

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.
 { MARY CARUS.

VOL. XXIII. (No. 5.)

MAY, 1909.

NO. 636.

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Associates: {E. C. HEGELER
 {MARY CARUS

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Contributed to by the Leaders of Science in all Countries, and by the
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Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

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HEAD OF THE VENUS OF MILO.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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THE VENUS OF MILO.

BY THE EDITOR.

PERHAPS the most valuable piece of art which the Louvre of Paris possesses is the famous statue that commonly goes under the name of the Venus of Milo. It has a room of its own where maroon walls throw the white marble in strong relief. An inscription informs us that it was acquired by M. de Marcellus for the Marquis de Rivière, at the time ambassador of France, who presented it to King Louis XVIII in the year 1821. It was discovered in a hiding place on a farm on the little island of Milo where it was but slightly covered with stones from a quarry near by. It was noticed afterwards that some marks were made in the stone on the roadside, with the apparent design to enable the person who had hidden the treasure to find the place again.

There is no question that the statue represents Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, and we have before us one of the greatest masterpieces of ancient Hellas. The goddess is represented in the form of a woman in her full maturity—her dress is falling down leaving the upper body entirely uncovered, and yet in spite of the nudity of the figure we are struck with the unparalleled purity and nobility of expression.

There is always a group of admiring visitors sitting quietly before this goddess of Greek paganism, and there is often a hush in the room which recalls the sanctity of a pagan temple visited by quiet worshipers; and yet the goddess before us is mutilated, has lost both arms and has suffered much maltreatment by brutal hands.

Having searched art books in vain for an explanation of the history of the statue, we will here briefly recapitulate what the simple facts of the statue, its workmanship, its mutilated condition and place of discovery, can teach us.

It is obvious that the statue has been hidden, and we need not doubt that it was concealed by pagan worshipers who wanted to preserve the effigy of the goddess. The marks of brutal treatment



THE VENUS OF MILO.

visible all over the body of the statue indicate that it was cudgelled by heavy clubs, that it was upset and thrown from its pedestal; the arms seem to have been smashed to small fragments, of which only one hand remains intact which grasps an apple, the symbol of Venus. This hand is preserved in a glass case standing by a window in the same room in the Louvre. The statue is made of Parian marble, and the artistic work proves that it must have been executed in the best days of Greek sculpture. The sculptor apparently worked after a definite model, for the features are not idealized into a composite personality, and we may be sure the artist would have taken liberties in some details, had it not been made from life. It has been noticed that the feet of the Venus are larger than those of the average woman of to-day.

Whence can the statue have come, and how did it find its way to this little island in the Ægean Sea?

The island of Milo was too small a place to have a temple that could afford a statue of such extraordinary value, and we must assume that it was carried thither on a ship. Athens is the only

place that we can think of which might have been its original home.

The classical name of Milo was Melos, meaning "apple." It was originally inhabited by a Dorian population, but during the Peloponnesian War the island was conquered and its inhabitants replaced by Athenian colonists. From that time it was the most faithful ally of Athens and remained subject to the authority of the city after all her other possessions had been lost.

At the beginning of the Christian era were troublesome times. Lawlessness prevailed and a general decadence had set in, which



VENUS ON THE SWAN.
A Kylix from Capua.

was due to the many civil wars in both Greece and Italy. The establishment of the empire checked the progress of degeneration but only in external appearance. In reality a moral and social deterioration continued to take an ever stronger hold upon the people. The old religion broke down and the new faith was by no means so ideal in the beginning as it is frequently represented by writers of Church history.

Our notions concerning the vicious character of ancient paganism are entirely wrong. Even the worship of Aphrodite and of the

Phœnician Astarte was by no means degraded by that gross sensualism of which the Church fathers frequently accuse it. Wherever we meet with original expression of the pagan faith we find deep reverence and a childlike piety. In many respects the worship of Istar in Babylonia and of Astarte in Phœnicia, of Isis in Egypt, of Athene, Aphrodite and Hera in Greece, of the Roman Juno, and Venus, the special protectress of the imperial family, was noble in all its main features, and did not differ greatly from the cult of the Virgin Mary during the Middle Ages. We reproduce here an ancient platter which is ascribed by archeologists to the fourth century B. C., and shows a noble and serene Venus who is fully draped and flying on the swan.

When Christianity spread over the Roman empire, the city of Athens was the last stronghold of paganism, but even there the mass of the population had become Christian. There was a time in the development of Christianity when it was hostile not only to ancient pagan mythology but also to pagan science and to pagan art. This is the age in which almost all the statues of the Greek gods were either destroyed, or maltreated and shattered so that not one has come down to us unmutilated.

Professor F. C. Conybeare of the University College of Oxford describes in his translation of the *Apology and Acts of Apollonius and Other Monuments of Christianity* as follows:

"The obvious way of scotching a foul demon was to smash his idols; and we find that an enormous number of martyrs earned their crown in this manner, especially in the third century, when their rapidly increasing numbers rendered them bolder and more ready to make a display of their intolerance. Sometimes the good sense of the worldly prudence of the Church intervened to set limits to so favorite a way of courting martyrdom; and at the Synod of Elvira, c. A. D. 305, a canon was passed, declaring the practice to be one not met with in the Gospel nor recorded of any of the Apostles, and denying to those who in future resorted to it the honors of martyrdom. But in spite of this, the most popular of the saints were those who had resorted to such violence and earned their death by it; and as soon as Christianity fairly got the upper hand in the fourth century, the wrecking of temples and the smashing of the idols of the demons became a most popular amusement with which to grace a Christian festival. As we turn over the pages of the martyrologies, we wonder that any ancient statues at all escaped those senseless outbursts of zealotry."

It must have been in one of these "outbursts of zealotry" that the temple of Aphrodite was attacked and the statue of the goddess brutally assaulted. The mutilated statue presumably lay prone upon the ground at the foot of its pedestal at the overturned altar. When night broke in and the rioters sought their homes the few friends

of paganism, perhaps the priests, perhaps some well-to-do philosophers and admirers of the ancient Greek civilization, came to the rescue. They met stealthily at the place of the tumult and with the assistance of their servants had the statue carried away down to a ship at anchor in the harbor. Before the riot could be renewed the ship set sail for the island of Milo where the devotees of the



HEAD OF THE VENUS OF MILO.
Profile view.

goddess may have had friends, or where possibly one of their own number possessed a farm. There they hid the statue, and it is certain that the act of concealment was done in the greatest haste, for it was only lightly covered over, and it is strange that it had not been found before the 19th century.

The pagan remnant was small and kept quiet for fear of persecution, but we may very well imagine how they lived in the hope that paganism would celebrate a revival, that the storms of these barbarous outbursts would pass by and the temples of the gods would be restored in all their ancient glory. Then would come the time to bring the goddess back to their ancient dwelling place, to raise her altar again and light the sacrifice anew. But though the riot ceased and the authorities restored order, though for a short time a pagan emperor sat again on the throne of Cæsar, the ancient gods never returned and Christianity replaced paganism forever. The devotees of the lost cause died without seeing their hope fulfilled. The desecrated statue remained hidden and their secret was buried with them in the grave.

* * *

We can not doubt that in large outlines such is the history of the statue. These are the facts which are revealed through the condition and the circumstances in which the statue has been found.

One thing is remarkable, that with all the skill of modern sculpture no artist has as yet succeeded in restoring this wonderful statue to its pristine completeness. None of the attempted restorations appear satisfactory, and it seems hopeless to venture upon the task. It almost seems as if the torso in its pitiful condition had acquired a new beauty of its own, and if we saw the original in its integrity it might not fulfil our expectations.