

THE ORACLE OF DELPHI:
JOURNAL ARTICLE CRITIQUE

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The oracle of Delphi was the most famous oracle in the Greek world, attracting pilgrims from throughout Greece and neighboring regions.¹ Despite its renown and longevity, historians continue to debate this oracle's purpose, how it functioned, and its role in Greek religion. What is certainly clear, however, is that from its opening in the fourteenth century BC,² through its first mention in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (c. sixth century BC),³ to its closing by the Christianized Roman Empire (fourth century AD), the oracle of Delphi was believed to have provided advice from the god Apollo through a priestess. This advice, while often cryptic, helped to determine the course of some of the Greek world's most well-known historical events. The present journal article critique examines the Delphic oracle's significance through the perspectives of four recent (2000 to present) journal articles. While each article focuses on the oracle of Delphi, each emphasizes a different aspect of the oracle and its significance to the Greek world. One commonality of these articles, however, is that the oracle of Delphi had great religious significance for ancient Greeks and their neighbors.

Of the four articles reviewed herein, the origin of the Delphic oracle appears to be best described by Luigi Piccardi et al. in "Scent of a Myth: Tectonics, Geochemistry and Geomythology at Delphi (Greece)." This article links the Delphic myth with geologic reality. Mythologically, the oracle was the result of Apollo's conquest of a mighty serpent known as Delphine or Python. This snake, as described in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, is believed to have created earthquakes and terrible noises, and it eventually gouged a great chasm into the earth.⁴ In

¹ Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Oracular Process: Delphi and the Near East," *Vetus Testamentum* 57, no. 4 (2007): 449, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20504276> (accessed September 30, 2013).

² Luigi Piccardi et al., "Scent of a Myth: Tectonics, Geochemistry and Geomythology at Delphi (Greece)," *Journal of the Geological Society, London* 165 (2008): 5, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/209440342?accountid=8289> (accessed September 30, 2013).

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

this chasm, the body of the slain serpent rotted away, producing a smell that exhaled from the chasm. This rotting process, in Greek “pytho,” gave the name Python to the serpent and Pythian to Apollo, who slew the serpent.⁵ The chasm became a sacred place to Mother Earth, and was referred to as the Earth’s uterus or womb, in Greek “delphi.”⁶ Thus, from the serpent, the oracle of Delphi received its name, and the prophetess who made the oracular pronouncements received her title, the Pythia.

Geologically, Piccardi et al. explain that the Delphic chasm was likely created by a seismic fault. The smell of the rotting serpent was, in reality, the release of CO₂-H₂S gasses that are typical of seismic activity.⁷ Piccardi et al. cite medical investigations in which great amounts CO₂ caused “dizziness, confusion, and hearing and visual dysfunctions.”⁸ While recent archaeological examinations have found that the chasm does not presently emit such gasses, Piccardi et al. contend that the likelihood that these gasses were exhaled from the fault during the fourteenth century BC and intermittently in the several centuries which followed, may account for the mantic and ecstatic state of the Pythia during times of oracular pronouncement.

The Pythia, the priestess believed to have channeled Apollo’s advice at the oracle, is the primary focus of Herbert B. Huffmon’s article, “The Oracular Process: Delphi and the Near East.” Huffmon compares the oracle of Delphi with other oracles, such as that of Ishtar of Arbela, Adad of Aleppo, Dagan along the Euphrates, Ammon of Siwa, and Yahweh of Jerusalem. In so doing, Huffmon identifies numerous similarities, and numerous differences, between the Near Eastern oracles and the Delphic oracle in an effort to understand how ancient oracles functioned. Huffmon cites Plutarch’s *Moralia* and the writings of contemporary

