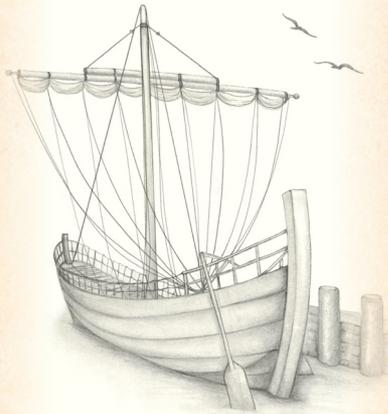




Historically Speaking

Volume 2, Number 2 February 2023

Oracles and Prophecy



What is an Oracle

The word oracle actually can mean any one of three things. First, a place sacred to a god. Second, the attendant priestess who speaks the words of the god in answer to questions or inquiries. Third, the answer given by the priestess. So you can go to an oracle to ask an oracle for an oracle. The belief was that since the words of the priestess (at Delphi she is referred to as the Pythia) are from the god through the mouth of the priestess, it must be true (especially at Delphi, the oracle of Apollo the god of truth.)

According to Greek legend, Delphi was previously called Pytho, a sacred place which served as the seat of Pythia, the major oracle who was consulted about important decisions throughout the ancient classical world.

At the Oracle of Delphi, the Pythia, who was also referred to as the Sibyl, was a priestess who would prophesy from the tripod in the sunken adyton of the Temple of Apollo. The god himself was believed to speak through this oracle.

When asked a question, the Oracle — perhaps quite cunningly — never gave a direct answer, but spoke in allegories with “hidden meanings” and “ambiguities,” according to Plutarch, who was himself a priest of Apollo and a great historian. It was then up to the inquiring party as to how to interpret them.

As the prophecy was regarded as the true word of divinity, the actual meaning, if it could be known, must be absolute truth.

The Pythia had to be an older woman of blameless life chosen from among the peasants of the area. Alone in an enclosed inner sanctum (Ancient Greek adyton – “do not enter”) the Oracle sat on a tripod seat over an opening in the earth (the “chasm”).

According to legend, when Apollo slew Python, its body fell into this fissure and fumes arose from its decomposing body. Intoxicated by the vapors, the Sibyl would fall into a trance, allowing Apollo to possess her spirit. In this state she prophesied. The oracle could not be consulted during the winter months, for this was traditionally the time when Apollo would live among the Hyperboreans. Dionysus would inhabit the temple during his absence.

While in a trance, the Pythia “raved” – most likely a form of ecstatic speech – and her ravings were “translated” by the priests of the temple into elegant hexameters.

The Delphic oracle exerted considerable influence throughout the Greek world, and she was consulted before all major undertakings including wars and the founding of colonies. She also was respected by the Greek-influenced countries around the periphery of the Greek world, such as Lydia, Caria, and even Egypt.

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The Five Most Important Oracles of Greece Dodona

The only oracle not affiliated with Apollo. It became associated with Zeus. It is a grove of oak trees, the tree sacred to Zeus. During classical antiquity, according to various accounts, priestesses and priests in the sacred grove interpreted the rustling of the oak leaves to determine the correct actions to be taken. According to a new interpretation, the oracular sound originated from bronze objects hanging from oak branches and sounded with the wind blowing, similar to a wind chime.

Trophonius

This oracle is inhabited by the spirit of Apollo's demigod son, Trophonius, and it can also transmit vocal messages instead of prophecies. He was a man who was swallowed up by the earth and transformed into the oracular demigod or daimon (spirit) of a cave near the town of Lebadeia in Boiotia. His name means "Nourisher of the Mind" from the Greek tropheô and noos.

Erythaea

Herophile is the Oracle of Erythaea, one of the oracles of Apollo. She was born with a beautiful voice that managed to attract Apollo, and as a result, he made her one of his oracles and blessed her with the power of prophecy. She spouts prophecies in the form of word puzzles.

Cumæ

The Cumaean Sibyl was the priestess and prophet of the god Apollo's oracle at Cumae, a Greek colony. The most famous legend of the Sibyl involves her nine prophetic books, which contained knowledge that Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, the semi-legendary last king of early Rome, sought to procure.

Delphi

(Thoroughly explained throughout this newsletter.)

Great Religious Significance of Delphi

Delphi became the site of a major temple to Phoebus Apollo, as well as the Pythian Games and the Oracle. Carved into the temple were three phrases: "Know thyself", "Nothing in excess", and "Make a pledge and mischief is nigh".

The actual authorship of the three maxims set up on the Delphi temple may always be a point of conjecture. Most likely they were popular proverbs, which tended later to be attributed to certain Greek thinkers.

The Temple of Apollo appears regularly in Homeric literature. In the *ILIAD*, Achilles would not accept Agamemnon's peace offering even if it included all the wealth in the "stone floor" of "rocky Pytho". In the *ODYSSEY*, Agamemnon crosses a "stone floor" to receive a prophecy from Apollo in Pytho.

The historian Hesiod also refers to Pytho "in the hollows of Parnassus" in his work "Theogony." These references imply that the earliest known date of the oracle's existence is the 8th century BCE, the probable date of composition of the Homeric works.

Zeus was said to have determined the site of Delphi after he sought to find the center of his "Grandmother Earth" (Gaia). He sent two eagles flying from the eastern and western extremities of the earth, and the path of the eagles crossed over Delphi, where the omphalos stone, or navel of Gaia, was found. The priests of Apollo oiled that stone daily as it was considered the bearing upon which all of creation turned.



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