
Delphi – Shamanism under Control?

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Abstract: The assessment of the talent of the Delphic Pythia was ambiguous among Greeks. On the one hand, they emphasized the role of Apollo in the process, saying that becoming a Pythia requires no special ability or education. On the other hand, they admitted that the Pythia influences the poetic quality of the oracle. Despite the modern popular view, the Delphic oracles did not require a secondary phrasing by male priests. Pythias presented the oracles in their final form, but in verse or in prose, depending on the poetic talent of the seer. In my paper, I present arguments that the Greeks deliberately underestimated the Pythia’s own efforts in order to hinder the formation of a spiritual (shamanistic) power which could have been able to overcome secular political power. The enigmatic character of the oracles served the same goal: to maintain the political independence of the Greek states. However, there are traces showing that divination originally had a close connection to poetic inspiration and that both had a slight shamanistic character. I highlight two motives: the existence of poetic as well as divinatory initiation and the role of honey, a food allegedly inducing trance.

Keywords: Greek religion, Delphic oracle, Pythia, shamanism, honey, poetic trance, Apollo, Hermes

The question about the most respectable oracle of ancient Greece, whether it had anything to do with shamanism or not, may be as old as the use of the word ‘shaman’ among scholars. The response, however, even now, is as far from us as it was hundred years ago. The first challenge we must face is the problem stemming from the limitations of our sources. A relatively great amount of text is available, but the questions posed by ancient authors are simply not the same as the ones we would ask. We must rely on the reports of the Greeks, more precisely the reports of many generations of a particular group in Greek society, namely male, upper-middle class intellectuals – the men who wrote; a fact that cannot be disregarded in the case of a cult where the most essential sacerdotal function was fulfilled exclusively by women. Another factor that can distort our sources is the context. It is self-evident that the Greeks could not understand Delphi independently from other aspects of their theology, their presuppositions about what can

and what cannot be done by the gods. Delphi, as one of the most important cult centres of Greece, had the facility to affect Greek thinking as a whole, but in the meantime it could not remain unaffected by the general trends in the development of Greek religion.

If we want to respond to the question about shamanism, we can choose between three starting points, 1.) the character of Apollo as the god of this oracle, 2.) whether this particular method of divination, namely possession by a god, can be categorized as a form of shamanism, and 3.) whether the Pythia of Delphi can be called a shaman or not. This latter point, though it is crucial to the assessment of Delphi, is almost impossible to answer. We can read a famous passage on the person of the Pythia by Plutarch:

“She who serves the god here at Delphi was born of a lawful and honourable marriage (...) and her life has been well ordered in all respects. But, because she grew up in the home of poor farmers, she carries with her nothing in the way of skill or expertise or ability when she goes down into the oracular shrine. On the contrary, just as Xenophon says that the bride should have seen and heard as little as possible before she goes to her husband’s household, so also the Pythia goes to the god being inexperienced, unlearned about almost everything and truly virginal with respect to her soul.”¹

This is the most frequently cited text about the requirements of being a Pythia; she needed no *techne*: art, no *empeiria*: expertness and no *dynamis*: power. But is this really true? For Plutarch, the Pythia was unlearned, which means she had no skill or natural talent he was able to appreciate or recognize – this is a point where we can question Plutarch’s statements. He wrote down his opinions and experiences, which were profound and comprehensive as regards Delphi, but this fact does not exclude that the women of ancient Delphi had their own special Apollonic rites or divinatory practice, invisible to men. I do not suppose that such a female tradition existed at all, but we cannot exclude it.²

The second objection we can raise derives from the context of the passage. Pythias were not simply frenzied women shouting gibberish under the influence of the ethylene evaporating from cracks in the floor.³ They spoke in a controlled manner, but some of them spoke in verse while others in prose.⁴ The cited text refers to this situation: even when she was possessed by Apollo, a Pythia was not a medium in a spiritist séance. Her abilities influenced the manner of the divination – Plutarch compares it to birds, which can transmit divinatory signs, but do not speak in human tongue against their nature. In some sense, Apollo is *in* the Pythia, speaking from her mouth, but the god cannot force the body to do things it is unable to do. Moreover, considering that a Greek author

¹ Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* 405 c-d, English translation from JOHNSTON 2008:39.

