

## *Sifnos, source of silver for Greece's coins*

The Aegean island of Sifnos, well known to present-day tourists and once famous for its gold mines, may also have been an important source of silver from which the Greeks made coins in ancient times.

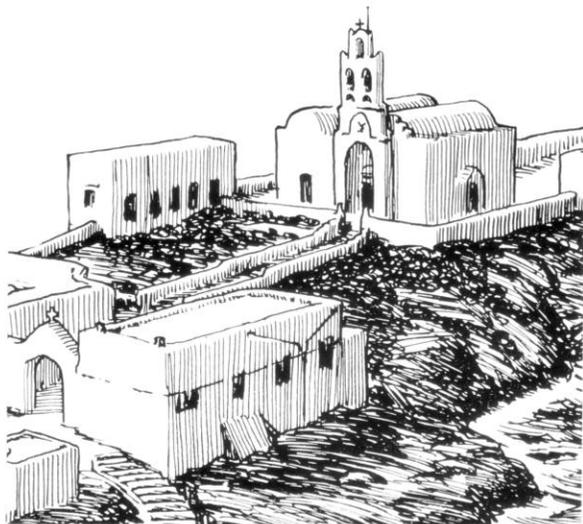
Over the past ten years, the German Max Planck-Institute for Nuclear Research, Heidelberg, has been carrying out exploration and research to discover where the Greeks obtained silver for minting. With the aid of lead isotope analysis, teams led by the late Professor Gentner, located a number of lead-silver-smelting sites throughout the Aegean, including some on the Cycladic island of Sifnos.

Last summer, Professor H.-G. Bachmann, a member of IAMS Scientific Committee and lecturer at the archaeo-metallurgy courses at the Institute of Archaeology, London, visited Sifnos at the invitation of the Max Planck-Institute to inspect the old mining and smelting sites.

### **Battle of Salamis**

In the inner ring of the archipelago which circles the holy island of Delos, Sifnos was in ancient times colonized by Ionians from Athens. In 480 BC the islanders sent a ship to fight on the Greek side in the great naval battle of Salamis at which the invading Persian fleet under Xerxes was routed.

In those days the island's wealth came primarily from



its gold mines, from the proceeds of which it built a "treasury" (small temple) at the sanctuary of Delphi on the Greek mainland below Mount Parnassus, site of the Oracle of Apollo. Remains of the beautifully-sculptured frieze of the temple can still be seen in the Delphi museum.

According to legend, the Siphnians were required to give Apollo a golden egg every year: once they tried to fob him off with a gilded stone, and in anger he flooded their gold mines.

Indeed, in antiquity the Siphnians had quite a reputation for sharp practice. Today they are a singularly gentle and pleasant people who live in a line of almost connecting villages on the crest of a hill. Byzantine churches and monasteries are scattered everywhere. The island demonstrates the cubic type of architecture seen with small variations throughout the Cyclades, but here a projecting ledge over door and window adds to the attractive appearance of the houses.

### **A Smiling Island**

The finest architecture is in the old island capital of Kastro, on the eastern shore: here one street passes over the roofs of one-storeyed buildings below and is joined by bridges to the upper storeys of the houses opposite.

Sifnos is a smiling island, its bare hills terraced on their lower slopes for cultivation or for olive trees. It is reputed to produce the best olive oil in the Cyclades and in consequence the local cooking is much better than average in the region.

Whilst the mines and smelting sites, source of the island's wealth in antiquity, are being probed by archaeologists and metallurgists, Sifnos is today better known as the home of the earthenware pots sold all over Greece (a speciality is highly decorative chimney pots) and as a retreat for holiday-makers, though it took some time before its attractions were fully recognized. The green hilly interior is surrounded on all sides by a picturesque coastline, indented with sandy bays and rocky coves.

Professor Bachmann is now working on his report and plans to summarize his observations and laboratory results in a forthcoming monograph to be edited jointly by the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and the German Mining Museum, Bochum.