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

historians such as E. R. Dodds, H. W. Parke, and D. E. W. Wormell, who identify the Pythia as the primary component of the oracle. The Pythia was usually a young maiden, an innocent virgin, raised by poor peasants, without prior religious training, and with no political self-interests.⁹ Thus, the Pythia was a blank slate for Apollo to use as a mouthpiece, an unconscious instrument used to deliver his pronouncements. The Pythia was also to be a local girl, with a lifetime appointment to the oracle. She was bathed at a sacred spring, likely a product of the seismic fault discussed by Piccardi et al.,¹⁰ and purified by an elaborate ceremonial process.¹¹ Sitting on the tripod, occupying Apollo's ritual seat, Hoffmon describes that the Pythia would enter a state of either ecstasy (according to Plutarch) or trance (according to Hoffmon's contemporary sources).¹² Advice-seekers who implored the oracle for guidance had to be purified by "holy water" from the seismic spring as well.¹³ The advice-seeker then asked a question, typically in a binary "yes" or "no" fashion to the Pythia. In some instances, however, jugs made of gold, silver, or bronze were filled with tin sheets upon which the Pythia wrote the oracular utterance. These jugs could then be taken back to a particular city, such as Athens, so that the prophecy could be read aloud at the Assembly.¹⁴ In this way, the religious belief in oracles had an impact on Athenian democracy.

According to Huffmon, these oracular pronouncements were believed to be a product of "divine speech" from Apollo, which often seemed random or neutral, to the point of appearing arbitrary. Sometimes the Pythia gave no response at all due to the advice-seeker's "unjust" request or the "blood on the hands" of the advice-seeker. If a pronouncement was uttered,

⁹ Huffmon, 452.

¹⁰ Piccardi et al., 5.

¹¹ Huffmon, 453-454.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 455.

¹⁴ Ibid., 456.

Huffman identifies a lack of consensus between ancient sources such as Strabo and Plutarch and contemporary sources such as H. Bowden about the comprehensibility of the utterances. Strabo and Plutarch believed that the Pythia's attendant, or *prophetes*, wove the "incomprehensible mutterings" into hexameter verse; however, Bowden contends that not enough evidence exists to rule out the possibility that the Pythia herself provided the hexameter verse.¹⁵

The "incomprehensible mutterings" described by Huffman are the subject of the article, "Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus' *Croesus Logos*," by Julia Kindt. Examining the Delphic oracle through the case study of Herodotus' examination of Lydian king Croesus, Kindt describes the divide between the human sphere and the divine sphere. Croesus misinterpreted the oracle's advice about whether he should attack the Persian Empire. His failure to interpret the oracular pronouncement was, according to Kindt's interpretation of the *Croesus Logos* which is located at the beginning of Herodotus' *Histories*, the result of the difference between the "divine speech" referred to by Huffman and the limitations of humanity to understand the knowledge of the gods. This "dichotomy" between gods and mortals creates "two different modes of knowledge and perspective."¹⁶ In the Greek view of their gods, Kindt contends, "The gods do not reveal their knowledge of things hidden to men in human language, but instead use their own specific language."¹⁷ Thus, human knowledge is restricted, and knowledge of the future can only be gained indirectly through the oracle. Furthermore, Kindt explains that rather than simply learning from the oracle and trying to gain the god's insight, Croesus tried to adapt the oracular pronouncement to his own plans, an

¹⁵ Ibid., 457.

¹⁶ Julia Kindt, "Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus' *Croesus Logos*," *Classical Philology* 101, no. 1 (January 2006): 37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/505670> (accessed October 1, 2013).

¹⁷ Ibid.

example of hubris, crossing the divide between the human and divine spheres.¹⁸ Croesus wanted to converse with Apollo on the god's own level, creating a recipe for disaster. In fact, Croesus may have started on the path to failure when he initiated an "oracle quiz" to determine which of the oracles near Lydia was the most trustworthy.¹⁹ As Huffmon points out, not all oracles in the ancient world were the same. Therefore, Croesus may have simply shopped around for the oracle that would pronounce in line with his own motives.

