artemis, who started moaning when asked about the fate of her sacred precinct.<sup>18</sup>

In some cases, prophecies tackle more precisely the construction of a church over pagan ruins. According to *Theosophy* 1.5, Apollo tragically laments the destruction of his temple by fire. The twenty-

<sup>12</sup> See now the reconstruction of the original text by Beatrice 2001. On earlier oracles collections, see Busine 2005b.

<sup>13</sup> *Theosophy, Epitome* 1 (ed. Beatrice) = 1 (ed. Erbse).

<sup>14</sup> On the role of Christian forgeries from a general point of view, see Gray 1988; Beatrice 2002a.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 18. 53–4. See Chadwick 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Malalas, *Chronographia* 5.5 (ed. Thurn). Similar versions in *Theosophorum Graecorum Fragmenta. Thesauri Minores* χ<sub>10</sub> (ed. Erbse); Cedrenos, *Compendium Historiarum*, CSHB 1. 320; Souda, s.v. *Ἀγούστος*.

<sup>17</sup> Philostorgius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7 F 1c (ed. Bidez): οὐκέτι Φοῖβος ἔχει καλύβαν. See Parke and Wormell 1956, 194–5.

<sup>18</sup> *Theosophy* 1. 52 (ed. Beatrice) = 51 (ed. Erbse): πρὸς τὸν ἑαυτῆς . . . τεμενίτην.

nine-verse oracle explains in a Christological perspective how a mortal and heavenly man (line 11: *βροτὸς . . . οὐράνιος φῶς*) has chased him away from his tripods.

As in the tale of the foundation of the temple at Abonoteichos, the Christian compiler begins by explaining the miraculous discovery of the sacred text, said to have been found ‘at Delphi, during the fifth year of Anastasius’ reign, on 18 August, that is, the first day of the fourth indiction, on a Sunday, after a great flood’.<sup>19</sup> The author recalls that the oracle was ‘inscribed on a stone near the foundations of the *cella* of the temple’.<sup>20</sup> It is important to point out that the account displaying these chronological and topographical details suggests the significance of the discovery itself, and not only of the content of the revelation.

A comparable story here bears closer attention. Several Christian authors report that an old inscribed oracle was found, in which Apollo foretells the transformation of his temple into a church. With minor variations, they all record that, when asked about the future of his place of worship (*τίνος ἔσται δόμος οὗτος*), Apollo prophesied: ‘Do whatever leads to virtue and order, I prophesy a single triune God ruling on high whose imperishable Logos will be conceived in a virgin (*οὐ λόγος ἀφθιτος ἐν ἀδαεὶ κόρη ἔγκυος ἔσται*). Like a fiery arrow he will course through the middle of the world, gather up everything and bring it as a gift to the Father. This house will be hers. Her name is Maria (*αὐτῆς ἔσται δόμος, Μαρία δὲ τοῦνομα αὐτῆς*)’.<sup>21</sup>

All the quotations of this prophecy about the transformation of the pagan temple into a church clearly aimed at showing that the devotion to the Virgin Mary had been foretold by the Greek deity. It should be stressed that most accounts of this oracle specify its material form as well as its miraculous discovery.

<sup>19</sup> *Theosophy* 1.5 (ed. Beatrice) = 16 (ed. Erbse) : ἐν Δελφοῖς ἐκὸς τῷ πέμπτῳ ἔτει τῆς βασιλείας Ἀναστασίου, μηνὶ ἀγούστῳ ἡ', ἰνδικτιῶνος, ἡμέρα α', γενομένης ἐπομβρίας μεγάλης κατακλυσμοῦ δύναμιν ἔχούσης, ἐγγεγραμμένος ἐν πλακί καὶ ἀποκείμενος εἰς τὰ θεμέλια τοῦ ναοῦ αὐτοῦ εἰδωλειον.

<sup>20</sup> *Theosophy* 1.5 (ed. Beatrice) = 16 (ed. Erbse): ἐγγεγραμμένος ἐν πλακί καὶ ἀποκείμενος εἰς τὰ θεμέλια τοῦ ναοῦ αὐτοῦ εἰδωλειον.

