

THE ROLE OF THE PYTHIA AT DELPHI:
ANCIENT AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

by

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Introduction

The title of this dissertation emerged from an undergraduate Honours paper that investigated modern scholarly views concerning the authenticity of the Pythia's possession. An attempt to answer one particular subquestion (Was the Pythia the priesthood's puppet?) elicited significantly more divergent modern opinions than the discussions concerning the other possible causations of the Pythian prophecies (divine inspiration, clairvoyance, intoxication, and/or charlatanry) that the paper examined. The mere suggestion of the possibility that the Pythia may have enjoyed some degree of autonomy while performing her role in the consultative procedure stirred considerable controversy among modern scholars. This reaction identified a need for further re-examination of the Pythia's role in the Delphic Oracle as depicted in both ancient literature and the commentaries of modern scholars. However, this dissertation is concerned more with *what* ancient and modern sources claim the Pythia actually did (i.e. the role she performed) during a mantic consultation than with *how* the Pythia managed to produce the oracles she uttered (i.e. the underlying causation of her ability to produce prophecies).

Ancient sources, in particular Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, and Pausanias, depict and apparently accept the Pythia as the speaker of the oracles, for, after all, the Pythia functioned as Apollo's mouthpiece "and as such she counted for little."¹ Most early 20th century modern scholars, all with access to the same ancient sources, nevertheless

¹ Parke 1939: 32; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 34-35.

contend (perhaps because they do not believe in Apollo) that the Delphic priesthood was (must have been) responsible for at least the composition, or the interpretation, or even the actual delivery to the enquirers, of the oracles. However, some later modern scholars acknowledge, even if they cannot fully comprehend or embrace, the ancient sources' portrayal of the Pythia as speaking the oracles directly to enquirers. Compton commences an article on the Delphic mantic session with these words: "As one reads through important treatments of the operation of the Delphic oracle, disparities in interpretation are striking."² The discrepancies between both ancient authors and modern scholars and between early 20th century and some later modern scholars warrant a reexamination of how all sources depict the Pythia's role in the Delphic Oracle.

Modern (20th and 21st century for the purpose of this dissertation) scholars all have access to the same ancient sources. However, an examination of modern commentaries on the role of the Pythia in the Delphic mantic (divinatory, oracular) consultation (session) appears to indicate a watershed year for a shift in modern perspective: 1978. Pre-1978 modern scholars depart from the ancient authors and depict the Delphic priesthood as the major player in the mantic procedure whereas several later modern scholars, in and after 1978, return to the ancient depiction of the Pythia as the one who delivers the Delphic oracles directly to the enquirers. A search for an explanation for this shift in modern interpretations of ancient literature underlies this dissertation, which seeks to answer not only *how* and also *why* modern classical scholarship on the topic of the Pythia evolved as it did.

² Compton 1994: 217.

An investigation of this evolving view of the Pythia's role includes examination of ancient literature and the commentaries on these ancient sources by modern scholars as found in English literature (including English translations and/or secondary quotations of Danish, French and German scholars) for information both about the person and role of the Pythia and about the composition and role of other Delphic temple personnel, referred to as the Delphic priesthood in this dissertation. Ancient and modern depictions of every step of the consultative process that culminated in the enquirers receiving the oracles that they accepted as Apollo's answers to their enquiries—in effect, the entire process of oracular consultation, including its physical location, and the process of transfer of communications at Delphi—are also relevant. This dissertation uses the term “chain of communication” to indicate the elements in the communicative process whereby the Pythia learned the content of enquirers' questions, and, in turn, enquirers learned the content of Apollo's replies to their questions. Answers to specific questions such as those that follow must, therefore, be sought first in ancient literature before divergent modern scholarly contentions can be evaluated. Who was the Pythia, and what was her role? Who comprised the Delphic priesthood, and what was its role? Who put the enquirer's question to the Pythia? Who heard the Pythia's reply? Who spoke the response to the enquirer? Was the response oral or written, in prose or verse form? Who wrote the response down and/or composed the verse? These are some of the questions that indicate a direction for investigation in order to evaluate the division of roles within the Delphic Oracle's administration. The findings in Chapters 3-6 of this dissertation are, therefore, consistently arranged under the headings of the Pythia (her person and role), the Delphic

priesthood (its structure and overall function in the Delphic Oracle), the chain of communication (who did and said what, and how, and to whom, during a Delphic mantic session), and the location in which this mantic consultation took place. Because the first three headings all address aspects of the respective roles played by the Pythia and priesthood during an oracular consultation, some overlap of content is inevitable.