While Huffmon refers to the oracular pronouncements as "incomprehensible mutterings," which supports the gaseous exhalation theory provided by Piccardi et al., Kindt points out that utterances from the oracle were not always unintelligible. Referring again to Herodotus' examination of Croesus, Kindt suggests that there is a difference between an oracular prediction (in the realm of the gods) and educational advice from the oracle (in the realm of humans).²⁰ While the oracle's prediction to Croesus was ambiguous as to which empire would fall if he attacked the Persians,²¹ there was no ambiguity in the educational message delivered later by the Pythia in response to Croesus' disappointment.²² Apollo, whose godly ways were believed to be far above those of humans, may have, according to Kindt, stooped periodically to the human level to teach valuable lessons.

The timing of Apollo's oracular pronouncements is the subject of the article, "Knowing When to Consult the Oracle at Delphi," by Alun Salt and Efrosyni Boutsikas. This article corroborates the contention held by Piccardi et al. that vapors exhaled from a seismic fault in

¹⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁰ Ibid., 42.

²¹ Hdt. 1.53.3.

²² Hdt. 1.91.

ancient times, providing “an essential agent in the consultation of the Oracle.”²³ Agreeing with Huffmon that the Pythia was Apollo’s “mouthpiece,” and that chamber gasses were believed to have caused the Pythia to enter into a trance, Salt and Boutsikas concede that excavations in the early 1900s found no evidence of a chasm producing any such vapors.²⁴ Therefore, Salt and Boutsikas contend that geology only partly explains the allure of the oracle. Geography, particularly the mountainous terrain, also added to the oracle’s mysterious charm.

According to Salt and Boutsikas, there was a strong correlation in ancient Greek religion and cult between local geography and traditions. This accounts for the various names of Apollo, such as Apollo Delphinios (Delphi), Apollo Daphnephoros (Eretria), and Apollo Epicurius (Bassae). The local traditions that evolved over long periods influenced the rituals and festivals held to honor the various forms of Apollo.²⁵ The timing of such festivals was also unique to each locality due to the relationship between geography and astronomy. Referencing Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, as well as contemporary scholars such as R. Hannah and M. L. West, Salt and Boutsikas note the significance of the movement of the constellation Delphinus and its relation to the Delphic oracle. Delphi was originally consulted only on Apollo’s birthday, the seventh day of the month Bysios (approximately during the Gregorian month of February).²⁶ The constellation Delphinus’ appearance above the nighttime horizon (in flat regions) takes place on approximately December 25, having served as a sign that the month of Bysios would begin at the time of the following new moon.²⁷ Local geography was important in this case, because some city-states had higher elevations than did others, causing Delphinus to be visible at different

²³ Alun Salt and Efrosyni Boutsikas, “Knowing When to Consult the Oracle at Delphi,” *Antiquity* 79, no. 305 (2005): 565, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/217558041?accountid=8289> (accessed October 1, 2013).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 565.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 567.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 565.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 568.

times. For example, the higher elevation at Delphi made Delphinus appear to rise above the horizon in late-January or early-February (the month of Bysios, which was the proper time to consult the oracle). However, the flatter terrain near Athens allowed Delphinus to rise above the horizon in late-December, allowing approximately one month to plan for and embark on the trip to Delphi to consult the oracle.²⁸ Thus, according to Salt and Boutsikas, the landscape and its relation to the constellation of Delphinus, and not necessarily fumes from a chasm, made the Delphic oracle religiously significant.²⁹

Despite the apparent disagreement between the article by Piccardi et al. and the article by Salt and Boutsikas over which aspect of geology or geography made Delphi significant, it is clear from both articles, and from corroboration by Huffmon regarding the seismic springs used for purification, that the location of the Delphic oracle was religiously significant. Furthermore, despite Huffmon's view of oracular pronouncements as "incomprehensible utterings," juxtaposed against Kindt's contention that some pronouncements, particularly those meant to educate the advice-seeker, were straight-forward and comprehensible, both are in agreement that Greek religious thought saw a division between human knowledge and divine knowledge. Therefore, the four journal articles discussed herein, while perhaps differing in specific focus, provide a collective insight into the important religious significance of the oracle of Delphi. It was a religious site that, while having closed nearly 1600 years ago, remains the world's most well-known ancient oracle and provides a window into ancient Greek religious belief and practice.

²⁸ Ibid., 569-570.

²⁹ Ibid., 571.

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