<sup>21</sup> *Theosophy* 1.54 (ed. Beatrice) = 53 (ed. Erbse), and the sources discussed below, cited in nn. 22, 24, 26, and 27.

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The first reference to this oracle is found in the *Oratio in Sanctam Mariam Dei Genitricem* of Theodotus of Ancyra (first half of the fifth century AD). This anti-Nestorian bishop states that the oracle was addressed by Apollo to the Athenians overcome by a plague. The text is said to have been ‘carved in Athens on the altar of the Unknown God, the same as the one mentioned by the Apostle Paul’,<sup>22</sup> but nothing indicates whether Theodotus saw it personally or if he depends on another source. The passage is in line with subsequent Christian interpretations of Paul’s mention of the altar of the Unknown God in Acts 17.23.<sup>23</sup> Later, the same prophecy in prose was again to be connected with the Athenian altar in a work falsely attributed to Athanasios of Alexandria.<sup>24</sup>

Malalas also quotes the text, perhaps based on the lost *Chronicle* of Eustathios of Epiphaneia.<sup>25</sup> However that may be, the Antiochene chronicler relates that the oracle was given to Jason and the Argonauts when they were attacked by Kyzikos, king of Hellespont. They had come to a place called Pythia Therma, where they made sacrifices and questioned the deity.<sup>26</sup> As regards the prophecy about the Virgin Mary, we are told that ‘they inscribed the oracle in bronze letters on a marble stone, and placed it over the door of the temple, calling it “House of Rhea, mother of the gods”. According to this *interpretatio christiana* of the legend of Kyzikos’ meeting with Jason, the disastrous destiny of the pagan place of worship became true when ‘many years later, this house was turned into a church of the Holy Maria Theotokos by Emperor Zeno’.<sup>27</sup> The association of Rhea/Kybele and Theotokos clearly aimed at showing the continuity of cult between the old temple of the Kyzicene mother of the gods and the newly built church of the Mother of God. John of Antioch (seventh century AD) also links the legend of the foundation of Rhea’s temple

<sup>22</sup> Theodotus of Ancyra, *Oratio in Sanctam Mariam Dei Genitricem*, PO 19. 3, no. 93, 333–4.

<sup>23</sup> See Kaldellis 2009, 51 n. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Pseudo-Athanasios of Alexandria, *Interpretatio of the Temple in Athens*, PG 28, 1428c–1429a.

<sup>25</sup> Treadgold 2007, 4–9; Kaldellis 2009, 49–50.

<sup>26</sup> Malalas, *Chronographia* 4.8 (ed. Thurn). A similar version will also be recorded by Cedrenos (eleventh–twelfth cent.), *Compendium Historiarum*, CSHB 1.209.

<sup>27</sup> Malalas, *Chronographia* 4.8 (ed. Thurn): *καὶ γράψαντες τὸν χρησμὸν . . . ἐν λίθῳ, ἤτοι μαρμάρῳ, χαλκίοις γράμμασι, ἔθηκαν εἰς τὸ ὑπέρθυρον τοῦ ναοῦ, καλέσαντες τὸν οἶκον Ῥέας μητρὸς θεῶν. ὅστις οἶκος μετὰ χρόνους πολλοὺς ἐγένετο ἐκκλησία τῆς ἀγίας καὶ θεοτόκου Μαρίας ὑπὸ Ζήνωνος βασιλείῳ.*

by Jason and the Argonauts with its future conversion into a church of Theotokos.<sup>28</sup>

In the *Theosophy*, the prophecy is similarly connected with the cities of Kyzikos and Athens. The introduction to the bogus oracle provides more details about the circumstances in which the inscription reappeared: ‘in the years of the emperor Leo, an idol’s temple of the same age as the city of Kyzikos was on the point of being transformed by the citizens into the chapel of our most glorious mistress the Theotokos. An oracle was found incised on a great stone along the temple wall’.<sup>29</sup>

The text of the *Theosophy*, or more probably a later marginal note,<sup>30</sup> adds that ‘the same inscription was found in Athens on the left side of the temple, at the gate, being indistinguishably identical to the other’,<sup>31</sup> but it does not state the time of the discovery.