Chapters 1 and 2 outline and review ancient Greek divinatory methods, seers, and oracles. Chapter 3 explores relevant ancient references to the Delphic Oracle as found in 8th-4th century BCE sources, including Homer, 5th century BCE tragic poets, and the historian Herodotus. Chapter 4 investigates post-4th century BCE ancient sources, including the works of historian Diodorus Siculus, Delphic priest, historian, and prose commentator Plutarch, and geographer Pausanias. Chapters 5 and 6 cover relevant modern scholarly views. Parke's 1939 and Parke and Wormell's 1956 authoritative works on the Delphic Oracle dominate the early 20th century (pre-1978) period, and Fontenrose's innovative 1978 work on the same subject introduces the later period of modern scholarship on the Delphic Oracle. The conclusion attempts an explanation for and reconciliation of the various ancient and modern views.

This dissertation essentially seeks to answer two questions: how do ancient and modern scholars view the role of the Pythia in the mantic procedure at Delphi, and can the variety of interpretations be explained and reconciled?

Chapter 1:

Ancient Greek Divination and Seers

The purpose of this dissertation is to elucidate the role of the Pythia in the Delphic Oracle by determining and attempting to explain and reconcile how ancient authors and modern scholars depict her role. This first chapter places the form of divination (how the Pythia made the will of the god Apollo known to enquirers) that the Pythia practiced at the Delphic Oracle in the context of ancient Greek divination as a whole.

Divination

Divination is a relatively foreign concept in the modern westernized world (although astrology, bibliomancy, and palm and tarot card readings spring to mind). However, divination was a very common and widely practiced phenomenon in the ancient Greek world. This chapter indicates how ancient Greek divination and the form, or forms, it took, including that practiced by the Pythia, operated.

The practice of divination, consulting and attempting to determine the will of the gods, may be at least partly related to the uncertainty of human existence. When confronted with this uncertainty, it may be comforting to consult a higher power in order to be guided in making the best decision or in order to receive an indication of divine sanction for a decision already made.

For an ancient Greek, one way of protecting oneself against the uncertainty of life's decisions and outcomes was for an enquirer to respectfully consult divine authority in order to receive advice and sanction and thus be in a position to claim divine endorsement, support, and approval for decisions and actions regardless of whether these decisions and actions generated favorable or unfavorable outcomes.³ For communities, such decisions might concern weighty matters such as whether to found distant colonies, implement new political constitutions, or wage war on other communities, or, in the event of disasters such as plague, famine or defeat in battle, which deity to placate, and how best to placate the deity. Individual enquiries might concern personal matters such as, for example, whether to travel, whether to marry, or whether one can expect to produce offspring. To act without attempting to obtain divine advice and/or sanction could be viewed as demonstrating disrespect towards the gods, which could call down divine retribution on both communities and individuals.⁴

The method used to determine the will or approval of the Greek gods is termed divination. Flacelière suggests that “we may perhaps say that divination means supernatural knowledge of what is otherwise unknowable,”⁵ and Loewe and Blacker define divination as “the attempt to elicit from some higher power or supernatural being the answers to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding.”⁶ Whittaker explains that divination exists “because man is cursed with knowledge that the future exists and at the same time that he is unable to know and control it. Like magic, therefore,

³ Parker 1985: 305; Morgan 1990: 154.

⁴ Bowden 2005: 158.

⁵ Flacelière 1965: 2.

⁶ Loewe & Blacker 1981: 1.

divination is an attempt to bridge the gap between the area in which he can operate quite rationally and the realm of chance.”⁷ In summary, divination is a means whereby gods and men are able to attempt to communicate with one another, or whereby men are, at the very least, able to enjoy the illusion that such communication is possible.

In ancient Greece, divination was a frequent and ubiquitous practice. Almost every ancient Greek adult consulted divination, in one form or another, on an ongoing basis, including “the individual who faced an unexpected decision or the commander in the field who wanted to know whether it was a good day to fight.”⁸ Johnston contends that “in antiquity, most people practiced or witnessed some form of divination at least once every few days.”⁹ Bowden believes that “[h]epatoscopy was literally an everyday occurrence in democratic Athens” and, moreover, that “[i]n some circumstances more elevated methods of divination were required, and on such occasions ambassadors were sent to the sanctuaries of gods noted for their oracular powers. Of these the most important, and the one about which we have most information, was that of Apollo at Delphi.”¹⁰

Various forms of ancient divination whereby deities communicated their responses to human enquirers were available for consultation by both individuals and communities. When divine responses occurred as observable material signs, these manifestations might require the services of skilled interpreters in order to reveal their intended meaning to

⁷ Whittaker 1965: 43.

⁸ Flower 2008: 2.