² Jenny Stuart Clay investigated a similar problem, namely the reason why the figure of the Pythia was missing in the Homeric hymn to Apollo, while it seems to be demonstrable that in the time when the hymn was written it had been already the Pythia who gave the oracles (CLAY 2009:11) Clay explains her absence with ideological motivations. The person of the Pythia did not match to the program of the poem “which is male, patriarchal, and Olympian in opposition to the female, the Titanic, and the chthonic.” (cf. CLAY 1989:76–79)

³ Modern evidence for the existence of a chasm under the sanctuary and the probability of ethylene evaporation: PICCARDI 2000:651–653; BOER – HALE – CHANTON 2001:707–710. On the ancient testimonies see GRAF 2009:599–600.

⁴ On the behavior of the Pythia: JOHNSTON 2008:44–50; GRAF 2009:588–600., cf. note 6.

would have deemed poetic talent more than the result of a purely physical process, we can conclude that neither the personality of the Pythia, nor her psychological character, briefly her soul, did dissolve completely during the trance, but influenced the quality of the oracle. Plutarch explained the trance of the Pythia as divine possession, and the lack of training or special abilities on her part was proof of this. However, he could not claim that Apollo's poetic talent was decreasing, so he had to admit that the seer's aptness affects the oracle.

The same twofold approach can be observed by other authors of the Antiquity too: they emphasized the active role of the god during the process of divination; consequently, they had to suppose that the special abilities and the training of the seer are irrelevant – because she is a passive antenna, an aerial.⁵ However, we must not forget that the quality of the picture on our TV is not independent from the quality of the aerial and the TV. The dominant tradition emphasizes this, as Plutarch formulates: “Neither the sound nor the inflection nor the vocabulary, nor the metrics are the god's, but the woman's; he grants only the inspiration (*phantasia*) and kindles a light in her soul towards the future; such is her *enthusiasmos*.” An opposite view also existed. Plutarch rejects opinions that overemphasized the god's role, but this refutation is strong evidence for the existence of such opinions (GRAF 2009:593–594), as Graf cites the same author: “it is utterly simplistic and childish to believe that the god himself would slip into the bodies of the prophets (as in the case of the belly-talkers who were formerly called Erykleis and are now called Pythones) and that he would speak using their mouths and vocal chords as his instruments.” If these attitudes were not wide-spread, why were the belly-talkers called *Pythones*, a word so closely associated with Delphi and its god?⁶

Despite of all the differences between Plutarch's complex approach and the simplistic views interpreting the Pythia's trance as simple possession, both opinions lead to the conviction that to be a Pythia does not require special abilities, and this attitude limits what they can tell us about Delphi. They did not write a word on their training, since the inspiration came from the god. We do not know the names of famous and especially successful Pythias because it was always Apollo who spoke through their mouths. Maybe their real training lasted for years, maybe only two days, but no ancient author would spoil the official narrative by declaring that a prophetess had to exercise prophesying. In spite of the popular view, the oracles did not arrive from the mouth of the Pythia in a half-finished form, needing to be worded by male priests;⁷ it is hard to believe that a Pythia was able to do this without a longer period of learning and exercising.

It is worth comparing the blurred silhouette of the Pythia with an obviously shamanistic figure, the famous Aristeas of Proconnesus. According to ancient accounts, he was able to leave his body, reappeared after seven years and then revealed that he had travelled in the shape of a raven with Apollo. He was a real historical personality, but his stories have an anecdotic character and their origin can be connected to the region of the Black Sea, so they can be borrowings from shamanistic peoples, shamanistic in the real

⁵ Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* 7. 397c–d.

⁶ Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum* 9. 414d–e.

