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“Arrows Fledged from Our Own Wings”: Discovering a ‘Delphi of the Mind’ in the Writings of the Early Church Fathers¹

Daniel J. Crosby

Introduction

Theodoret of Cyrus, a Church historian of the fifth century,² provides a provocative historical anecdote from the previous century:

And first Emperor Julian forbade the sons of the Galileans (for that is what he named the worshippers of the Savior) to take part in the words of the poets, and rhetors, and philosophers.³ For he said, according to the proverb, “We are shot by arrows fledged from our own wings.” For arming themselves from our own writings, they make war against us.⁴

The statement indicates that some pagans of the fourth century believed that the Christian apologists implemented the arguments of certain earlier poets, rhetors, and philosophers, who were sometimes skeptical of the traditional Greco-Roman religion and at other times unaware of the potential implication of their words, as weapons against paganism. The sentiment rings true even if Julian never spoke these words. In the mid-fourth century, paganism was under attack, and the Early Church Fathers were leading the intellectual front of the assault. One important maneuver in Christian polemics was discrediting the authority of the Delphic Oracle.⁵ In this contribution, I first discuss five particularly salient arguments that the Early Church Fathers leveled against the Oracle: the ambiguity of the oracles, the daemonic source of its inspiration, the gender of the Pythia, the Christian overtones of certain oracles of Delphi, and the clear signs of the serious decline (even the end) of its importance as a functioning Oracle. I then show in each case that these arguments have clear antecedents among skeptical philosophers, thus demonstrating that the Early Church Fathers are working with a received tradition, just as

¹ A version of this contribution first appeared in a festschrift titled *A Dangerous Mind: The Ideas and Influence of Delbert L. Wiens* and has been used here with the permission of Wipf & Stock Publishers. See Crosby 2015. The present contribution has had the benefit of two years of reflection and further research as well as the comments of a number of helpful advisors, reviewers, colleagues, and friends who deserve my sincerest gratitude.

² All dates are given in years CE unless otherwise specified.

³ Theodoret’s complaint pertains to Julian’s educational policies. Julian issued a rescript in 362 barring Christians from teaching as part of his larger program of reform aimed at reviving the cults of the gods that ensured the survival of the state. Jul. *Ep.* 61c. For discussion of Julian’s educational laws, see Downey 1957:97–103; Banchich 1993:5–14. The specific charge that Julian forbade Christian children from attending lectures in the schools is neither corroborated by any non-Christian source nor by Julian’s own κοινὸς νόμος in the rescript above. Rather, the last lines of the rescript specifically state that none were to be excluded from receiving the healing benefits of proper education as a remedy for their mindlessness. For this reason, Hardy challenges the historicity of Theodoret’s claim. Hardy 1968:132n6.

⁴ καὶ πρῶτον μὲν ἀπηγόρευσε τῶν Γαλιλαίων τοὺς παῖδας (οὕτω γὰρ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν τοὺς θιασώτας ὠνόμαζε) ποιητικῶν καὶ ῥητορικῶν καὶ φιλοσόφων μεταλαγχάνειν λόγων. «τοῖς οικείοις γάρ», φησί, «πετροῖς κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν βαλλόμεθα ἐκ γὰρ τῶν ἡμετέρων συγγραμμάτων καθοπλιζόμενοι τὸν καθ’ ἡμῶν ἀναδέχονται πόλεμον». Theodoret, *HE* 185.9–13 (Parmentier and Scheidweiler, ed., *Akademie Verlag*, 1954). All translations are mine. There is fable about an eagle being shot with an arrow made from his own feathers in the Aesopic corpus. Aesop. 273.3, 1b (Hausrath and Hunger, Tuebner, 1959). As W.C. Wright and Alan H. Sommerstein point out, the imagery of this story was a striking enough one in antiquity for it to be used by Aeschylus (*A. Fr.* 139), who is quoted by Aristophanes (*Ar. Av.* 807–8) and alluded to by many other authors even far later. See Wright ed. 1923:299n4; Sommerstein ed. 2008:148.

⁵ I use Oracle with a capital *O* to distinguish the institution of the Delphic Oracle from its individual pronouncements, the Delphic oracles.

Julian's complaint suggests. Finally, drawing on social constructionist theory, I suggest that their use of Delphic tradition to discredit the Delphic Oracle, an institution that they claim is no longer operating, signals the existence of two different realities of the Oracle of Delphi: a 'Delphi of the mind' and the 'Delphi of fact.'⁶

The course of scholarship on the Delphic Oracle has swung rather pendulum-like over the last century. During the excavations begun by the French Archaeological School in 1893, it was revealed that no chasm existed beneath the temple of Apollo, contrary to what some of our ancient literary sources say.⁷ This dramatic refutation of an established tradition began the swing of the Delphic pendulum between trends of harmonization, which endeavored to correlate the ever-growing wealth of archaeological evidence with the literary sources, and skepticism, which sought to disregard any textual witness that did not agree with the archaeological evidence.⁸ For example, one faction of scholars suggested that the frequent earthquakes, to which Delphi is prone, were responsible for erasing all trace of this chasm, fissure, or slight depression of the pavement of the temple.⁹ Another faction preferred to scrutinize the literary sources rather than the expertise of the French archaeologists, and in the process, they discredited the chasm as an imaginative embellishment or a traditional misunderstanding.¹⁰ With the chasm all but closed, natural, geological explanations of the Pythia's supposed prophetic frenzy declined in favor of more synthetic, psychedelic and psychological ones.¹¹ More recently, an interdisciplinary team reexamined the geomorphology of the area around Delphi and determined that the temple of Apollo may sit atop an intersection of two faults, which reopened the cleft, however far, to the possibility of subterranean, noxious vapors in the form of ethylene gas and offered some explanation for the ancient belief in a chasm below the temple.¹² However, the most recent scholarship has demonstrated the serious flaws in that theory, from the evidence for the location of the faults, to the volume of ethylene needed to induce the Pythia's supposed "trance-like state," to the methodology involved in the usage of historical sources.¹³ The pendulum still continues to swing.¹⁴

⁶ Ironically, it was the Early Church Fathers' reliance upon the pagan literary tradition both for their polemics and apologetics that ensured the survival of much of that tradition. For discussion, see Fuhrmann 1990. I have borrowed the terms 'Delphi of the mind' and 'Delphi of fact' from Lipsey 2001, whose work I discuss at greater length in the conclusion.

⁷ E.g., Str. 9.3.5; D.S. 16.26. For the findings of the French archaeological team related to the chasm, see Courby 1927:64–6.

⁸ A noteworthy exception is Maurizio 1995:69–86, whose work analyses the depictions of the Pythia's activities in light of anthropological evidence and theory.

⁹ Flacelière 1965:48; Dempsey 1918:59; Roux 1976:110–17. Roux bases his theory on the statement that "rien ne laisse moins de ruines qu'un trou!" Roux 1976:110. Similarly, Bourguet 1914:250 suggests a systematic demolition of the site as a possible solution to the problem of the missing chasm.