⁹ Johnston 2008: 3.

¹⁰ Bowden 2005: 6.

enquirers. When the divine response was communicated to the enquirer in a dream or in a prophecy spoken by the deity through a human mouthpiece to the enquirer, the enquirer received the divine response directly (although further interpretation of its meaning could be sought if desired). Flower cautions against “drawing too sharp a distinction between so-called natural divination (such as ecstatic prophecy and spirit possession) and technical, artificial divination (such as extispicy and augury).”¹¹ Johnston concurs: “Although the ancients had divided divination into ‘natural’ and ‘technical’ types, the division was always somewhat artificial.”¹² Despite the above implied blurring of boundaries, the ancient authors quoted below do, for the most part, seem to identify two main divisions or forms of divination: interpretative divination and inspired divination. Although this chapter uses the terms interpretative and inspired to distinguish between these two forms, other modern scholars utilize the terms technical, artificial, rational, scientific, deductive, and/or inductive versus ecstatic, natural, intuitive, and/or irrational respectively. Another distinction between these two forms of divination is that skill in interpretative divination was able to be acquired by training and could therefore be learned whereas inspired divination appeared to emanate from an innate ability in the dreamer of dreams or the speaker of prophecies (see the discussion concerning the quotations from Cicero below¹³).

Interpretative divination comprised the observation, examination, and interpretation of natural or material phenomena. Flower explains that the “vast majority of Greeks believed that the gods desired to communicate with mortals, that they did so through

¹¹ Flower 2008: 26.

¹² Johnston 2008: 28.

¹³ Cicero *Div.* 1.6.11-12, 1.18.34, 1.32.70, 1.33.72.

signs of various kinds, and that there were religious experts who could correctly interpret those signs.”¹⁴ The suffixes of the English translations of many of the interpretative methods of divination listed below suggest divination by examination; “mancy” is derived from the Greek term for divination (*manteia*); “scopy” and “spicy” are respectively derivatives of the Greek and Latin verbs (*skopeo/specio*) denoting the process of examination. A summary of interpretative divinatory methods (with the phenomena examined in each case enclosed in parentheses) includes the following: ornithomancy or augury (bird signs, e.g. species, flight); dendromancy (trees, e.g. the rustling of leaves); hieromancy, hieroscopy, extispicy, or haruspicy (appearance of entrails of sacrificial animals); pyromancy (flames or fire); empyromancy (the behavior and appearance of burning sacrifices); cledonomancy (unusual or chance utterances, bodily behavior, meetings, and/or names); cleromancy (casting of lots, knuckle-bones, and/or dice); hydromancy or lecanomancy (reflections in water); catoptromancy (reflections in mirrors); oniromancy (dreams, i.e. the interpretation of dreams by a seer, as opposed to the dreamer experiencing his or her own sleeping visions); prodigies (unnatural phenomena, e.g. speaking oxen, birth of a hermaphrodite, or rain of stones); astrology (celestial phenomena such as stars, comets, or eclipses); meteorological phenomena such as thunder and lightning; earthquakes; tsunamis; and necromancy (ghosts of the dead).¹⁵ The last-mentioned method of divination was a transgression of the ancient and murky boundary between religious divination and the practice of magic (see the discussion concerning the quotation from Lucan below).

¹⁴ Flower 2008: 8.

¹⁵ Halliday 1913: 211-212; Flacelière 1965: 4-19; Whittaker 1965: 23; Parke 1967a: 134; Hammond & Scullard 1970: 356-357; Morrison 1981: 89; Parke 1988: 193, 197, 200; Bonnechere 2007: 150-153; Johnston 2008: 125-137.

In contrast to interpretative divination, the ancient Greeks recognized only two forms of inspired divination: dreams, possibly deliberately sought at incubation sanctuaries as described in the next chapter of this dissertation (as opposed to the technical interpretation of dreams by a seer);¹⁶ and inspired, enthused prophecy. The latter was regarded as the most prestigious form of divination, and as the most reliable in as much as the consulted deity spoke directly to the enquirer through the person of the medium, in contrast to interpretative forms of divination in which a seer was required to interpret the divinatory signs and to explain them to the enquirer. The Pythia was the foremost representative of the inspired form of divination in the ancient Greek world.

Although Dodds defines inspired divination as that “which aims at knowledge, whether of the future or of the hidden present,” his definition as stated could possibly apply to interpretative divination, too.¹⁷ However, inspired divination, the “highest form of divination,” is communicated directly by the gods.¹⁸ Flacelière declares that, compared to “artificial divination,” divine possession represents “much the higher” and “superior form of divination.”¹⁹ However, Flower and Johnston’s previously mentioned cautionary warnings against making too distinct a division between inspired and interpretative forms of divination bears repeating here.²⁰ A sampling of how ancient authors viewed divination follows in chronological order and includes views expressed by two 5th century BCE Greek dramatists, a 5th century BCE Greek philosopher, a 1st century BCE Roman

¹⁶ Johnston 2008: 16.

