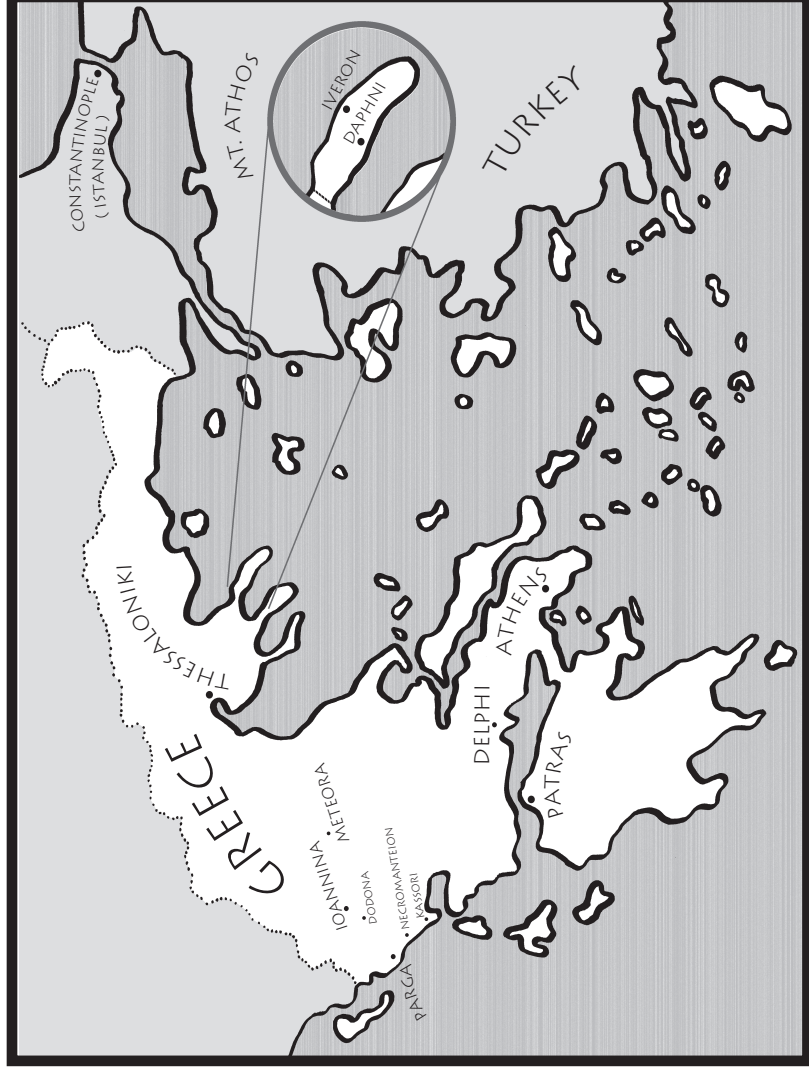


THE FINAL ORACLE

KEY LOCATIONS
OF THE PAST
AND PRESENT



SCALE IN MILES 125



PROLOG

Delphi, Greece, 393 A.D.

The little white goat stood impassively on the marble platform as Timasion tipped the bowl of the silver dipper into the jar of holy Kastalian spring water. The two young acolytes holding the jar shifted nervously and looked repeatedly over their shoulders. Timasion ignored the impropriety and went on with the ritual. He held the dipper high, allowing the excess water to drip from its rim. Then, as the goat watched with dubious interest, Timasion centered the utensil over the animal's carefully groomed back and let spill a few drops of the sacred water. The goat blinked its wide green eyes but did not flinch.

Timasion frowned. He shut his eyes and mouthed a silent prayer. His acolytes shuffled their feet against the stone pavement as they continued to scan the temple precinct with growing unease. Timasion ended his prayer with an irritated grunt and shot the others a simmering glare. He then composed himself anew and returned his attention to the dipper, dribbling another brief shower onto the goat's furry hide. This was the customary way to determine the god's mood and his willingness to speak.

The beast remained perfectly still.

Timasion tipped the vessel a bit more, spilling a fair quantity of water onto the animal. With a bored glance back at its dampened coat, the little goat turned to Timasion and let out an impudent bleat.

Timasion lowered the dipper. His shoulders sank as he stared at the animal on the plinth. The acolytes shifted nervously and cocked their heads, listening as a rumbling wave of noise rolled up the mountainside. Timasion, too, heard the commotion. A cloud of black smoke billowed above the treetops below.

It had begun.

"The treasures!" one of the acolytes cried.

"Silence!" Timasion hissed. "Let the atheist barbarians have their gold! You will not profane the god's sanctuary!"

The shamed acolyte quivered silently.

Timasion ignored the growing din rising up the hill. The villagers who made their living catering to – and exploiting – pilgrims were fleeing now. Their wailing screams and panicked footsteps added to the tide of angry shouts and bellowing commands – the unmistakable sound of armed conquest.

The time had come at last, Timasion thought. The pompous Roman fool who'd arrived the previous day had warned him. The followers of his strange Judean cult now had the force of the empire behind them. They'd come to silence Apollo's oracle once and for all.