¹⁰ Oppé 1904; Will 1942; Amandry 1950: 215–230; Fontenrose 1978:197–203. Although Parke and Wormell 1956:21 do not support the historicity of the Delphic chasm, they feel forced to concede that the possibility cannot be excluded.

¹¹ For psychedelic theories, see Holland 1933:201–14; Nilsson 1941:160; Littleton 1986:76–91. For psychological theories, see Dodds 1951:70–4; Parke and Wormell 1956.1:37–41; Flacelière 1965:50–1.

¹² de Boer et al. 2001; Spiller et al. 2002.

¹³ Etiope et al. 2006; Foster and Lehoux 2007; Lehoux 2007.

¹⁴ The revival of the noxious gas theory in the early 2000s was very well publicized and popularized, appearing even in *Scientific American*. J.H. Hale et al. 2003. The theory continues to attract the notice of scholars despite the work of those who have demonstrated its flaws. See Clay 2009:11–12; Scott 2014:23–4. Those who have recently demonstrated the flaws of the theory have yet to receive much attention.

At their core, all of these studies share a positivist approach to the study of the Delphic Oracle, in which archaeological and textual evidence are used, whether affirmed or dismissed, to support conclusions related to the existence of certain physical features and the historicity of certain practices and events. In this contribution, I will explore evidence that may not reflect *the* historical reality but, nonetheless, reflects *a* historical reality, namely the historical perspective of the Early Church Fathers. With regard to scholarship on the Delphic Oracle, the most often dismissed class of evidence is the writings of the Early Church Fathers whose obvious bias has hampered their credibility and, as a consequence, their evidentiary weight and reception.¹⁵ Although perhaps factually inaccurate on a number of counts, their writings can still be important sources for how certain people thought about the Delphic Oracle, and to that effect, they provide good evidence.

The apologetics of the Early Church Fathers argued not only in favor of Christianity, but also against many traditional forms of Greco-Roman religious experience and expression. Among these institutions, the Delphic Oracle was of particular interest to them. The Early Church Fathers singled out the Oracle for fierce attacks; at the same time, they proclaimed that the issuance of oracles had been discontinued. To quote Parke and Wormell, although the apologists understood that the Oracle was no longer performing the function for which it was best known, "... the tradition of their [the oracles'] prophetic powers continued to remain as an influence in the minds of men. The Christian apologists think it worth their trouble to devote much space in their writings to refuting the idea that the oracular powers of Delphi were in any way a confirmation of pagan belief."¹⁶ Their polemics against the Oracle reveal a disconnect between a realistic appreciation of the threat posed by the Oracle of the third and fourth centuries and the profound thoroughness of their response. The Early Church Fathers seem to have felt that the Oracle of Delphi was still a threat, despite the fact that they thought it was no longer issuing oracles. For this reason, the attention that they paid to Delphi raises a question about what the Delphic Oracle was and what it meant to them. Was the Oracle that the Early Church Fathers railed against different from the institution that existed in antiquity?

I propose to answer this question by defining reality differently from traditional scholarship on the Delphic Oracle with its emphasis on strict historicity. Instead, I adopt a social-constructionist definition of reality, by which reality is understood as a "taken-for-granted" body of knowledge, "regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge,'" that is "developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations."¹⁷ This reality is one that comes into being through the social interaction involved in communication, particularly through language.¹⁸ So, while the positivist and empiricist approach studies the

¹⁵ Although some scholars enjoy mentioning and even quoting the writings of the Early Church Fathers, most dismiss them as unreliable evidence for Delphic oracular practice. See Oppé 1904:218; Fontenrose 1978:210; Price 1985:136. Amandry 1950:23, 23n1 is more even-handed in his assessment of the value of the writings of the Church Fathers, but except in making passing comments on their thoughts, he only very seldom relies on their authority without additional support from earlier writers. Others, like Will 1942, Flacelière 1965, and Roux 1976, do not cite them at all.

¹⁶ Parke and Wormell 1956.1:288.

¹⁷ Berger and Luckmann 1966:3. These two scholars are responsible for coining the term 'social construction.'

¹⁸ For a brief discussion of the importance of language in the theory of social constructionism, see Burr 2003:7–8.

reality of objects, the social constructionist approach studies the reality of how objects are thought about in a society and described in language. The theory has produced influential and paradigm-shifting scholarship since the 1960s, such as Benedict Anderson's classic study on the concept of nationalism and Edward Said's critique of the Western construction of 'Orientalism,'¹⁹ but only relatively recently have ideas of social constructionism found their way into classical scholarship. It has become more acceptable to study what were the realities that the ancients constructed for themselves and what were their underlying motivations for doing so. Zeitlin, for example, states in "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama":

In proposing that there is some conceptual category in the Athenian theater named 'Thebes' and that some underlying 'unity of place' organizes these disparate stories and their treatment in the work of all three Athenian tragic poets, I am, in effect, suggesting that we look at Thebes as a *topos* in both senses of the word: as a designated place, a geographical locale, and figuratively, as a recurrent concept or formula, or what we call a 'commonplace.'²⁰

Here, Zeitlin parses the reality of Thebes the polis that in one reality stood about fifty kilometers distant from Athens and the 'Thebes' of the stage that the tragedians constructed as an "anti-Athens" or Athens' "mirror opposite."²¹ Also, Berman has shown in a recently published volume that the Theban landscape was constructed from elements of the Boeotian polis' physical topography and buildings, as well as from elements found in the myth and literature of the late-Archaic and Classical Periods that do not reflect the historical polis.²² Thebes, then, is a composite with at least two facets to its reality in the ancient world: one grounded in a geographical location and another that was imagined.

I contend that the lens of social construction can be a useful one for studying the Delphic Oracle, an institution and place that, like Thebes, is prominent in both myth and history and often stood at a remove from those who wrote about it. Through this lens, the misunderstandings, fabrications, and falsehoods that the Early Church Fathers wrote about the Delphic Oracle may fairly be considered reality, provided that it can be shown that their statements were socially transmitted and maintained as part of a tradition and not merely their own fictions. First, therefore, it will be necessary to elucidate and comment on the assault made by the Early Church Fathers against the Oracle of Delphi, showing not only that they felt compelled to change the perception of the most honored institution of the Greco-Roman world, but also that they borrowed extensively from the pagan tradition of philosophical skepticism to effect that result. Second, the fact that the Early Church Fathers admit that Delphi, as an oracular institution, no longer existed, and yet wage a war against it, indicates that the Early Church Fathers were concerned not with the institution, but with its reception among their contemporaries. This evidence signals their recognition of two different, but real, Oracles of Delphi: the one being the declined institution, the 'Delphi of fact,' and the other, the constructed reality that continued to

¹⁹ Anderson 1983; Said 1978. I should point out the importance that Anderson places on language and printing in the construction of the European concept of a nation and nationality. Said's work on 'Orientalism' is somewhat analogous to what I am suggesting happened in the case of the Oracle in the writings of the Early Church Fathers. Said shows that a society that imagined itself superior perpetuated traditional 'knowledge' as commonly accepted reality that did not accurately reflect the reality but supported the society's claim of superiority.