¹⁷ Dodds 1951: 69.

¹⁸ Parke 1985: 200.

¹⁹ Flacelière 1965: 4, 5, 20.

²⁰ Flower 2008: 26; Johnston 2008: 28.

orator/author, and a 1st century CE Roman poet.

Prometheus Bound is traditionally attributed to Aeschylus, a deeply religious tragic poet, as one of his later works. Aeschylus depicts Prometheus as a champion and benefactor of men. In the passage below, Prometheus, after bewailing his punishment at Zeus' hands to the chorus and after mentioning his own gift of fire to human men, describes further benefits which he himself has conferred on mankind, specifically the incredibly useful ability to interpret the will of the gods by interpretative means of divination:

I also systematized many kinds of seer-craft. I was the first to interpret from dreams what actual events were destined to happen; I made known to them [men] the difficult arts of interpreting significant utterances and encounters on journeys; I defined precisely the flight of crook-taloned birds, which of them were favourable and which sinister by nature, the habits of each species and their mutual hatreds, affections and companionships; and the smoothness of internal organs, and what color bile should have if it is to be pleasing to the gods, and the mottled appearance and proper shape of the liver-lobe; I wrapped the thigh-bones and the long chine in fat and burnt them, guiding mortals towards a skill of making difficult inferences, and opening their eyes to the signs the flames gave, which till then had been dark to them.²¹

Prometheus mentions a number of well-known ancient interpretative divinatory methods in the above passage: oniromancy, cledonancy, ornithomancy, hieromancy, empyromancy, and pyromancy.

In contrast to Aeschylus, Euripides is a less conventional, and usually a less conventionally religious, dramatist. Nevertheless, in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, Theseus chastises Adrastus, king of Argos, for impiously ignoring divinatory warnings before complying with Adrastus' request for Athens' assistance in retrieving the unburied

²¹ Aesch. *PV* 484-499, transl. Sommerstein.

bodies of five Argive warriors from Thebes. Theseus points out that it was Zeus himself who gave to seers the skill to interpret by means of both interpretative and inspired divination:

I praise the god who set our life in order, rescuing it from its confused and brutish state...Matters that are unclear and of which we have no reliable knowledge are foretold to us by seers [*manteis*] who examine fire, the folds of entrails, or the flight of birds...yet when you were leading all the Argives on an expedition, when seers [*manteis*] were uttering prophesies, you set them at nought, forcibly transgressed the will of the gods, and destroyed your city.²²

Both interpretative divination (in the form of pyromancy, hieromancy, and ornithomancy) and inspired divination are mentioned in the above passage.

In his *Phaedrus*, Plato presents a conversation between Socrates and a young man Phaedrus, during the course of which Plato argues the comparative benefits of erotic love as offered both by a desirous, jealous, frenzied, unreasonable lover and by a restrained, reasonable, affectionate friend. In his defense of the former, Socrates claims that such love resembles inspired divination in as much as both are divinely inspired and of potential benefit to men:

[I]n reality the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods. For the prophetess [*prophetis*] at Delphi and the priestesses [*hiereiai*] at Dodona when they have been mad have conferred many splendid benefits upon Greece both in private and in public affairs, but few or none when they have been in their right minds; and if we should speak of the Sibyl and all the others who by prophetic inspiration have foretold many things to many persons and thereby made them fortunate afterwards, anyone can see that we should speak a long time. And it is worth while to adduce also the fact that those men of old who invented names thought that madness was neither shameful nor disgraceful; otherwise they would not have connected the very word mania with the noblest of arts, that which foretells the future, by calling it the manic art. No, they gave this name thinking that mania, when it comes by gift of the gods, is a noble thing...The ancients, then testify that in proportion as prophecy (mantike) is superior to

²² Eur. *Supp.* 201-231, transl. Kovacs.

augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness, which comes from god, is superior to sanity, which is of human origin.²³

In this passage, Plato draws a clear distinction between interpretative divination (Plato specifically mentions ornithomancy as an example) and inspired divination, which, in his opinion (which he shares with “men of old”), constitutes the “superior” form of divination.

Roman Cicero, writing *De Divinatione* four centuries later, assigns the role of credulous supporter of divination to his brother Quintus in the first book of this work while he himself assumes the role of critical and skeptical disbeliever in the second book.

