



The Grotto of Herakles, perhaps one of the oldest of the temples on the island. The buff fellow in the shadows gives an idea of the scale. There must be a name for this sort of arch?

DELOS

The Cyclades are a cluster of more than 200 islands in the Aegean Sea to the southeast of the Greek mainland. Cyclades (circling) refers to way the islands are disposed around Delos, at one time the spiritual as well as commercial and cultural center of the archipelago.

Diminutive Delos, only a kilometer and half wide and six kilometers long, exerted power and radiated influence throughout the Aegean. It was the birthplace, not only of the Greek gods Apollo and his sister, Artemis (Diana), but of the Delian League, the political alliance that ruled the Aegean from Athens. It was the League's home port and the site of its treasury. Its harbour, though, does not give the impression that a great sea power operated from here. Neither does the island seem able to accommodate a population of 25,000 persons (not counting slaves) as it is said to have done.

Temples were built not only to Apollo and Artemis, but to many other deities, major and minor, Greek, Roman and Egyptian. There was a major synagogue there.

Under Roman rule Delos was made a free-port and became a favoured destination for Rome's affluent class, much as neighboring Mikonos is for Europe's jet set today.

Circa 426 BC the bones of all who were buried on Delos were disinterred and removed to Rhenia, a nearby island, and it was decreed that those about to die and women who were about to give birth were to be taken off the island. In effect, no one was allowed to be born or die there.

But die there they did, and in great numbers when, early in the 1st Century BC, the Mithridatic War made a sudden and brutal visit to Delos. Mithridates, the emperor of the kingdom of the Black Sea was at war with Rome, and Delos was very important to Rome. In 88 B.C the island was sacked and its inhabitants, thousands of them, were slaughtered, the mansions and temples desecrated and demolished. Twenty years later it was raided again and ransacked by pirates who took into slavery all those they did not kill.

Given the emergence of other important

ports in the Mediterranean, the second assault caused the island to recede into obscurity. The Greek emperor even put the place up for sale in the 1st century AD. Nobody would buy it. At times it was a base for pirates. The Turks owned it for a while. For centuries Delos has been used as a marble quarry; the temples, monuments and mansions were stripped by generations of scavengers. The vestiges of its glory that remain, however, and the absent world they intimate, still evoke a sense of wonder.

The French School of Archaeology began excavations in 1872, resumed them between 1904 and 1914, then again between 1958 and 1975. Many public buildings and private houses were uncovered and some were partly reconstructed. Work is still in progress.

I regret that my photographs of the famous lions of Delos and the cisterns—beneath the floor of a theatre supported by a series of arches—have dematerialized. A return there may be in order.

T L