²⁰ Zeitlin 1990:131.

²¹ Zeitlin 1990:144.

²² Berman 2015.

exercise a great amount of influence on pagan religious thought during the third and fourth centuries, a ‘Delphi of the mind.’

The Debts of Our Fathers

The Early Church Fathers were certainly not alone in their stance against traditional Greco-Roman religion. That ground had already been well trodden by earlier philosophers. Thus, in many instances, the apologists did not need to invent new controversies, but simply to dredge up old ones and occasionally to present them in a new package wrapped in Christian morals and teachings. In the case of the Oracle of Delphi, the debts of the Fathers are clear. In what follows, I discuss four particular arguments of the five mentioned above as representative of that debt—these are the ambiguity of the oracles, the daemonic source of their inspiration, the gender of the Pythia, and the Christian message of certain oracles that Delphi was thought to have issued—and I demonstrate the similarities they show to earlier literary tradition in each case.

The ambiguity of its oracles was the most popular argument against Delphi’s authority. Eusebius, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, believed that the oracles of the Greeks were “extremely well designed for deceit, and being composed in an equivocal and ambiguous manner, they are fit, not without skill, for either of the outcomes expected from the event.”²³ To demonstrate his argument, Eusebius claimed that the Delphic Oracle was responsible for the downfall of its own faithful patrons, offering as an example the well-known tale of Croesus. In this story, Croesus, who had lavished Pythian Apollo with his most exquisite dedications, was only told by the Oracle that if he should cross the Halys River, a great empire would fall. Believing the great empire to be that of the Persians and not his own, he attacked.²⁴ It was his that fell. Clement of Alexandria in the late second century was also aware of this ironic and unfortunate episode, saying, “He [Apollo] betrayed his friend Croesus, and having forgotten the reward he had received (for thus was he a lover of deceit), led Croesus across the river Halys to the funeral pyre.”²⁵ To the Early Church Fathers, Pythian Apollo was a traitor even to his most beneficent patrons.

The argument that both Clement and Eusebius made was definitely not original. Oracular institutions, and the Delphic Oracle in particular, seem to have had a reputation for ambiguity going back perhaps as far as the philosopher Heraclitus, who famously said, “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither tells, nor conceals, but gives a sign.”²⁶ Cicero also records the

²³ εὖ μάλα δὲ πρὸς ἀπάτην ἐσκευωρημένων πλάσματα τυγχάνειν, μέσῳ καὶ ἀμφιβόλῳ συγκείμενα τρόπῳ πρὸς ἐκάτερά τε τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκβάσεως προσδοκωμένων οὐκ ἀφυῶς ἐφαρμόζειν. Eus. *PE* 4.1.8 (Mras, Akademie Verlag, 1956). See Ciholas 2003:101; Lipsey 2001:218.

²⁴ Eus. *PE* 5.20–21. The foundation of Eusebius’ critique comes from the work of Oenomaus of Gadara, the second-century Cynic who wrote a work called *On the Detection of Impostors* in which he ridiculed credulousness, particularly the belief in prophetic oracles. The book became a happy hunting ground for Christian apologists who were eager to tear down the foundations of pagan beliefs and institutions. For the Croesus episode, see Hdt. 1.53.

²⁵ προὔδωκε τὸν Κροῖσον τὸν φίλον καὶ τοῦ μισθοῦ ἐκλαθόμενος (οὕτω φιλόδολος ἦν) ἀνήγαγε τὸν Κροῖσον διὰ τοῦ Ἄλως ἐπὶ τὴν πυράν. Clem. Al. *Ex. Gr.* 43.3.14–16 (Marcovich, Brill, 1995).

²⁶ ὁ ἄναξ, οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει. DK B93 (Diels and Kranz, Weidmann, 1951), Plut. *Mor.* 404D. Fontenrose argues the Delphic Oracle did not have a reputation for ambiguity in antiquity, claiming further that this is a “wholly modern” idea. Fontenrose 1978:236–8. His argument is essentially a dismissal of certain evidences for oracular ambiguity outside of the oracles themselves. About the fragment of Heraclitus, he says that scholars who use the fragment in support of equivocalness ignore the context of the passage within Plutarch’s work. The context, however, cannot tell us anything about the meaning that Heraclitus intended; it only tells us how Plutarch and his interlocutors understood his meaning. Plut. *Mor.* 404D. The ambiguity of the Oracle is certainly a part of Delphi’s constructed reality in antiquity, as the examples will show.

example of Croesus and adds about the oracles in general, “Some were so intricate and obscure that their interpreter needs an interpreter and the oracles themselves must be referred back to the oracle; and some so equivocal that they require a dialectician to construe them.”²⁷ According to Dio Chrysostom, writing in the early-second century, Diogenes the Cynic warned a man traveling to Delphi to be cautious of the response that the Pythia would give to him, lest he unwittingly cross his own Halys.²⁸ Delphic ambiguity was such a well-known topic in the Greek world that Lucian could even mock Apollo, whom he portrays as hedging his bets in his prophecies, for the amusement of his audience.²⁹

The Early Church Fathers also challenged the nature of the source of the Pythia’s oracular inspiration. In other words, the apologists were able to cast a measure of suspicion on the Oracle by redefining the nature of and relationship between Apollo and the daemons. The Greek understanding of the cosmological order of δαίμονες seems to have evolved much over time, but we need only treat one tenet here. That pertinent element of daemonology stems from the Classical Period in Plato’s supposition that daemons were intermediaries through which the gods and mortals interacted, bridging the gap between the opposing realms of mortal and immortal that could not intermingle without pollution.³⁰ Therefore, daemons could be made responsible for relaying prophecy from Apollo, the prophetic god, to the Pythia, his oracular priestess. Xenocrates, the successor of the Academy after Speusippus, seems to have been the first to open the door to what would become the more common interpretation of the daemoniac in Christian thought: malevolent spirits. He submitted that daemons, being between the realm of gods and mortals, shared both in divine power and human passions, and because of these passions, they varied in virtue and vice.³¹ Pushing his theories further, Porphyry and Theophrastus, one of the immediate successors of Aristotle whom Porphyry quotes extensively, believed that all sacrifice is defilement, an unholy and shameful act, in the sight of the gods and worthy only of the daemons. “The one who ponders reverence toward the gods knows that no animate thing is sacrificed to the gods, but to the daemons either good or bad.”³² Some Greek philosophers, then, not only argued that there was a distinction between good and evil daemons, but also that all sacrifice was an element of daemoniac worship.