First, the author Cicero introduces his topic of divination:

There is an ancient belief...that divination of some kind exists among men; this the Greeks call *mantike*—that is, the foresight and knowledge of future events...[S]igns are given of future events, and...certain persons can recognize those signs and foretell events before they occur...[T]he Assyrians...took observations of the paths and movements of the stars...[T]he Chaldeans...have...long-continued observation of the constellations...[T]he Cilicians, Pisidians, and...the Pamphylans...think that the future is declared by the songs and flights of bird.²⁴

Two methods of interpretative divination are mentioned above: astrology and ornithomancy.

The passages below twice make a clear distinction between inspired and interpretative divination and also mention several methods of Greek interpretative divination. Quintus introduces his pro-divination argument:

There are two kinds of divination: the first is dependent on art [*ars*], the other on nature [*natura*]. Now—to mention those almost entirely dependent on art—what

²³ Pl. *Phdr.* 244a-d, transl. Fowler.

²⁴ Cic. *Div.* 1.1.1-3, transl. Falconer.

nation or what state disregards the prophecies of soothsayers, or of interpreters of prodigies and lightnings, or of augurs, or of astrologers, or of oracles, or—to mention the two kinds which are classed as natural means of divination—the forewarnings of dreams, or of frenzy?...For there is a certain natural power, which now, through long-continued observation of signs and now, through some divine excitement and inspiration, makes prophetic announcement of the future.²⁵

When Quintus makes the above distinction between nature and art, he is drawing on a very ancient debate concerning whether a quality, for example virtue (or seercraft, see below), is innate in a man (the more ancient and, correspondingly, accepted and respected form) or whether a quality can be acquired by learning—the more debated, questioned, and, therefore questionable, form, the promotion of which brought the sophists into disrepute. Modern societies and scholars continue to perpetuate this longstanding “nature versus nurture” controversy. Quintus specifically mentions prodigies, meteorological phenomena, ornithomancy, and astrology as methods of interpretative divination. Quintus also distinguishes between the seercraft involved in the practice of interpretative divination, which can be learned and therefore acquired, and that of inspired divination, which is considered innate, a gift from the gods.

Quintus reiterates this distinction in the passages below:

[T]here are two kinds of divination: one, which is allied with art; the other, which is devoid of art. Those diviners employ art, who, having learned the known by observation, seek the unknown by deduction. On the other hand those do without art who, unaided by reason or deduction or by signs which have been observed and recorded, forecast the future while under the influence of mental excitement, or of some free and unrestrained emotion. This condition often occurs to men while dreaming and sometimes to persons who prophesy while in a frenzy...In this latter class must be placed oracles...uttered under the impulse of divine inspiration...Men capable of correctly interpreting all these signs of the future seem to approach very near to the divine spirit of the gods whose wills they interpret...²⁶

²⁵ Cic. *Div.* 1.6.11-12, transl. Falconer.

²⁶ Cic. *Div.* 1.18.34, transl. Falconer.

[D]ivination by means of dreams and fantasies...[is] devoid of art.²⁷

But those methods of divination which are dependent on conjecture, or on deductions from events previously observed and recorded, are, as I have said before, not natural, but artificial, and include the inspection of entrails, augury, and the interpretation of dreams.²⁸

In the passage immediately above, Quintus specifically mentions hieromancy, ornithomancy, and oniromancy as methods of interpretative divination.

For the purpose of this chapter on divination, whether Quintus and/or Cicero believe or do not believe in divination is not at issue. It is the forms and variety of methods of ancient divination as depicted in Cicero's work that are relevant to this chapter's discussion.

A century later, the Roman poet Lucan wrote an epic poem *The Civil War* in which Lucan supports Pompey's rather than Caesar's cause. In the passage below, before a crucial battle between the two contenders, Lucan portrays Pompey's son Sextus as "the unworthy son of Magnus."²⁹ Sextus is an impatient and impious man, who, rather than consult respected oracles (such as those at Delos, Delphi, and Dodona) or interpretative diviners (utilizing hieromancy, ornithomancy, meteorological phenomena, and astrology) in order to foretell the outcome of the pending battle, seeks to learn the future by less reputable means:

Fear urged him on to learn beforehand the course of destiny...But he sought not the tripods of Delos nor the caverns of Delphi: he cared not to inquire what sound Dodona makes with the cauldron of Jupiter...[H]e asked not who could read the

²⁷ Cic. *Div.* 1.32.70, transl. Falconer.

²⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.33.72, transl. Falconer.