Timasion dropped the dipper into the water jar. The goat remained stubbornly immobile. Had it shaken off the sacred water dripped onto its back in a ritual as old as the oracle itself, Timasion would have known the god was ready to speak. He and his acolytes then could go to the temple and assist the *pythia* as she prepared to receive his message. But the goat did not so much as twitch when the drops of Kastalian spring water fell upon it. Apollo would offer no oracles today.

"Nor any day to come," Timasion muttered.

"Master?" a frightened acolyte asked.

Timasion shook his head and bade them both be silent. Slowly, he walked alone along the ancient stone path from the altar to the temple, its thick marble columns sprouting like a well-tended grove of trees from the massive foundation stones that anchored the building to the sacred mountain. As Timasion ascended the ramp to the temple's great bronze doors, he chanced to look aside at the growing conflagration on the hillside below. Thick smoke veiled the

view of the village and the deep gorge beyond. The air smelled of ash and death.

“Master! Come quickly!”

A young woman rushed to Timasion’s side. The linen gown that cloaked her shoulders was soiled and disheveled. Forgoing the most basic decorum, she took his hand and all but dragged him into the temple. Her white cheeks were slick with tears. Timasion started to scold her, but the woman’s sobs and insistent tugging tempered his irritation. Of what use was decorum now, he conceded.

The woman guided him through the temple’s columned interior to a shadowy corner along the far wall. There she hesitated, gazing down into a darkened chamber at the bottom of a narrow flight of steps. Her body shook as she let go of Timasion’s hand and began to sob uncontrollably.

Timasion surprised himself by feeling a touch of sympathy for the helpless woman overwhelmed by her emotions. He took her by the shoulders and drew her close, as a father might soothe a young daughter.

“My mistress...!” she whimpered.

“It is for the best,” Timasion whispered back. There was little more he could offer. Her fate was in the hands of the gods, he knew, and today they seemed otherwise occupied.

Timasion left her crying softly at the top of the stairs as he descended into the *adyton*, the small cellar underneath the main floor of the temple. The old, much-worn curtain in the pilgrim’s anteroom hung limply to one side, revealing the simple chamber in which the sacred communication took place. As Timasion’s eyes adjusted to the dim light of a single glowing brazier, he noted the sacred tripod standing empty. No damp vapors curled from the hollow *omphalos* stone beside its bronze basin. No laurel wreaths hung from its spindly legs. The *adyton* was still and silent as a tomb.

Opposite the stairs, visible only now as Timasion slowly approached, lay a shrouded bulk stretched out on a stone bench. Timasion sank to his knees and bowed his head. He said a prayer for the dead, then gently lifted the shroud to reveal the pale face of the pythia, her aged flesh and sunken, shadow-lined eyes now peaceful in eternal sleep.

Had she known? Did the god share with her a final oracle foretelling the inevitable? Was this the future revealed to her, or did she take the poison in order to avoid that vision?

Timasion eased himself up and stood for what he knew would be the last time before the pythia's tripod. He studied the corroded and much-repaired structure, recalling the countless times he'd watched the pythia sit upon it, entranced by Apollo's presence within her. He wondered if anyone ever again would take that seat and seek the god's wisdom? Or would the atheist tide sweeping over the world, a world that once embraced the gods and their oracles, wash away not only the gods themselves, but their memory as well? Even if men did remember, would they know how to worship them, how to respect their ways, or how to contact them in times of need?

Timasion stood a little straighter. A thought had entered his mind, and considering it caused his jaw to set more firmly, his shoulders to sag a little less.

With a final look back at the pythia's covered body, Timasion crossed the adyton and purposefully climbed the stairs back up into the temple. There he met again the young woman, now seated on a wooden stool, her sobbing controlled, her emotions calmed.

Timasion asked her quietly if she would help him. He needed the writing implements and parchment with which he normally wrote down the pythia's divine oracles.

"No," he said, dashing a final remnant of hope, "your mistress will speak for the god no more. But I wish to record something nonetheless."

As the woman hurried away to gather the required gear, Timasion strode to the entrance of the temple, passing through the doors and onto the wide portico, where he stopped at the top of the ramp leading down into the temple precinct and the winding pathway toward the village. Now the smoke from the fires blanketed all of the mountainside. The battle cries and struggles had largely faded. Occasionally, he heard the sharp ring of metal on metal, or the distant rumble of yet another building lost to the barbarians from Rome.

"Fire will guide you to the truth!" the Roman emissary had warned him earlier. Timasion chuckled to himself as the fat little

man's threat returned to mind. How quick these modern men were to burn that which had illuminated their own rise to power.

"What rises in smoke," Timasion answered the Roman, "falls in ash."

The woman returned with parchment, ink pot and stylus. Timasion sat down against a smooth column. Never before had anyone recorded the sacred words spoken by the temple scribe as the pythia mounted the tripod and turned inward to hear the voice of Apollo. Before this dark day, the holy invocation had passed from generation to generation only through the spoken words of one scribe to another.

"We are the last of our time," Timasion said to the young woman, now seated at his knees. She gazed up at him with eyes dried of their tears. "But time is a river without end, and someday another generation will seek counsel and require guidance."