The Early Church Fathers furthered the argument of these philosophers, taking it to its ultimate conclusion. Eusebius says, “Porphyry, relying on Theophrastus as his witness, says that animal sacrifice is not fitting for the gods, but only for daemons, such that according to the

²⁷ ‘partim flexililoquis et obscuris, ut interpres egeat interprete et sors ipsa ad sortes referenda sit, partim ambiguis et quae ad dialecticum deferendae sint.’ Cic. *Div.* 2.115 (Giomini, ed., Tuebner, 1975).

²⁸ D. Chr. 10.23–26.

²⁹ Lucian, *DDeor.* 18(16).1; *JTr.* 28.

³⁰ Pl. *Sym.* 202E. Exactly what the δαίμονες were to the Greeks was apparently a matter of debate even among the Greeks. See Burkert 1991:331–2. These δαίμονες were known in Greek religion since at least the time of Homer (e.g., *Il.* 1.222).

³¹ Plut. *Mor.* 360D–E (fr. 145), 361B (fr. 146), 416C–D (fr. 142), 417B (F 147). The fragment numbers are those assigned by Parente and Torandi 2012. See discussion in Schibli 1993:144–9. This theory of daemoniac powers allowed Plutarch’s Cleobrotos to believe that the decline in the importance of the Delphic Oracle that he perceived in his own time and had read about in the past was due to the defection of the daemons that were responsible for relaying Apollo’s prophecy. Plut. *Mor.* 418C–E. It is to Xenocrates, perhaps, that our culture owes its conception of the evil demon. Dillon 1996:31–2; Burkert 1991:332. cf. Plut. *Mor.* 419A.

³² οἶδεν δὲ ὁ τῆς εὐσεβείας φροντίζων, ὡς θεοῖς μὲν οὐ θύεται ἔμψυχον οὐδέν, δαίμοσιν δέ, ἀλλ’ ἦτοι ἀγαθοῖς ἢ καὶ φαύλοις. Eus. *PE* 4.15.1. cf. Plut. *Mor.* 361B (F 146), 417C–D.

argument of himself and Theophrastus, Apollo is a daemon but not a god.”³³ Eusebius indicts Apollo especially, whose oracular pronouncements endorsed sacrifice to the gods, and only subsequently extends his argument to the whole pantheon.³⁴ However, Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius were not content to prove that the Greco-Roman gods were merely daemons; they desired to prove that the gods, and Apollo in particular, were deceitful, misanthropic daemons in order to discredit the Delphic Oracle. They accomplished this task through various means, but the most powerful argument used was an appeal to commonplace ethics.³⁵ “For if the philosophers considered the sacrifice of irrational animals to be accursed and sacrilegious, abominable, defiled, unjust, unholy, not harmless to those who are sacrificing, and on account of all these reasons unworthy of the gods, what ought to be thought about the sacrifice of people?”³⁶ Both Clement and Eusebius go through a litany of examples of this practice, and thus, the Greco-Roman gods are consigned to the ranks of the evil daemons by the common perception that human sacrifice is immoral. “But if anyone should say that the custom of human sacrifice is not evil, but was most properly practiced by the ancients, he must condemn all those of the present day, because no one worships like their fathers.”³⁷ Apollo’s Oracle at Delphi could not have been truthful because its source was evil. In this instance again, we see that the Early Church Fathers employed a pagan tradition, specifically the theology that developed out of the pagan, philosophical schools of the Classical and Hellenistic Periods, to assault the basis for the Oracle’s authority.

Another method for discrediting the Delphic Oracle was through an appeal to overt sexism in their contemporary culture. The common thread of Greek male chauvinism is clearly seen in Plato and in the works of other philosophers: women are, by their very nature, inferior to men according to the Greeks.³⁸ The argument appears most clearly in the writings of the third-century theologian Origen. “If the Delphic Apollo were a god, as the Greeks think, whom is it more necessary for him to choose as a prophet than a wise *man*, or, if one could not be found, at

³³ ὁ δὲ τὸν Θεόφραστον μαρτυρούμενος θεοῖς μὲν οὐ φησιν ἀρμόζειν τὴν διὰ ζώων θυσίαν, δαίμοσιν δὲ μόνοις, ὥστε κατὰ τὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ Θεοφράστου λόγον δαίμονα εἶναι, ἀλλ’ οὐ θεὸν τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα. Eus. *PE* 4.10.3. Origen appears to be alluding to a similar line of reasoning, citing an uncertain Pythagorean commentary on the *Iliad*. Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.28; 7.6, 35; 8.62.

³⁴ Eus. *PE* 4.9.

³⁵ Clement of Alexandria relies mostly upon mythology, stories of the gods being on earth, living human-like lives, and dying, as a means to discredit the “deathless” ones. Clem. Al. *Ex. Gr.* 2.24P–31P; cf. Origen, *C. Cels.* 6.2. Eusebius points out the disparity between mythology and the opinions of the philosophers, both of which were supported by oracular pronouncements at different times. Eus. *PE* 3.14–15. Additionally, Apollo, who was supposed to be the sun, could not descend in order to bring inspiration. Eus. *PE* 3.16. Finally, Apollo recommended an inquirer to sacrifice to an evil daemon in an oracle. Eus. *PE* 4.20.

³⁶ εἰ γὰρ ἡ διὰ ζώων ἀλόγων θυσία ἐπάρατος καὶ κακόθυτος πρὸς τῶν φιλοσόφων ἐλέχθη μισαρά τε καὶ ἄδικος καὶ ἀνόσιος καὶ οὐκ ἀβλαβῆς τοῖς θύουσιν καὶ διὰ γε ταῦτα πάντα θεῶν ἀναξία, τί χρὴ νομίζειν τὴν δι’ ἀνθρώπων σφαγῆς; Eus. *PE* 4.15.5. See Ciholas 2003:52–53.

³⁷ εἰ δὲ λέγοι τις μὴ φαῦλον εἶναι τὸν τῆς ἀνθρωποθυσίας τρόπον, ὀρθότατα δ’ ὑπὸ τῶν παλαιῶν τελεῖσθαι, ὥρα τοῖς νῦν καταμέμφεσθαι πᾶσιν, ὅτι μηδεὶς ὁμοίως τοῖς πατράσιν εὐσεβεῖ. Eus. *PE* 4.20.

³⁸ When, and only when, his partners in dialogue are willing to suspend their objections based upon societal preconceptions, Plato’s Socrates lays something of a foundation for a more positive view of the female sex in Greek society, granting that they are at least capable of performing the same functions as males, although to an inferior level of ability. This train of thought is an appreciable departure from the Greek societal views concerning the accepted role of women and their abilities. See Pl. *Rep.* 455B–C; cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1.1254B10–14, *NE* 8.1158B11–14. However, to Plato’s Socrates the inferiority of women to men is a fact even at the ontological level, as in his discussion of metempsychosis at Pl. *Tim.* 41D–42D, 90E–91B.

least one who would be inclined in that direction? How would he not wish that a *man* prophesy rather than a *woman*?”³⁹ Origen plays to the sexist mindset that was prevalent in Greek society by questioning the tradition of Apollo’s priestess. If we can agree that even a wisdom-inclined man is superior to a wise woman, then why is the Pythia a she and not a he?