²⁹ Luc. 6.420, transl. Duff.

future by means of entrails, or interpret birds, or watch the lightnings of heaven and investigate the stars with Assyrian lore—he sought no knowledge which, though secret, is permissible. To him were known the mysteries of cruel witchcraft [*saevorum arcana magorum*] which the gods abominate, and grim altars with funeral rites; he knew the veracity of Pluto and the shades below; and the wretch was convinced that the gods of heaven are ignorant.³⁰

Johnston points out the following:

[P]eople apply the word “magic” [see *saevorum arcana magorum* above] to practices that they consider to be abnormal or marginal—even illegal or immoral. By doing so, they set those practices in greater contrast to the practices that they consider “religious” and “normal.” Not surprisingly, “magical” practices are usually ascribed to groups that are also considered to be odd or of a dubious moral character—foreigners and women, for example.³¹

Appropriately, therefore, Sextus manages to locate an especially wicked female Thracian witch, and the encounter culminates in a macabre, grisly form of necromancy that predicts doom and disaster for Caesar and Pompey alike.

Johnston attributes the persistence and relative consistency of ancient divinatory practices to “a strong tendency toward continuity in all aspects of Greek religious practices and belief.”³² Johnston also remarks that “[l]ike pornography, which survives all modern attempts at extirpation, ancient magic and divination seem to have been amazingly resilient.”³³ Despite the occasional doubts and criticisms offered by intellectuals and philosophers, divination remained a pervasive and enduring aspect of ancient Greek and Roman culture and religion.

³⁰ Luc. 6.423-434, transl. Duff.

³¹ Johnston 2008: 146.

³² Johnston 2008: 151.

³³ Johnston 2008: 153.

Seers

The person performing divination, interpretative or inspired, was a diviner, *mantis*, translated as “seer” for the purpose of this chapter.³⁴ Bowden defines a *mantis* as “someone who can reveal the future, or things hidden from view.”³⁵ Morrison claims that a *mantis* is one who “possesses intuitive knowledge of the truth” and “knows what is, what is to come and what was before.”³⁶ Some highly respected, eminent seers were able to address, advise, and influence individuals, armies, and governments.³⁷

Seers can be categorized by location, as well as by method, of divination. Johnston distinguishes between “independent diviners” and “institutional oracles.”³⁸ In the case of the former, a professional seer might choose to operate as a “freelance religious expert” or as one of the “itinerant specialists.”³⁹ Examples of the former type of practitioner range from Tiresias, the revered blind seer associated with the city of Thebes,⁴⁰ to “street-corner purifiers and dream interpreters.”⁴¹ An example of a respected itinerant specialist would be Aristander, who accompanied and advised Alexander on his military campaigns.⁴² In contrast, seers might be associated with an established oracular site and/or a fixed place of prophecy, for example, the Pythia at the Delphic Oracle.⁴³

³⁴ Argyle 1970: 139; Flower 2008: 2.

³⁵ Bowden 2003: 257.

³⁶ Morrison 1981: 91, 93.

³⁷ Bowden 2003: 258-259.

³⁸ Johnston 2008: 28.

³⁹ Johnston 2008: 113, 137.

⁴⁰ Johnston 2008: 110.

⁴¹ Flower 2008: 22.

⁴² Johnston 2008: 116.

⁴³ Johnston 2008: 20, 28.

Combining methods and places of divination lent variety to the practice of divination. Some oracular sites, such as Dodona and Delphi, are thought to have perhaps offered and practiced more than one form of divination, for example, both inspirational prophecy and cleromancy.⁴⁴ Similarly, a person who dreamed might both experience and interpret his or her own dream, or sleeping vision, perhaps even at an incubation oracle (see next chapter of this dissertation), and also choose to obtain a professional seer's interpretation of the same dream.⁴⁵

In addition to the above considerations of place and method of divination, a seer's powers could be the result of "intuitive knowledge of the gods" (for example, Homer's Calchas),⁴⁶ a personal gift from the gods (for example, Branchus at Didyma),⁴⁷ or a "hereditary accomplishment."⁴⁸ Seers could enhance their professional image and personal prestige by claiming hereditary membership of an established mantic family, or by acquiring their "seercraft" through adoption by, apprenticeship to, and teaching and training from a family of seers.⁴⁹ For example, two hereditary (semi-mythological) seer clans, the Iamids and Clytiads, established a fixed oracular site at Olympia where they practiced empyromancy.⁵⁰ Likewise, Tiresias, his daughter Manto, and his grandson Mopsus were members of another famous (semi-mythological) seer family, but whereas Tiresias was usually associated with the city of Thebes, Mopsus was associated with a

⁴⁴ Holland 1933: 203; Morrison 1981: 98; Maurizio 1993: 54; Johnston 2008: 52, 61-62.