Christians thus provide information about the medium on which the oracle was inscribed; about the circumstances and the purpose of its being put into writing; and about its location and the date of its later reappearance. They also describe the consequences of the miraculous discovery: the pagan cult was supplanted by a Marian one, and the temple was transformed into a Christian church.

Would it be unreasonable or too bold to imagine that the invented oracle had really been carved, then buried, and finally rediscovered when the Christians decided to build a church near a pagan temple, just as Alexander reportedly did when he founded the Glykon cult? We should remember that other oracular pieces of the *Theosophy* are recorded on stone elsewhere. The most spectacular example is certainly an oracle quoted in *Theosophy* 1.2, which L. Robert was able to identify with an inscription on the city gate of Oinoanda in Lycia.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, P.F. Beatrice has also proposed considering as genuine five oracles which are said in *Theosophy* 1.41–5 to have been inscribed

<sup>28</sup> John of Antioch, *FHG* 4.548 (ed. Müller). Note that the oracle quoted here is slightly different, probably corrupted.

<sup>29</sup> *Theosophy* 1.54 (ed. Beatrice) = 53 (ed. Erbse): ἐν τοῖς χρόνοις τοῦ βασιλέως Λέοντος ναὸς εἰδώλου, ὀμηλιξ τῆς Κυζικηνῶν πόλεως, ἔμελλε παρὰ τῶν πολιτῶν εἰς εὐκτήριον ματασκευασθῆναι οἶκον τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν θεοτόκου, καὶ εὐρέθη ἐν λίθῳ μεγάλῳ κατὰ τὸ πλεῖρον τοῦ νεῶ χρησμός ἐγκοκολαμμένος.

<sup>30</sup> Kaldellis 2009, 49.

<sup>31</sup> *Theosophy* 1.54 (ed. Beatrice) = 53 (ed. Erbse): ὁ δὲ αὐτὸς εὐρέθη καὶ ἐν Ἀθήναις ἐν τῷ ἀριστερῷ μέτρῳ τοῦ νεῶ κατὰ τὴν πύλην, ἀπαραλλάκτως ὁμοίως ὧν ἐκεῖνον.

<sup>32</sup> Robert 1971.



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in Egypt at Ombos, Koptos' and Elephantine.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, one may wonder why, despite L. Robert's irrefutable demonstrations, scholars have so far been reluctant to admit the documentary value of these oracular excerpts.

In the midst of scholars' indifference or scepticism, C. Mango suggested as early as 1995 that the inscription mentioned in *Theosophy* 1.54 about Maria's church had probably existed in Athens, and argued that this would provide evidence that the Parthenon was turned into a church dedicated to the Theotokos.<sup>34</sup>

New epigraphical evidence in the Aegean islands now confirms Mango's intuition: indeed, a unique inscription recording the oracle about the new church dedicated to the Virgin Mary was found in 2002 on the island of Ikaria.<sup>35</sup> As G. Deligiannakis stresses, the archaeological context seems to coincide with the stories of the miraculous discovery of the inscription in (or near) a pagan temple. The Ikaria stone can be associated with a large basilica (ninth century) most probably built over an earlier building, and itself now located beneath the church of Aghia Eirene at Oinoe.<sup>36</sup>

A. Kaldellis has recently reassessed and discussed in detail the implications of this find in the context of archaeological evidence in Athens. Indeed, remains of the Christian Parthenon enable one to date the conversion of Athena's temple in the second half of the fifth century AD.<sup>37</sup> According to Kaldellis, the oracle must have come from Athens; and he speculates that it might even have been inscribed on the Altar of the Unknown God as stated by Theodotus of Ancyra. In this perspective, the text would have confirmed the Apostle Paul's attempt to convert the Athenians through recourse to the authority of their ancient poets.<sup>38</sup>

Be that as it may, literary evidence shows that the emperors Leo (457–74) and Zeno (474–491) made use of the oracle in order to promote the cult of the Theotokos. Recent studies on monasteries in Constantinople have highlighted that Leo and Verina were the first to promote actively the Marian cult, and not Pulcheria as usually stated.<sup>39</sup> This new religious policy was a result of the Council of

<sup>33</sup> Beatrice 2002b, 260–4. <sup>34</sup> Mango 1995.