The answer that was adduced by the Church Fathers would have appeared, at first glance, to be a shock to the reverent Greek, for they unabashedly attributed to the mantic session the sensational and the burlesque. Origen believed that Apollo’s choice of prophet was dictated by his sexual appetites. “Sitting at the mouth of the Castalian cave, the prophetess receives a spirit through her genitals; being filled with this, she utters the holy statutes and divine oracles,” and “the pure mantic spirit, Apollo, slips from the body of earth into the so-called prophetess through her genitals as she sits at the Pythian cave.”⁴⁰ In one sense, his description may conjure up images of the treatment of certain gynecological diseases through vaginal fumigation (θυμιάσις/ὑποθυμιάσις);⁴¹ in another sense, Origen is representing the inspiration of the Pythia as the result of sexual congress between the god and his priestess. Origen was not alone in this understanding. John Chrysostom paints a similar picture, adding that the effect of the prophetic session produced an odd symptom.

This very Pythia, being a woman, is said to sit at times with her legs spread upon the tripod of Apollo. Thus, the evil spirit rising up from below and issuing itself through her genitals fills the woman with madness, and she, letting down her hair further, then raves like a bacchant and spews foam from her mouth, and being thus in a drunken state, she utters the words of her madness.⁴²

Even Clement of Alexandria may have had this understanding of the origin of the prophetic power when he wrote of seers in general, “some were stirred by demons, or were disturbed by waters, and fumigations (θυμιαμάτων), and air of a certain sort.”⁴³ In addition to the ability to pronounce oracles, the spirit made her wild and crazed.⁴⁴ Thus, the Church Fathers could draw a

³⁹ εἴπερ δὲ θεὸς ἦν, ὡς Ἕλληγες οἴονται, ὁ ἐν Δελφοῖς Ἀπόλλων, τίνα μᾶλλον ἐχρῆν αὐτὸν ἐκλέξασθαι προφήτην ἢ τὸν σοφὸν ἢ μὴ εὗρισκομένου τοῦ τοιοῦτου κἂν τὸν προκόπτοντα; πῶς δ’ ἂν οὐκ ἄνδρα μᾶλλον προφητεύειν ἐβούλετο ἢπερ γυναῖκα; Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.5.27–31. See Ciholas 2003:79–81; Lipsey 2001:215.

⁴⁰ περικαθεζομένη τὸ τῆς Κασταλίας στόμιον ἢ τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος προφήτις δέχεται πνεῦμα διὰ τῶν γυναικείων κόλπων· οὗ πληρωθεῖσα ἀποφθέγγεται τὰ νομιζόμενα εἶναι σεμνὰ καὶ θεῖαμαντεύματα. Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.3.25–30; διὰ τοῦ Πυθίου στομίου περικαθεζομένη τῇ καλουμένη προφήτιδι πνεῦμα διὰ τῶν γυναικείων ὑπεισέρχεται τὸ μαντικόν, ὁ Ἀπόλλων, τὸ καθαρὸν ἀπὸ γῆϊνου σώματος. Origen *C. Cels.* 3.25.31–4. See Ciholas 2003:82–83; Lipsey 2001:214.

⁴¹ The process of vaginal fumigation calls for a woman to be seated over a cauldron of smoldering spices in order to adjust the position of the uterus within her body, which was thought to inform the overall health of a woman, e.g., Littre 1853:444. See discussion in Sissa 1990:44–49.

⁴² λέγεται τοίνυν αὕτη ἢ Πυθία γυνὴ τις οὕσα ἐπικαθῆσθαι τῷ τρίποδι ποτε τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος, διαιροῦσα τὰ σκέλη εἶθ’ οὕτω πνεῦμα πονηρὸν κάτωθεν ἀναδιδόμενον, καὶ διὰ τῶν γεννητικῶν αὐτῆς διαδυόμενον μορίων πληροῦν τὴν γυναῖκα τῆς μανίας, καὶ ταύτην τὰς τρίχας λύουσιν λοιπὸν ἐκβακχεύεσθαι τε, καὶ ἀφρὸν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ἀφιέναι, καὶ οὕτως ἐν παροιμία γενομένην τὰ τῆς μανίας φθέγγεσθαι ῥήματα. John Chrys. *Ep. I Cor. Homil.* 29.1 (242.11–19) (Migne, 1857–1866).

⁴³ οἱ δὲ καὶ ὑπὸ δαιμόνων κινηθέντες ἢ ὑδάτων καὶ θυμιαμάτων καὶ ἀέρος ποιοῦ ἐκταραχθέντες. Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.21.135.2 (Früchtel, Stählin, and Treu, Akademie Verlag, 1960).

⁴⁴ If we are to imagine the inspiration of the Pythia as a sexual act between god and priestess, might we also see the result of the inspiration, the uncontrollable madness, to be orgasmic?

clear dichotomy: the Hebrew prophets were superior not just because they were men, but also because they prophesied in a sober state of mind and under the inspiration and power of God.⁴⁵

The story that an exhalation rose up from below the Pythia was not a new one. Strabo, Plutarch, and Pausanias were aware of the tradition of a prophetic πνεῦμα at Delphi.⁴⁶ There is even some indication that the obscene imagery of the Pythia that was employed by the Christian apologists was not without precedent. Certainly, the position of tripod over the supposed source of the πνεῦμα is suggestive of vaginal fumigation, in and of itself, not to mention the fact that the symptoms of certain conditions in women, for which the prescribed treatment might be fumigation, included bacchant-like behavior popular in later characterization of the Pythia.⁴⁷ Plutarch seems to be the first to give us a more base account of Delphic consultation in a treatise called *On the Delay of Divine Vengeance*: “At the same time, he, going forward, tried to show him the light that, as he said, came from the tripod, and passing through Themis’ vagina (διὰ τῶν κόλπων), came to rest upon Parnassus.”⁴⁸ As we have seen in Eusebius above, the word κόλπος can also mean vagina or womb, so it is clear that whatever Plutarch actually meant, the text could be read with an eye for scandal.⁴⁹ Additionally, Pseudo-Longinus says, “The account holds that the Pythia approaches tripod where there is, as they say, a chasm in the earth that emits an inspired vapor, and sitting in that place and being impregnated by the daemonic power, she immediately chants oracles according to her inspiration.”⁵⁰ The Pythia is impregnated by the prophetic force, and their offspring is the oracular pronouncement. Although the evidence is slight, the fact that any evidence exists at all demonstrates that this idea was at least extant before

⁴⁵ Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.3–4; Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 1.21.135.3; John Chrys. *Ep. I Cor. Homil.* 29.1.