⁴⁵ Johnston 2008: 16.

⁴⁶ Parke 1967a: 14.

⁴⁷ Parke 1985: 4-5.

⁴⁸ Parke 1967a: 15; Bowden 2003: 259.

⁴⁹ Flower 2008: 37-38; Johnston 2008: 110-111.

⁵⁰ Flower 2008: 39.

fixed oracular site, Apollo's Oracle at Claros.⁵¹ Whether modern scholars accept these individuals as real or mythological figures is not at issue here. That they were accepted by, and significant to, the ancient Greeks is relevant to our understanding of how the various roles of seers were perceived and practiced in the ancient world.⁵²

Inspired or enthused prophecy, the most prestigious and respected form of divination, involved a seer speaking on behalf of a god, or through whom a god spoke. Such an inspired seer was essentially the god's spokesperson, mouthpiece, or instrument or vehicle of expression.⁵³ Cassandra, like the Delphic Pythia, prophesied as Apollo willed her, but Cassandra was not tied to any oracular site. In ancient literature, she is depicted as prophesying at both Troy and Argos.⁵⁴ Dodds describes the occurrence of Cassandra's type of prophetic behavior as "spontaneous and incalculable."⁵⁵ However, the focus of this dissertation, the Pythia, through whom Apollo also spoke, practiced enthused prophecy in only one very specific place, the *adyton* (literally, not to be entered), the innermost sanctuary of Apollo's temple at Delphi.⁵⁶

The Pythia was consulted in person by both official delegations and individual enquirers. This necessity entailed enquirers' expenditure of time and money to travel to and wait (perhaps for months in the case of individual enquirers) in Delphi in order to consult the

⁵¹ Parke 1985: 112-113.

⁵² Flower 2008: 43.

⁵³ Parke 1967a: 31.

⁵⁴ Aesch. *Ag.* 1098-1109; [Eur. *Tro.* 431-443](#).

⁵⁵ Dodds 1951: 70.

⁵⁶ Flacelière 1965: 48.

Delphic Oracle.⁵⁷ Any enquirer's experience would seem worthwhile, his enquiry important, and Apollo's response valuable if the divinatory session itself and the behavior and utterances of its female inspired prophetess combined to produce an experience that supported the enquirer's belief that he had received the god's attention and a response that dignified his enquiry. A Delphic consultation presented a veritable social and religious drama and thus a memorable and worthwhile experience, performance, or spectacle for enquirers.⁵⁸

The above discussion of divination and seers places the figure of the Pythia as inspired seer in her ancient Greek historical and religious context of inspired divination. The Pythia represents the best-known example of an inspired diviner practicing inspired prophecy at a fixed oracular site and cult center in the ancient Greek world. The examination of ancient Greek oracular sites in the next chapter of this dissertation places the Delphic Oracle itself in its wider ancient perspective.

⁵⁷ Burkert 2005: 40.

⁵⁸ Parker 1985: 300-301; Maurizio 1995: 86; Frankfurter 2005: 235.

Chapter 2: Ancient Greek Oracles

The word “oracle” has two meanings: “The primary meaning of *oracle* is the response of a god to a question asked him by a worshipper. It may also indicate an oracular shrine,” site, or sanctuary.⁵⁹ It is the latter meaning that is referred to in the above chapter title.

In this chapter, the Delphic Oracle is considered in the context of oracular sites or sanctuaries operating in the ancient Greco-Roman world—including sites on mainland Greece, Greek Ionia on the west coast of Asia Minor, Libya in north Africa, and the Aegean island of Delos—during the period spanning the 9th century BCE through to the 4th century CE. Each oracular site is described with regard to its origin, presiding deity, supporting archeological evidence, mode of divination, attending personnel, cause and date of decline and demise, and/or coverage in ancient literature. Enquirers could choose to visit fixed oracular sites in order to obtain divine responses to their individual enquiries. As implied above, each oracular site essentially served a particular deity and practiced “a fixed mantic procedure” managed by “regular personnel.”⁶⁰

The focus of this dissertation is the Pythia, who practiced inspired divination when she spoke Apollo’s oracles at the fixed oracular cult-center at Delphi. However, the Delphic Oracle was neither the only, nor even the earliest, oracle in the ancient Greek world. The most famous oracles—those at Dodona, Delphi, Claros, and Didyma—are discussed in

⁵⁹ Hammond & Scullard 1970: 754.

⁶⁰ Fontenrose 1988: 78.

some detail below. Then, oracles situated at Olympia, Siwah, Oropus, and Lebadea are described. Finally, three more obscure oracles at Delos, Argos, and Aegira are touched upon.