<sup>35</sup> IG XII 6.2, 1265; Kaldellis 2009, 51–2, fig. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Deligiannakis, forthcoming. <sup>37</sup> Kaldellis 2009, 47–53.

<sup>38</sup> Kaldellis 2009, 51–2. <sup>39</sup> James 2005, 145–52.

Chalcedon, which modified the status of the city of Constantinople.<sup>40</sup> Although never quoted in this context,<sup>41</sup> the Kyzikos examples are obvious witnesses of Leo's and Zeno's undertaking of the foundation of places of worship dedicated to Theotokos outside the capital. As such, the shaping of imperial ideology was reinforced by the discovery of pseudo-pagan oracles announcing Marian worship through the Byzantine world.

The undeniable physical nature of the Ikaria stone shows once and for all that fake oracles about the introduction of the cult of Theotokos had in effect been inscribed and placed near a place of worship. In consequence, Christians not only adopted the idea that founding a new cult should be validated by a traditional authority, but they also undertook the production of inscriptions and their narratives and the performance of the excavation and rediscovery of the oracular texts.

Apollo's dire prediction on stone shows that his prophetic power was recognized by Christians to such a degree that his cult building could immediately be accepted as a proper residence for the Mother of God.<sup>42</sup> This runs counter to a commonly assumed scenario in which temples were converted only after a period of abandonment.<sup>43</sup>

It should be stressed that Christian authorities appear to have chosen to build these churches of the Virgin Mary near or over temples dedicated to female deities—here namely Athena, Rhea, and Artemis. Epigraphic evidence as well as literary texts indicate that the cults of Athena Parthenos at Athens, of Rhea/Kybele at Kyzikos, and of Artemis Tauropolos at Ikaria survived at least until the fourth or even the fifth century.<sup>44</sup> Continuity between pagan and Christian worship was preserved. As an instrument of conversion, the oracle provided pagans with the religious sanction that would allow them to identify the Virgin Mary with their ancestral goddess.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Pentcheva 2006, 189.

<sup>41</sup> But see Deligiannakis, forthcoming.

<sup>42</sup> On Christian adherence to pagan gods' prophetic power, see Potter 1994.

<sup>43</sup> On the various types of temple conversion, see, for example, Ward-Perkins 1999; Foschia 2000; Bayliss 2004; Hahn et al. 2008; Kaldellis 2009, 31–40.

<sup>44</sup> For Athens, see Kaldellis 2009, 19–23. For Kyzikos, Zosimos (2.31.2) recounts that Constantine admired Kybele's cult statue so much that he had it brought from Kyzikos to Constantinople: see Roller 1999, 334. For Ikaria, see Deligiannakis, forthcoming.

<sup>45</sup> On the prefiguration of the Virgin Mary in Kybele, see Borgeaud 1996.

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In addition, the creation of the false oracle goes to show that Christian authorities adopted and adapted the former role of the oracular sanctuaries in regulating cult activity, such as the introduction of new cults. At the same time, they took over the religious authority of the cities, which was henceforth underpinned by a centralized power.

The large-scale diffusion of identical copies of Apollo's pseudo-prophecy at least in Kyzikos, Ikaria, and Athens also finds a parallel in the pagan world: these inscriptions can be compared with dedications 'To the gods and goddesses according to the interpretation of the Apollo from Claros' disseminated in the empire in the second century AD.<sup>46</sup> The ten or so inscribed texts, reproduced exactly, were clearly issued by officials at Apollo's shrine at Claros in Ionia. Likewise, fifth-century emperors presumably took the initiative in propagating the same oracle in different places in order to support their promotion of the cult of the Theotokos. Afterwards, imperial initiatives to build Marian churches were probably taken over at the local level by ecclesiastical circles. In this respect, G. Deligiannakis has proposed that the Ikaria inscription could be linked to a 'mopping-up operation' by the bishop of Samos for the conversion of the people in the region.<sup>47</sup>