⁴⁶ Str. *Geo.* 9.3.5; Paus. 10.5.7. εὔηθες γάρ ἐστι καὶ παιδικὸν κομιδῆ τὸ οἶσθαι τὸν θεὸν αὐτὸν ὡσπερ τοὺς ἐγγαστριμύθους Εὐρυκλέας πάλαι νυνὶ δὲ Πύθωνας προσαγορευομένους ἐνδύόμενον εἰς τὰ σώματα τῶν προφητῶν ὑποφθέγγεσθαι τοῖς ἐκείνων στόμασι καὶ φωναῖς χρώμενον ὄργανοις. “It is silly and childish to suppose that the god himself just like ventriloquists, who long ago were called ‘Eurycleis’ but now ‘Pythones,’ enters into the bodies of his prophets and utters making use of their mouths and voices as instruments.” Plut. *Mor.* 414E1–6 (Sievekings, Teubner, 1929). Ammonius’ objection is that it is beneath the dignity of Apollo to enter the Pythia for himself, not that this was not a conception of the mantic mechanism. The agent responsible was a daemon. Plut. *Mor.* 417A. Πνεῦμα has a broad range of meanings in Greek literature, from “wind” or “breath” to discarnate “spirit.” *LSJ*, s.v., “πνεῦμα.”

⁴⁷ One gynecological treatise describes such symptoms as rolling back of the eye, grinding of the teeth, and flowing of saliva. Littre 1853:32. Sissa 1990:50 remarks that in the case of the Pythia “it is as if a well-known image of a traditional therapy had been distorted for the purpose of representing the disease that it was intended to cure.” Sissa 1990:52 also believes that the obscene nature of the process of oracular consultation at Delphi is the reason for much of the silence that we encounter in the primary sources of the Classical Period on mantic session at Delphi. “It evokes what ought not to be seen: an inspired pregnant woman in a temple—a woman who simultaneously opens her mouth and her vagina.” This is a possible interpretation of the evidence. On the other hand, Amandry 1950:47–8 proposes that the madness of the Pythia was a counterfactual tradition that sprung from a misunderstanding of the word μῆνία and its derivatives at Pl. *Phdr.* 244A–B.

⁴⁸ ἅμα δ’ ἐπειρᾶτο προσάγων ἐπιδεικνύειν αὐτῷ τὸ φῶς ἐκ τοῦ τρίποδος, ὡς ἔλεγεν, διὰ τῶν κόλπων τῆς Θέμιδος ἀπηρεϊδόμενον εἰς τὸν Παρνασσόν. Plut. *Mor.* 566D. Cf. Iambli. *Myst.* 3.11.126. Themis, in certain versions of Delphic Succession Myth, was said to have held the means of prophecy at Delphi. e.g., E. *IT* 1259–1270.

⁴⁹ *LSJ*, s.v., “κόλπος.”

⁵⁰ τὴν Πυθίαν λόγος ἔχει τρίποδι πλησιάζουσαν, ἐνθα ῥῆγμά ἐστι γῆς ἀναπνέον, ὡς φασι, ἀτμὸν ἐνθεον, αὐτόθεν ἐγκύμονα τῆς δαιμονίου καθισταμένην δυνάμεως παραντικά χρησιμωδεῖν κατ’ ἐπίπνοιαν. [Longinus], *Subl.* 13.2.5–9. (Russell, Clarendon Press, 1964). Amandry says, “Le mot ἐγκύμων employé dans ce texte prouve qu’Origène et saint Jean Chrysostome trouvaient déjà chez les auteurs païens la notion d’une fécondation physique de la Pythie par l’esprit apollinien, dont ils devaient tirer le thème de railleries obscènes.” Amandry 1950:53n1.

the time of the Early Church Fathers.⁵¹ Further, that the Christian Fathers were among our earliest sources should not surprise us then; they could hardly have kept themselves from pointing out such a salacious fact, while the reverent or squeemish might have preferred cleaner versions.

The Christian apologists were also able to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to paganism even by calling upon the Delphic Oracle as a witness. Tradition held that the Pythia undermined her own authority with her responses on occasion. We are told by Eusebius that when the Nicaeans went to inquire at the Oracle about a certain sacrifice to Apollo, the Pythia said, “It is not possible to restore the babbling Pythian voice, for already having become weak by great lengths of time, it has turned the bolt of un-prophetic silence. But pay to Phoebus the prophetic offerings as is the custom.”⁵² A similar declaration is made in an oracle given by Philostorgius, an Arrian church historian writing in the late-fourth and early-fifth centuries. The emperor Julian’s emissary to the Oracle was told, “Tell the emperor that the cunningly wrought hall has fallen to the ground. No longer does Phoebus possess his pool, nor his mantic laurel, nor the talking spring. Even the babbling water has vanished.”⁵³ It is clear by the admission of the Pythia herself that there is no oracular power left at Delphi! The decline of the Oracle, however, had begun much earlier, and the Pythia had foreseen that the end would come. According to Eusebius, Augustus asked the Oracle of Delphi who would rule after him. The response he received was, “A Hebrew boy, a god who rules among the blessed, commands me leave this house and go back to Hades. Now then, leave our altar in silence!”⁵⁴ In the same words, the Pythia proclaims the eventual victory of Christianity and consigns herself to damnation! This was not the only oracle to speak of Christ; John of Euboea, writing in the eighth century, provides another example. “After a long time one will come to this much-divided earth, and he will become flesh separated from the Fall. He will free it from the corruption of incurable desires by the infinite limits of his divinity. He will become hated by an unbelieving people. He will be

⁵¹ The date of the treatise *On the Sublime*, which is commonly attributed to a certain Longinus, is debatable. However, current theories place its authorship sometime between the first and the third century, which would have been time enough for both Eusebius and John Chrysostom to have read the work. For a summary of the debate on the date of the treatise, see Russell 1964:xxii–xxx.

⁵² Πυθῶν δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀναρρῶσαι λάλον ὀμφήν,
ἤδη γὰρ δολιχοῖσιν ἀμαυρωθεῖσα χρόνοισιν
βέβληται κληῖδας ἀμαντεύτοιο σιωπῆς,
ρέξατε δ’ ὡς ἔθος ἐστὶ θεόπροπα θύματα Φοῖβω.

Eus. *PE* 5.16.12–15; Parke and Wormell 1956.2:194 (475). Parke and Wormell note that sixteen of the twenty-four “significant words” are *hapax legomena* in the corpus of Delphic oracles. Fontenrose’s case that this is a pronouncement of the Oracle at Didyma is based on the observation both that the Pythia’s silence would be claimed by a speaking Pythia if it were genuine and that the oracle immediately preceding this in Eusebius’ work is attributed to Didyma. Fontenrose 1978:427 (Didyma 41).