⁷ CLAY 2009:8. and MAURIZIO 1995:69. The priests did not “reformulate her utterances and convert them into comprehensible prose or verse... Not one ancient source suggests that anyone other than the Pythia issued oracular responses.”

and strict sense of the word.⁸ The god of Aristeas is Apollo, which can be a sign of the god's shamanistic nature, but Aristeas' person was not involved in any rite of the Greeks. The same can be said about Abaris the Hyperborean, an even more mythical character who had travelled the world with or on an arrow without eating any food.⁹

While Aristeas travelled in soul with Apollo in the tale, the Pythia was possessed by her god. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that the differences between the shamanism of the neighbouring peoples and the Greek image of the oracles are based on the differences between the actual rites. They can be the result of other factors, some of them independent from religion, for example the sociological and even the political background, which affected the Greek expectations towards their shamans. Not being an expert, I would not dare to create a general definition of shaman and cannot choose between the many broader or stricter definitions used in modern scholarship, but I think it is true of most of them that they are religious specialists who have a high reputation within their community; they have special knowledge, unachievable for ordinary persons, they were born with special abilities or signs, they received some form of initiation, they have a training in order to gain the ability to communicate with the supernatural, etc. They are able to help and protect the community they belong to – at the same time the community becomes defenseless against its own shaman. Maybe the latter point does not matter much in an authentic shamanist culture, but it did matter to the Greeks.

In archaic and classical Greek civilization, religious specialists were not specialists at all – this is true not only for the Pythias but for any sacerdotal function. There is no “caste” of priests, either on a hereditary or an educational basis. To be a priest was not a profession. They had no exclusive role in performing sacrifices. Frequently, they were chosen only for one year. No person or committee had a monopoly on interpreting signs. All the famous seers (e.g. Tiresias) are purely mythological characters. What Plutarch said about the education of the Pythia was true for virtually every Greek priest.¹⁰ If we do not want to disregard any piece of the puzzle, we must admit that there were real religious specialists in Greek society e.g. wandering necromancers (*goetes*) or *telestai*, who performed initiatory and cathartic rites for private individuals, but they existed on the periphery of society, their activity was not acknowledged by the state, and intellectuals (like Plato) usually disdained them (OGDEN 2004:105–107). This attitude guaranteed that political power did not depend on spiritual power, which was a fundamental interest of both the aristocracy and the “*demos*”, the people, and can explain some characteristics of Delphi. If Greeks had not tolerated real shamans, a shaman with his or her own reputation, the trance of the Pythia must have been explained by divine possession, diminishing the Pythia's own efforts in the process. It is typical that the word *tripous*, the three-legged seat of the prophetess could be used as a metonymy for the Pythia herself, the object

⁸ Aristeas of Proconnesus: Herodot, *Histories* IV. 13–16. On the shamanic traces in his and other similar figure's legends: OGDEN 2004:116–127; GRAF 2008:37–40.

⁹ Abaris the Hyperborean: Herodot, *Histories* IV.36., Plato, *Charmides* 158c.

¹⁰ On Greek priesthood: BURKERT 1985:95–98; MIKALSON 2010:101–102; PIRENNE-DELFORGE 2010:121–14: “So the stranger in Plato's *Politicus* (290c8-d3) captures the essence of the Greek priesthood and its position in the hierarchy of the state as it is expressed in the philosophical tradition of this period. Priests sacrifice, pray, and do both not as ‘rulers’ but as ‘servants’. They possess the ‘priestly craft’ but not the ‘ruling craft’. For Aristotle, this priestly service is an ‘overseer role’, clearly distinct from a ruling service.”

instead of the person.¹¹ From the first centuries of the documented history of the oracle, we have hardly any report on the person of the prophetess.¹² On the famous cup of the Codrus painter, which is perhaps the first representations of the Delphic Pythia, it is actually not a human prophetess but the goddess Themis who sit on the sacred *tripous* answering to the question of the mythical king Aegeus.¹³

