



Did Apollo Save Greece from the Celts?

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Monastiraki waterfront

Everything we know, or think we know, about the ancient European Celts comes from the writings of Romans or Greeks, who were often deeply prejudiced against the Celts. In my last article, I explained why the Romans felt that way, after a Celtic army, led by a leader called Brennus, forced the city to surrender. Early Greek writers were often more sympathetic. A century later, however, another Celtic leader, also called Brennus, took a fateful decision, which - I was about to discover - would poison the views of many Greeks and leave a legacy of mystery around those events.

From Ancona, on the east coast of central Italy, I sailed to Greece and took a train south to the port of Brindisi, on the Heel of Italy. The crossing takes 17 hours overnight. I watched the sun rise over the mountains the following morning as we sailed between the Ionian islands and the Greek mainland. At the port of Patras, I met my Greek friend, Athena. Over the next couple of weeks, we would travel to mountains, museums, and ancient sites, including the one at the centre of this story: the Temple of Delphi.

Although versions differ, we know from Greek and Roman writings that Celtic armies invaded Greece around 280 BC. Modern historians have struggled to separate histori-



**Athena with Athena
- Patras Archaeological Museum**

cal facts from legend and propaganda. The name of Brennus is part of that conundrum. Was it a personal name or a title, meaning something like 'King'? If so, that would explain the coincidence between the two Brennuses who led the attacks against Rome and

Greece a century apart.

Where Brennus and his army came from is unknown, but they entered Greece from the north, through Macedonia. By the 3rd century, Macedonia was in turmoil. 43 years after the death of Alexander the Great, his empire, which included Greece, was fragmenting, as his successors fought amongst themselves. During an earlier attack, a Celtic army defeated the Macedonians and killed their King Keraunos. After much infighting, a general by the name of Sosthenes took control of the army and the kingdom but refused an offer of the crown. Macedonia still dominated the Greek city-states further south, but its instability was increasing their independence.

According to the ancient Greek historian and travel writer Pausanias, Brennus persuaded the Celtic peoples to raise a larger army to attack Greece "pointing out the weakness of the Greeks at that time, their great public wealth, and the even greater wealth in the sanctuaries in dedications and in coined silver and gold."

After marching through Macedonia, they



Apollo on a dish 5th Century BC - Delphi Museum

met an advance force of the Greek army on the opposite side of the River Spercheios. Undaunted, they rafted across the river and put the Greeks to flight. You can find the next part of the story described online as historical fact, but it may be a legend, or as one Ph.D. thesis puts it: “a fabrication” constructed “to imitate” an earlier event. Pausanias says that a small Greek army stopped the Celts at the Pass of Thermopylae - the same place where a tiny Greek force had resisted the might of the Persian army two centuries earlier. The two accounts do sound suspiciously similar.

After this setback, Brennus decided to create a diversionary attack on an undefended town further west. At this point, Pausanias’ account begins to sound like propaganda: “They butchered every human male of that entire race, the old men and the children at the breast...they drank the blood and ate the flesh of those of the slaughtered babies that were fattest with milk.”

Some of the Greek leaders then made a cynical decision to guide the Celts through the mountains, and away from their own territories, towards the Greeks’ most sacred temple at Delphi.

In the impressive new archaeological museum in Patras, I read that Patras was the only city on the Peloponnese peninsula that sent troops to resist the Celtic invasion. The others noted that the Celts had no ships, so they hoped to keep them out by blocking the narrow Isthmus which joins the Peloponnese to the mainland.

Today a suspension bridge crosses the Gulf of Corinth, linking Patras to the mainland and offering a more direct route to Delphi. There is a coach service, which I would have taken if I had been on my own,

but Athena had other business on the way to Athens, so she offered to drive the outward journey. The two shores of the Gulf are very different. The road we followed, on the southern shore of the mainland, was quiet and sparsely populated. Euphorbia and poppies were flowering on the deserted hill-sides to our left, whilst across the water, on the north shore of the Peloponnese, snow-capped mountains rose behind a strip of continuous development.

Athena had convinced me that there was no point in going to Thermopylae. Centuries of coastal silting have removed the famous pass; all that remains today is a monument beside a main road. Instead, I decided to walk part of the route that Brennus’s army might have taken through the mountains north of Delphi. European Walking Trail E4 runs for 17km through Parnassos National Park from Eptalofos to Delphi. As we don’t know what route they took, that seemed a good option.



Naxian Sphinx - Delphi Museum

Spring is a good time to visit Greece before the heat and the tourists arrive. I did a lot of walking in the mountains around Patras wearing shorts and T-shirts and had not considered that higher up, snow might still be a problem. As we climbed towards Eptalofos we passed it piled beside the road.

The village, at 800 metres, was free from snow but the air was noticeably cooler up here. I stopped a group of hikers and asked their leader if he knew what condition the trail to Delphi was in. He shrugged his shoulders. He had walked it last year but hadn't heard of anyone walking it so early this year. There was likely to be snow, and possibly ice.