⁵³ εἶπατε τῷ βασιλεῖ, χαμαὶ πέσε δαίδαλος αὐλά.
οὐκέτι Φοῖβος ἔχει καλύμβαν, οὐ μάντιδα δάφνην,
οὐ παγὰν λαλέουσιν, ἀπέσβετο καὶ λάλον ὕδωρ.
Parke and Wormell 1956.2:194 (476). Gregory 1983:355–66 believes that this oracle is a genuine pronouncement of Delphi, pleading with Emperor Julian to save the Oracle from lapse. Cf. Bowra 1959:426–35; Fontenrose 1978: 353 (Q263).

⁵⁴ παῖς Ἑβραῖος κέλεταιί με, θεὸς μακάρεσσιν ἀνάσσων,
τόνδε δόμον προλιπεῖν καὶ Αἶδην αὔθις ἰκέσθαι.
λοιπὸν ἄπιθι σιγῶν ἐκ βωμῶν ἡμετεράων.
Parke and Wormell 1956.2:518; Fontenrose 1978:349 (Q250).

hanged on high as one condemned to death. He will willingly submit to suffering these things, but having died, he will rise to eternal life.”⁵⁵ That these oracles are forgeries should at least be suspected, but it would be an excessively uncharitable reading to suggest that the Church Fathers fabricated these themselves. Rather, it seems more likely that some of these oracles, perhaps produced and fathered upon Delphi by zealous Christians and gathered into collections by oracle-mongers, became considered part of the genuine tradition of Delphic oracles, such that the apologists had no reason to scrutinize them and every reason to make use of them.⁵⁶

Julian’s lament that Early Christian apologists shot “arrows fletched from our own wings” was, indeed, an accurate metaphor. We can clearly observe how significant those borrowings were in this case study on the Delphic Oracle, and we ought not to be surprised. Although the use of Delphic literature in order to discredit Delphic literature has an inherent irony, it was through this literature that the argument could be made most convincingly. It is as Faustus the Manichean of Augustine’s epoch suggested: a pagan was more inclined to be persuaded by arguments that were working within a tradition with which he was familiar (like oracles, oracular literature, and philosophy) than one with which he was not (like the Hebrew prophets).⁵⁷

The ‘Delphi of the Mind’

As I argued in the introduction, trying to reconcile or differentiate the archaeological and the literary evidence is not the only means of investigating what Delphi was in reality. One scholar who acknowledges this fact has attempted to view the issue from a different angle. Roger Lipsey proposed the existence of two Oracles of Delphi.

From the beginning there were two Delphis: the Delphi of fact and the Delphi of the mind. Throughout ancient times, the two followed generally parallel courses, linked to one another by pathways however slim, yet likely to diverge because Delphi lived richly in the minds of men and women, most of whom would never visit the holy city or enjoy the privilege of inquiring there. Delphi drew to itself, as if magnetically, both the refined inventions of poets, orators, and playwrights and the rough storytelling of the common

⁵⁵ Ὅψέ ποτέ τις [[φησιν]] ἐπὶ τὴν πολυσχεδὴ ταύτην ἐλάσειε γῆν καὶ δίχα σφάλματος γενήσεται σὰρξ: ἀκαμάτοις δὲ θεότητος ὄροις ἀνιάτων παθῶν λύσει φθοράν: καὶ τοῦτω φθόνος γενήσεται ἐξ ἀπίστου λαοῦ: καὶ πρὸς ὕψος κρεμασθήσεται ὡς θανάτου κατάδικος: ταῦτα δὲ ἐκὼν πείσεται φέρειν: θανῶν δὲ εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον ὀρεῖται. Delatte 1927:325. See also Fontenrose 1978:354 (Q268).

⁵⁶ Eusebius certainly consulted Porphyry’s *On the Philosophy to be Derived from Oracles*, but how scientifically Porphyry went about gathering his sources and authenticating them is the issue here.

⁵⁷ ‘Ita nihil, ut dixi, Ecclesiae Christianae Hebraeorum testimonia conferunt, quae magis constet ex Gentibus quam ex Judaeis. Sane si sunt aliqua, ut fama est, Sibyllae de Christo praesagia, aut Hermetis, quem dicunt Trismegistum, aut Orphei, aliorumque in Gentilitate vatum, haec nos aliquanto ad fidem juvare poterunt, qui ex Gentibus efficimur Christiani: Hebraeorum vero testimonia nobis, etiamsi sint vera, ante fidem inutilia sunt, post fidem supervacua; quia ante quidem eis credere non poteramus, nunc vero ex superfluo credimus.’ “Thus, as I have said, the testimonies of the Hebrews offer nothing to the Christian Church, which consists more of Gentiles than of Jews. Indeed, if, as is the rumor, there are any prophecies of the Sibyl, or Hermes, whom they call Trismegistus, or Orpheus, or the other prophets of the Gentiles, these will be able to assist us Gentiles, who become Christians, toward faith considerably. But the testimonies of the Hebrews are useless before we believe, even if they may be true, and they are redundant afterwards, because we were not even able to believe them before, but now we believe them unnecessarily.” August. *Contra Faust.* 13.1, (Migne, Patrologia Latina). Hardly any of the Early Church Fathers would have agreed with Faustus that the Hebrew prophets were of no value to the Christian converted from paganism. Augustine himself spends the next several sections arguing against Faustus’ claim, explaining that the whole conception of the Christ depends on the Hebrew prophets. In this instance, the two seem to be talking past each other.

people. Even when historical figures about whom we know a great deal visited Delphi—for example, the model of Roman virtue, Cicero—the recorded results seem to swerve gaily from the verifiable realm of history to the imaginative realm of story, which may or may not be wholly “true.”⁵⁸

The point of Lipsey’s book is to revive the philosophical ‘Delphi of the mind,’ and to that effect, he provides commentary on a number of popular and thought provoking Delphic tales.⁵⁹ The lore and commentary he presents, however, do not as adequately show that the ‘Delphi of the mind,’ as an abstracted, constructed reality existed in the minds of the ancients, only that its elements may at times be observed by the modern mind in these stories. It seems a far more important argument to Delphic scholarship to demonstrate that the ‘Delphi of the mind’ was just as real as the ‘Delphi of fact’ in ancient times.