However, to overshadow the Pythia's figure would not have been alone a sufficient method to hinder the emergence of a theocratic power. It withheld personal charisma from the prophetess, but at the same time gave a practically unquestionable authority to her words, and therefore other strategies were needed to achieve the goal, which is perhaps a common goal of all political powers in history: to rely on a divine approval, but without political intervention by the earthly representatives of the transcendence. Delphi was only one among the dozens of oracles in Greece; any of these cult places had a chance to reach the rank of a Panhellenic sanctuary, but it was Delphi that proved to be capable of fulfilling the role expected by the Greek city states, and the cause of this success can be the perfect combination of credible spirituality and authority as well as the relative tactfulness with which the oracle intervened in the internal affairs of the cities. For a historian, associating the term 'non-invention policy' could sound doubtful in this context, considering that the Greek cities fought three so-called Sacred Wars to obtain custody over Delphi. It was so vital for the major states to control this unavoidable source of divine prophecies, to control and influence them; this influence, however, was indirect, for the oracles always arrived in an enigmatic form, and the receiver could interpret the riddle according his own needs. For our sceptical age, the first explanation for the Delphic riddles is the suspicion that the oracle wanted to avoid the possibility of an obviously false prophecy, but another motivation could also have played a role. Greek politicians did not needed precise and detailed guidelines for their what-to-dos. In the famous (and probably not authentic) oracle, the god of Delphi informed Athens that it had to build wooden walls to defend the city against the Persians, and Themistocles explained this as a call for fighting the war on the sea, with ships, while a few bigots began to build wooden bastions on the Acropolis (EVANS 1982:24–29). However, the explanation of the story is imperfect without the knowledge that Delphi expressed open sympathies for the Persians during the war. What gave the city a chance to oppose a malevolent oracle was its enigmatic form and the possibility of metaphoric interpretations.

Greek society had an interest in restricting the activity of genuine shamans, but this fact alone is not evidence for the existence of a previous and manifestly shamanistic phase of Delphi or any other oracles. The age and nature of our sources do not give us opportunity to provide a full description of the earliest phase of trance-divination in Greece, but there are signs in Greek literature suggesting that its shamanistic nature was originally more apparent, and it was connected with poetry and poetic initiation.

Generally, the effect of Apollo on the human soul is the same as in the case of other gods of the Greek religion: he is able to induce possession. A frequent term for it is

¹¹ CLAY 2009:10; e.g. Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* 406d and *De defectu oraculorum* 413b., 435a.

¹² See note 1. CLAY 2009: 6–9: the first evidence for a Delphic priestess comes from Theognis 807–8., dated back from the seventh century (WEST 1971:172).

¹³ Berlin F 2538, ARV² 1269.5, LIMC 1 s.v. Aegeus 1. Aeschylus in his *Eumenides* names Themis as a previous owner of Delphi.

enthusiasmos, which is a combination of ‘in’ and ‘god’, so it denotes a mental state when the divinity is somehow *in* the person. Altered states of consciousness played an important role in Greek religion, so it is surprising to see that this word was not a part of the traditional Greek religious vocabulary. It appeared rather late, in the works of the philosophers, first of all Plato – Greek religion practiced *enthusiasmos* but did not conceptualize it.¹⁴ Consequently, what we have in our sources is mostly a reflection of philosophy, or rather an abstraction created by philosophers, not an inner ‘theological’ interpretation of the phenomenon.

Apollo is not the only god who is able to provoke *enthusiasmos*, Plato mentions it together with the Dionysian and Corybantic trance.¹⁵ The Corybantic dancers were the offspring of the god Apollo and one of the Muses, Thalia, but they worshipped Cybele, the Phrygian mother of the gods with their dance. As Plato says: “For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise; just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite those fine songs in their senses, but when they have started on the melody and rhythm they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession – as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers – that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report”¹⁶ (Ion 533e–534a).

Ecstatic rituals were wide-spread in all of the mentioned cults, but the effects of the trance were radically different – the Pythia told the future, some followers of Cybele castrated themselves without feeling pain. However, ancient authors did not distinguish the different forms of religious trance terminologically. A more traditional word for divination, ‘*mantike*’, derives from the verb ‘*mainomai*’ ‘to be mad’, as the Greek recognized it, and their etymology was probably correct.¹⁷ In spite of all association with madness, possession by Apollo was radically different from the *enthusiasmos* caused by other gods, e.g. Dionysus or Cybele. Apollonic ecstasy did not lead to the extinction of normal consciousness or the loss of the moral sense; it presented men and women with the ability to surpass normal human standards. This is even more obvious if we examine the talent of divination together with its pair: poetry.