We have already mentioned that later, during Anastasius' reign (491–518), a similar performance of an oracular discovery was again used in the debates over monophysite orthodoxy.<sup>48</sup> As P.F. Beatrice argues, the oracle sets moderate monophysite Christology as supported by Anastasius himself against pro-Chalcedon partisans.<sup>49</sup> On this occasion, the discovery in Delphi of an oracle about the future of Apollo's temple contributed to justifying the ideology of imperial policy. Given this, it is reasonable to assume that this oracle too could have actually been engraved in the sanctuary at Delphi.

In conclusion, this paper has reviewed the manner in which old inscriptions were purported to have been discovered long after they had been written, and how they contributed to the introduction of new cults and the construction of new places of worship. It is worthy

<sup>46</sup> See Jones 2005; Busine 2005, 184–9.

<sup>47</sup> Deligiannakis, forthcoming.

<sup>48</sup> *Theosophy* 1.5 (ed. Beatrice) = 16 (ed. Erbse). See above, at n. 19.

<sup>49</sup> Beatrice 1997; Beatrice (2001) xxxvii, 10–12. For other interpretations of the Christological tendencies of the pseudo-oracle, see Daley 1995.

of note that the tangible nature of the artefacts increased the effectiveness of the divine prescriptions.

I hope to have shown that, despite lack of details about each stage in the process, earlier examples of oracular inscriptions about cult foundations can now be better understood—thanks in general to the more explicit Christian evidence for this practice, and in particular thanks to the recent discovery of the inscription justifying the introduction of the cult of the Virgin Mary on the island of Ikaria. Literary accounts (for example, those of Lucian) should now be given more credit when they relate how oracles were created, inscribed, and later discovered for the purpose of founding new cults. In this regard, scholars, previously convinced by L. Robert's seminal demonstrations of the genuine origin of some pagan oracles quoted in the *Theosophy*, should now also acknowledge the documentary value of its pseudo-epigraphical material.

In spite of the dramatic decline of inscriptions all around the Roman empire from the third century AD onwards, Christians undertook in the second half of the fifth century AD to inscribe oracles, just as they had been since the archaic period. The resumption of this old religious practice underlines their attachment to the past.

In addition, the diachronic analysis of pagan and Christian narratives allows us to understand better the common fear of novelty, especially in religious matters. In this respect, references to inscribed oracles, though mostly fake, aimed at sanctioning a suspicious change within the tradition.

We may find it paradoxical that Christians tried to legitimize their faith and religion by constantly referring to the classical past. Since the eschatological conception of time was oriented towards the future rather than towards the past, frequent Christian recourse to what happened long before seems to contradict their expectation of an imminent parousia and its subsequent eschatological events.<sup>50</sup>

This apparent contradiction can however be explained by the fact that Greeks and Romans, among whom Christians tended to be accepted, considered anything new with great suspicion. That is precisely why one of the most severe charges repeatedly levelled at the Christians was that they were a new nation with a new religion.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See Inglebert 2001, 307–15.

<sup>51</sup> See Pépin 1958, 466–70; Kofsky 2000, 77–8. This accusation still needed to be refuted in the fifth century AD, see Malley 1978, 239–44.

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Christianity could therefore not spread in a Greco-Roman world without claiming deep-seated roots in the history of both Hebrews and Greeks.<sup>52</sup> Creating an acceptable past for the new religion was an unavoidable stage in the wider Christianizing process. And with this end in view, what could be more spectacular and convincing than the miraculous discovery of a beautiful inscription?

**Abbreviations**

- CSHB *Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*  
FHG *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, ed. Müller  
IG *Inscriptiones Graecae*  
PG *Patrologia Graeca*  
PO *Patrologia Orientalis*  
RICIS Bricault, L. 2005. *Recueil des Inscriptions concernant les Cultes Isiaques (RICIS)*. Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres.

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Gardner et al. 2008.

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