He dipped the stylus into the little pot of ink and began to write.

ONE

Rome, Italy, Present Day

Catherine Gordon stood with both hands firmly planted on her hips. She scraped at pebbles with the toes of her sturdy hiking boots, the poise of her lean body suggesting a fairly significant lack of enthusiasm. She'd never had an interest in exploring modern sewers, and felt no excitement at the prospect of crawling through an ancient one.

"You won't actually be crawling," the tanned young man at her side explained.

Father Paolo Sebastiano stepped over the rope barrier surrounding a small plot of earth in the heart of the Imperial Forum. He placed a key into a padlock looped through a bolt imbedded within a flat, round stone bleached white by the Roman sun and set flush with the ground inside a ring of ancient concrete.

"If the old builders knew one thing, it was plumbing," he said.

Father Sebastiano used a crowbar to pry the stone up high enough to slip his fingers underneath and lift it gingerly a few inches. Catherine knelt to help, and together they hefted the stone free of the gaping hole that was the entrance to the twenty-five hundred year-old sewer.

"Here we enter the main branch of the *Cloaca Maxima*, the central drainage channel for all the city. As you will see, the cloaca is quite commodious. Old king Tarquinius rode his chariot through it, inspecting the work and checking up on his masons."

The handsome priest grinned at Catherine.

“We would not see one of our modern leaders on such a ride.”

Catherine returned the smile.

“Nor many of our priests,” she added.

Father Sebastiano blushed, a thoroughly endearing trait, Catherine thought. Ever since meeting the Vatican representative earlier this morning, she had to keep reminding herself the young archaeologist was also an ordained Catholic priest. She wondered about that. Was there a trail of teary-eyed Italian girls with broken hearts left behind in some small village? He reminded her in many ways of her husband, Steven, back when he and Catherine first met on an undergraduate field expedition to Anasazi ruins in New Mexico.

She found herself picturing the priest in surf shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, the kind Steven wore back in his collegiate beach boy days. Or maybe a smart Italian suit, something a more fashionable Roman might wear. Neither choice presented an unappealing image.

Building upon the latter fantasy, Catherine added herself to the picture, replacing her own standard field garb – jeans, safari shirt, boots – with something not quite so frumpy. The two of them did not seem an incongruent match: Catherine was, after all, a tall and attractive woman, not as young as the priest, but still. In Rome, as in other parts of the world where she’d traveled, her appearance at an excavation site had never failed to be noticed. Sometimes this was annoying and led to the usual sexist nitwits questioning her abilities as a professional, but Catherine wasn’t the kind to let that sort of ignorance get the better of her own confidence and training. As far as she was concerned, looks plus brains equalled a nice Darwinian combination she’d be silly not to appreciate.

“Dr. Gordon?”

Catherine snapped out of the daydream. Father Sebastiano, appearing every bit the workaday scientist now in his khaki shirt and baggy paratrooper pants, had partially lowered himself into the opening in the ground. Braced on a series of flimsy wooden rungs imbedded in the side of the earthen shaft, he glanced up at Catherine like a patient teacher waiting on a child’s response to a puzzling lesson.

“Va bene. Toss down the packs after I descend, okay?”

Catherine grabbed their two field packs – her own considerably bulkier than Father Sebastiano’s compact Italian version – and watched as he carefully climbed into the hole. Peering down after him, Catherine could see the vertical tunnel dropped about fifteen feet before opening out into a larger chamber all but hidden by a bird’s eye view of the priest and his tousled black hair.

“Rather narrow, isn’t it?” she called after him. Frighteningly narrow, she didn’t add.

Father Sebastiano stopped for a moment, halfway down. “You will be okay, Doctor?”

“Please, call me Catherine,” she said, avoiding his question.

The priest nodded, then continued to climb down to the bottom of the shaft, where he stepped off the wooden rungs onto a platform of glistening white marble. He looked up and stretched out his hands, ready to catch their packs. Catherine dropped his first, then hefted her own over the side of the hole.

“It’s kind of heavy,” she said.

“Women cannot pack light,” Father Sebastiano called up.

Even in the shadows, Catherine could see his sly smirk. She dropped her pack, adding a little extra momentum just for good measure. With exaggerated drama, Father Sebastiano caught it, pantomiming a struggle with the weight. Catherine pretended to scowl.

Catherine took a moment to check her phone. Zero calls. No surprise. She and her husband, an archaeologist known for his recovery of Greek and Phoenician sailing ships in and around the Mediterranean, weren’t exactly smiling at each other when they’d boarded separate planes in Paris. Regardless, she’d left a message for him before leaving the hotel this morning and he should have done the same. By now he and his crew would be somewhere along the western coast of Greece. Off the beaten path, but not so far off his cell wouldn’t work. This was going to be an issue, she could tell, and debated whether to try his number again.

“Now you,” Father Sebastiano called. “Don’t worry. If you fall, I will catch you, too.”

"I can think of worse fates," she muttered, deciding against the call.

"*Scusi?*"

"Nothing."

She slid over the edge of the hole and dangled her feet until her toes found the wooden rungs. With a deep breath – *Why is it always a hole in the ground?* – she closed her eyes and started down.