When Plato wrote on *enthusiasmos*, he primarily used the term to explain some characteristics of poetry – and he saw a strong connection between poetry and divination as well as the divine possession behind them:

“And what they tell is true. For a poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, and is unable ever to indite until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him: every man, whilst he retains possession of that, is powerless to indite a verse or chant an oracle.

¹⁴ The first occurrence of the noun *enthusiasmos* is in a fragment of Democritus: CLAY 1997:40. The adjective *entheos* may be older. The other word frequently used to describe the Pythia’s state of consciousness is *katochos*, a term to denote a person who is controlled by a divinity. To these terms: GRAF 2009:592, JOHNSTON 2008:44.

¹⁵ Plato, *Ion* 533e–534a

¹⁶ Translation from LAMB 1925.

¹⁷ The etymology is controversial: while the majority of the scholarship accepts it – CHANTRAINE 2009:641; FRISK 1954–1972:2.173; DILLERY 2005:19 – there are objections against it both on linguistic and factual grounds (CASEVITZ 1992:14–15; MASLOV 2015:194).

Seeing then that it is not by art that they compose and utter so many fine things about the deeds of men – as you do about Homer – but by a divine dispensation, each is able only to compose that to which the Muse has stirred him, this man dithyrambs, another laudatory odes, another dance-songs, another epic or else iambic verse; but each is at fault in any other kind. For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learnt by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all. And for this reason God takes away the mind of these men and uses them as his ministers, just as he does soothsayers and godly seers, (...)" (*Ion* 534b-c)

The presupposition of his theory is that Greek poetry was more or less oral, even in his age. The analogy between poetic talent and soothsaying is not Plato's invention. It can be found in earlier Greek literature, and comparative linguistics suggest that their connection had already existed in the age of the Indo-European language.¹⁸ In Greece, the state of mind of the poet is practically the same as in the case of the Pythia: the Muse speaks through his tongue. The 'Sing me, Goddess' formula of Homer was not intended to be a mere metaphor: the inspiration comes directly from the Muses, but their leader is Apollo. However, while he reveals truth for the mortals in the oracles, he sings only to the gods.

The Greek society that did not want to see famous prophets, at least within the framework of the institutional cults, wanted to adore great poets. Maybe it is not a coincidence that it is easier to find shamanistic motives in the case of poets, first of all clear and unambiguous traces of the initiation. Hesiod lived in the first part of the seventh century, the following text is from the proem of his *Theogony*. Traditionally, all poets had to invoke the Muses, in this case the Muses of Mount Helicon, near to the village where Hesiod lived:

"One time, they taught Hesiod beautiful song while he was pasturing lambs under holy Helicon. And this speech the goddesses spoke first of all to me, the Olympian Muses, the daughters of aegis-holding Zeus: 'Field-dwelling shepherds, ignoble of disgraces, mere bellies: we know how to say many false things similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things.' So spoke great Zeus' ready-speaking daughters, and they plucked a staff, a branch of luxuriant laurel, a marvel, and gave it to me; and they breathed a divine voice into me, so that I might glorify what will be and what was before, and they commanded me to sing of the race of the blessed ones who always are, but always to sing of themselves first and last."¹⁹

We have no cause to deny the psychological reality of this encounter between Hesiod and the Muses on the slopes of Helicon. He, a shepherd, met the Muses, who gave him the traditional staff of the Greek bard, *aidos*, made of laurel, the sacred tree of Apollo, the poetic talent, and an *ars poetica*. The text is authentic, so here we have a first-hand account of an initiation. In the biographies of Greek poets, we can find parallel stories

¹⁸ On the common vocabulary of poetry and divination: WEST 2007:28–29.