I was caught in a dilemma. I didn't want to give up, but I wasn't equipped for winter mountaineering. If my frozen body was discovered by future archaeologists, I would

never finish this article. Athena had no intention of coming with me, so I decided to set out, stay in contact with her, for as long as I had a signal, and turn back if necessary.

The trail leaves Eptalofos on a dirt track bordered by houses that would not have looked out of place in the Austrian Alps. Above 1000 metres the snow appeared, then thickened, but the track remained clear. I discovered the reason when I reached a turning with a snow plough parked beside the track. I followed the trail onto a narrower path covered with snow and some ice. Then I noticed footprints, so someone must have walked there recently. There were some tricky sections, but nothing needed an ice pick. Higher up, I reached a plateau, where the snow was melting, turning to mud: messy but passable. I messaged Athena; I was going to push on.

*As I climbed over
a second mountain,
the coast came into view and
everything changed.*

The snow disappeared and the pine forest gave way to a Mediterranean landscape, dotted with bushes and flowers I didn't recognize. I met two Polish hikers - the only people I saw for over eight hours.

The view over Delphi arrived suddenly. I looked down over a steep drop and saw the town directly below me, with the track zig-zagging down the face of the mountain. Brennus's army would never have taken this route. Below me were two other options, roughly following the modern road, both involving long climbs. The Greeks chose a great site to defend their temple.

Delphi is a beautiful town, but even at quieter times, the signs of mass tourism are everywhere. There is the Pan Hotel, the Artemis Hotel, and the Apollonia Hotel. When the Christian emperor Theodosius destroyed the temple in 390 AD the pantheon was evicted, so it seems they moved down the hill and went into the hotel business.



Bronze helmets - Delphi Museum

The archaeological site and museum are a short walk from the town. A single ticket gives entry to both. I went to the museum first. Considering the damage inflicted on the temple over the centuries, it is amazing how much has survived - statues of gods and sphinxes, golden offerings, and weapons used by Greek soldiers - but there was no mention of Brennus or his army and none of the staff I spoke to had heard of them, though they knew of Pausanias. I gave one of them a reference to find the story online.

The entrance to the archaeological site is a few hundred yards down the same road. As soon as you enter, you begin to climb. The site, with the remains of many buildings, is built on different levels into the side of the mountain. Shortly after the entrance you come to the Omphalos stone, the navel of the world, thrown there by Zeus. It stood at the heart of the Temple of Apollo, where a priestess would deliver oracles, valued throughout the ancient world. When the Greeks heard that a Celtic army was approaching, they consulted the priestess, who advised them not to remove the treasure from the temple. Speaking with the voice of Apollo she said: "I will defend what is mine."

Most of the buildings on the site were erected as offerings from the Greek city-states for victories over enemies. Just above the Omphalos, stands a small temple, the Treasury of the Athenians, built after their victory over the Persians. In Brennus's time, it would have been full of captured treasure. Further up the slope, I climbed past an athletic stadium and an amphitheatre. Looking down towards the valley the scale of the challenge facing the Celtic army became clearer.

There are several differing accounts of the battle and its aftermath. Pausanias' is the most evocative:

"Brennus and his army were faced by the Greeks at Delphi and by the hostile portents of the god...All the ground where the Gaulish army was, quaked violently nearly all day, with continuous thundering and lightning. The Celts were dumbfounded by this lightning, and unable to hear when orders were given; flashes from heaven would not only strike a man down but set fire to other men and their shields all round him...cliff-faces broke away and came crashing down. Not by ones and twos now, but in twenties and thirties or more, on guard and where they slept, they perished together under storms of rock."

The Celtic army retreated in confusion - "going out of their minds" - fighting amongst themselves as they mistook their own soldiers for Greek attackers. Wounded and



Omphalos stone - Delphi Museum

despondent, Brennus took his own life "by drinking unmixed wine" - they must have made it pretty strong back then.

Other versions suggest the Celts succeeded in sacking the temple, taking its treasure back to Toulouse in modern France.

How much truth is there in any of these stories? The archaeological evidence doesn't help very much.

Some historians believe the Temple authorities needed a PR boost, after wrongly prophesising a Persian victory in a previous war. A new story with an accurate prophecy and divine retribution helped them to do

that.

The next day we continued to Athens, where I visited the National Archaeological Museum and the Acropolis. I learned a lot more about the ancient Greeks, but little more about the Celtic attack. Traditional history says after the battle they headed east towards modern Bulgaria, and Turkey where they founded the kingdom of Galatia mentioned in the Bible, but more recent writings have questioned that too.

Travelling back to Patras on the coach I began to realise that there would be no clear conclusion to this story. There was an attack; that much is clear, but what really happened at Delphi and what became of those Celtic attackers remains shrouded in mystery.

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