The best place to find the effect of the ‘Delphi of the mind’ is where the two Oracles of Delphi diverge most significantly: during the decline in its operations and significance. The Early Church Fathers were quite cognizant of a decline in the Oracle at Delphi. Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, and Gregory of Nazianzus, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, all declared that the prophetic spring was dried up.⁶⁰ Parke, Wormell, and Scott are quick to point out that the celebrations of Christians like Clement of Alexandria were “premature,”⁶¹ but it was a fairly well-acknowledged fact among pagan authors from the first century BCE onward that the Oracle of Delphi had undergone a serious decline that required explanation.⁶² Plutarch, one of the priests of Apollo at Delphi, could discuss a decline in the importance of the Delphic Oracle in a treatise that came to be called *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*. This decline was evident even earlier in Cicero’s time. He wrote, “Now, therefore, its glory is diminished . . . ,” and more damningly, “Why are Delphic oracles not issued in this very way at the present time and have not been for a long time, such that nothing now is viewed with more distain?”⁶³ It is clear that by the first century BCE the effects of numerous destructions by earthquakes and enemies, the depopulation of Greece, the decentralization of Delphi in the Hellenistic Period and the Roman Empire, and the developing trend of skepticism in philosophy, to name but a few reasons, left behind a ‘Delphi of fact’ that was noticeably less significant, despite several attempts to revitalize the institution.⁶⁴ Further evidence of decline is found in the corpus of Delphic oracles. In Fontenrose’s catalogue of Delphic responses, there are only seven out of 343 total responses that he classifies as Historical or Quasi-Historical that are datable to a time after

⁵⁸ Lipsey 2001:2.

⁵⁹ Lipsey, stating the purpose of his book, says, “The project of this book is to stake a claim in rocky Pytho on behalf of modern minds for which *some* Delphic material—not all, by any means—can be uplifting and provocative, as it was for many ancient listeners and readers.” Lipsey 2001:7.

⁶⁰ Clem. Alex. *Protr.* 11.1; Eus. *PE* 5.16; Greg. Naz. *Or.* 5.32. Eusebius draws extensively from Plutarch for evidence of the decline of the Oracle.

⁶¹ Parke and Wormell 1956.1:288; Scott 2014:236. Scott’s work does indeed provide a more nuanced appreciation of the decline of Delphi by introducing often ignored evidence of public works projects and statuary and monumental dedications as indicative for some continuity of the status of Delphi. However, although these evidences can be demonstrative of the importance of Delphi as a place of history and social memory, they can only be suggestive of the continuity of its oracular operations.

⁶² e.g., Cic. *Div.* 1.38, 2.117; Plut. *Mor.* 409E–438E.

⁶³ ‘nunc minore gloria est....’ Cic. *Div.* 1.38; ‘cur isto modo iam oracla Delphis non eduntur non modo nostra aetate, sed iam diu, ita ut iam nihil possit esse contemptius?’ Cic. *Div.* 2.117.

⁶⁴ For a few possible reasons for the decline of the Oracle, see Dempsey 1918:167–81; Flacelière 1965:72; Parke and Wormell 1956:1.277–281; Heineman 2012.

200, and he only considers one of these, an oracle from the mid-third century, to be genuine.⁶⁵ The issuance of oracles at Delphi might have continued now and then, but the fact that only three genuine oracles, even by the most liberal count,⁶⁶ survive from a time period spanning two centuries is itself suggestive of the status of Delphic oracles in literature in the late Imperial Period and by extension the perception of the Delphic Oracle in the same epoch.

Thus, the decline of the Delphic Oracle was a well-established fact by the time of the Early Church Fathers, but the fact of its decline did not stop them from casting a dark shadow on the legacy of the Oracle or from stripping the Pythia naked. Why would the Early Church Fathers fire a full quiver of shafts at the Delphic Oracle when, by their own admission, the prophetic institution had no further function in pagan religion during the Empire? The evidence indicates that the Early Church Fathers felt compelled to respond in their apologetics not to the declined institution at Delphi, the ‘Delphi of fact,’ but to the collective, literary tradition of Delphi, the ‘Delphi of the mind,’ that had set roots so deep in the Greco-Roman mind that it outlasted the tree that had set them down. The struggle of the apologists was truly “not against flesh and blood”; it was against a construct that was every bit as real in their contemporary culture. Nevertheless, their claim of the status of the ‘Delphi of fact’ demonstrates that the Early Church Fathers recognized a distinction between the physical reality and the constructed reality. Only the latter merited serious concern and attention in their writings.

Given the shortage of evidence on which to base conclusions about the practices of the Oracle of Delphi in antiquity and the necessarily speculative character of the research that investigates the Oracle from a positivist angle,⁶⁷ there are at least two benefits that recommend a social constructionist approach in this sub-field. The first is that it opens the conversation of scholarship to a consideration of the processes by which the construct of the Delphic Oracle came to be formed and the importance of that construct to ancient perceptions of the reality Oracle.⁶⁸ The parameters of this contribution prohibit more than a suggestion of the manner in which this construct may have come about generally. I, therefore, submit that as the romance of the Oracle captured the hearts and minds of the ancients, material accreted to its tradition, spoken or written. Sometimes the material was factually accurate, sometimes it was false, but it was the full scope of that tradition, a taken-for-granted body of knowledge, that formed a certain reality

⁶⁵ Fontenrose 1978:5, 240–354. The seven responses are numbered H68, H70, Q258, Q261, Q262, Q263, Q268. Thus, Scott’s claim that “we have evidence that the oracle of Delphi continued to give responses right through into the fourth century AD” is not very well supported, as the authenticity of all of these oracles is dubious or debatable.

⁶⁶ I grant possible exceptions for the two oracles that were supposedly given to the Emperor Julian. Parke and Wormell 1956.2:194–5, 232–3 (476, 600); Fontenrose 1978:352–3 (Q262, Q263).

⁶⁷ There is a common sense in the field that a clear picture of the operations of the Delphic Oracle is not possible with the current state of our evidence. This feeling is often couched in hedging phrases that come on the coattails of claims made on the basis of a subset of evidence, but occasionally, scholars are more transparent. For example, Bourguet 1914:250 famously says, “la dernière Pythie a emporté son secret,” and Fontenrose 1952:445 says in his review of Amandry, “There is too little evidence upon which to base sound and convincing conclusions. Most ancients who wrote about the Delphic oracle did not themselves know what was done. Those who did, e.g. Plutarch, tell us little....”

⁶⁸ There is already some work on the processes by which the construct was formed, e.g., Amandry 1950:47–8, who argues that conception of the Pythia’s raving and bacchant-like behavior stem ultimately from a misunderstanding of the *μῆνιά* discussed by Plato at Pl. *Phdr.* 244A–B. However, Amandry’s purpose is positivist, as he uses this argument to discredit the authority of later authors and to isolate the historical practices of the Delphic Oracle as the only meaningful reality. See also Will 1942, for a similar study on the construction of the prophetic pneuma.

of the Oracle in the minds of the ancients. Many Greeks and Romans in Late Antiquity would not have had the opportunity or even the desire to visit Delphi, and thus, the most common way to access the Oracle was through the more readily available literature and storytelling relating to Delphi. The second benefit of the social constructionist approach is that it can embrace all the extant literature related to the Delphic Oracle, including the often ignored Early Church Fathers, since it esteems each text as important evidence for the way that the ancients thought about the Oracle and constituted some of its reality. This facet of reality is also part of Delphi's reception.

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