¹⁹ Hesiod, *Theogonia* 22–34, from Most's edition and with his translation (MOST 2006).

with mysterious signs or divine encounters,²⁰ but this text is unique because of his age, his authenticity, and because it sounds traditional: seemingly, the audience found it quite normal that Hesiod saw the Muses. Maybe it is more than a mere guess to suppose that in earlier times seers may have experienced similar encounters. The mythical diviners: Tiresias, Melampus and Cassandra either received their prophetic talent as a gift from a god (Cassandra from Apollo, Tiresias from Athena or Hera) or it was somehow connected with snakes. Tiresias killed a pair of mating snakes, and he turned into a woman.²¹ Melampus did not hurt a similar pair of snakes, and they taught him the language of the animals. Iamus, the son of Apollo and Euadne, was fed on honey by two snakes and became a seer.²² All these motifs can be interpreted as initiatory symbols.

Another common element between divination and poetry is the symbolism of honey and the bee. Though their symbolic value is polyvalent, both were central symbols of poetry. The motifs of honey and bee appear to be linked to Apollonic divination as well. According to the myth, the first Delphic temple was built of honeycombs and bee wings. In some variations of the myth, the place of the oracle was revealed by bees, and the Pythia was called the Delphic bee.²³ Here, I must omit the more unclear issue of the toxic honey (*melimainomenon*) which was a known hallucinogenic material for the Greeks.²⁴

We have another important text related to bees and divination. In the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, the one-day-old Hermes steals the cattle of his half-brother and later tries to get a portion from the most important functions of Apollo: music/poetry and divination. Apollo responds in a riddle and gives him a very peculiar form of divination:

“There are certain holy ones, sisters born – three virgins gifted with wings: their heads are besprinkled with white meal, and they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus. These are teachers of divination apart from me, the art which I practiced while yet a boy following herds, though my father paid no heed to it. From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honeycomb and bringing all things to pass. And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth; but if they be deprived of the gods’ sweet food, then they speak falsely, as they swarm in and out together. These, then, I give you.”²⁵

These bee-maidens had belonged to Apollo, and now he gives them to Hermes. There is no really plausible hypothesis to solve the riddle of these bee-maidens’ identity, but

²⁰ On Hesiod: TSALAGALIS 2009:132–135. Archilochus’ similar encounter with the Muses: BREITENSTEIN 1971:9–28. Considering that we know nothing about the person of Homer, Archilochus and Hesiod are the two earliest Greek authors with known biographical details, and both of them received poetic initiation from the Muses.

²¹ Hyginus, *Fabulae* 75. Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.6.7., Phlegon, *Mirabilia* 4. It is remarkable that the god and the receiver of the divinatory talent always belong to the opposite sex. About views on the Pythia as the bride of Apollo see: Johnston, “Ancient,” 40.

²² Pindar: *Olympian odes* 6. 46–53.

²³ On the connection between bees, prophecy and Delphi: SCHEINBERG 1979:16–21., the oracle of Trophonius was found with the help of bees (Pausanias 9. 40. 1.). The second Delphic temple was built of wax (Pausanias 10. 5. 9., Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum* 17, 420d.). Certain Delphic coins were stamped with bees (SCHEINBERG 1979:20), Pythia was mentioned as the Delphic bee (Pindar: *Pyth.* 4.60.). On temple-builder bees: RUMPF: 1964:5–8. Further sources in COOK 1895:1–24.

²⁴ On toxic honey: OTT 1998:260–266.

²⁵ Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* 550–564. Translation from: EVELYN-WHITE 1914.

something is clear: their prophetic talent seems to be associated with ecstasy – when they eat the honey, their prophecies are true, and the verb *thyio* in the texts usually indicates divinatory trance.

We know far too little about divination in the earliest Greek society. It is clear that the rational methods, divination through sacrifice or observation of birds, played a greater role initially. Divination in trance must have been coexisting, but we have no direct evidence about the process that made this Delphic method the most prestigious form of mediating the gods' will. What we know is that this development did happen sometime in the Archaic Age and we can suppose that one prerequisite of this change was imposing regulation on this form of divination, eliminating the elements we can define as shamanistic.

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