Dodona

Dodona, situated in the somewhat inaccessible northwestern region of Epirus, enjoyed the prestige of providing a site for an Oracle of Zeus, father of the gods. The oracle appears to have originated in the 9th century BCE as part of an outdoor sanctuary—under an open sky rather than inside a temple building—which originally served a female earth-goddess figure, possibly Dione (or Gaia),⁶¹ who was subsequently associated with Zeus as his consort at Dodona.⁶² Archeological exploration reveals no evidence of a temple until the late 5th century (or possibly even 4th century) BCE, perhaps because Dodona’s particular divinatory methods as discussed below do not require an interior setting.⁶³

The 5th century BCE historian Herodotus makes the following claim on behalf of Dodona during the pre-Greek Pelasgian period: “[T]his place of divination is held to be the most ancient in Hellas, and at that time it was the only one.”⁶⁴ Plato’s Socrates echoes this traditional sentiment a century later when speaking to Phaedrus: “They used to say, my

⁶¹ Dempsey 1918: 10-11.

⁶² Parke 1967a: 91; 1967b: 70.

⁶³ Parke 1967b: 114-117; Johnston 2008: 62.

⁶⁴ Hdt. 2.52, transl. Godley.

friend, that the words of the oak in the holy place of Zeus at Dodona were the first prophetic utterances.”⁶⁵

Despite the veneration in which it was held in antiquity, some modern scholars argue that Dodona was never quite able to overcome the geographical disadvantage of being “the farthest and least accessible of the great oracle-centres of Greece,” situated “on the outmost edge of the known Greek world.”⁶⁶ After pointing out that Dodona is “far from what most Greeks considered the centers of civilization,” Johnston provides the following illustration: “Overland travel to the site would have been difficult, which meant that from Athens, for example, the best way to reach Dodona would have been to sail all the way down the east coast of the Peloponnese and then up the west coast again—much like getting from New York to San Francisco in the days before the Panama Canal was built.”⁶⁷ As a result, Dodona attracted “very few official enquiries from states outside of Dodona’s immediate neighborhood.”⁶⁸ Most of Dodona’s enquirers tended to “cluster around the immediate region,” judging by the alphabets and dialects revealed by the lead tablets on which the clients wrote their own enquiries and which served as lots in a lot oracle that Dodona offered as one of its methods of divination (see below).⁶⁹

However, the ancient evidence does not seem to support these modern reservations concerning Dodona’s inaccessibility. In the late 5th century BCE, Athens certainly managed to consult Dodona on several occasions during the Peloponnesian War (431-401

⁶⁵ Pl. *Phd.* 275b, transl. Fowler.

⁶⁶ Parke 1967b: 7, 99.

⁶⁷ Johnston 2008: 60.

⁶⁸ Johnston 2008: 61.

⁶⁹ Parke 1967a: 92; Johnston 2008: 61, 68, 70, 72.

BCE) in reaction to Delphi's apparent support of Spartan interests over those of Athens.⁷⁰ In addition, in the second half of the 4th century BCE, Athens again consulted Dodona, partly in response to suspicion that the Delphic Oracle had "philippized" and partly because of the Delphic Oracle's refusal, in 332 BCE, to receive Athenian delegations until Athens paid the Eleans an outstanding fine for bribery incurred during the Olympic pentathlon.⁷¹

Ancient sources reveal that divination took a number of forms at Dodona. The earliest literary reference to Dodona is Homer; Achilles calls upon Zeus as follows: "Zeus, lord, Dodonaean, Pelasgian, who dwell afar, ruling over wintry Dodona—and about you live the Selli, your interpreters, men with unwashed feet who sleep on the ground."⁷² The mention of bare feet and sleeping preference suggests that the Selloi (or Helloi) sought close contact with the earth, and supports the theory that some form of worship of the earth-goddess, Gaia (Dione), may have predated Zeus' Oracle.⁷³ Reverence for and worship of the earth as the primordial source and sustainer of all forms of life also predates worship of Apollo and Zeus at Delphi and Olympia respectively, as discussed below. A later Homeric reference states that Odysseus "had gone to Dodona to hear the will of Zeus from the high-crested oak of the god."⁷⁴ A change of both deity and method of divination can be inferred.

⁷⁰ Flacelière 1965: 66, 69; Parke 1967a: 109; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 70.

⁷¹ Parke 1939: 255; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 244; Parke 1967a: 116; 1967b: 141-142.

⁷² Hom. *Il.* 16.233-235, transl. Wyatt.

⁷³ Johnston 2008: 63.

⁷⁴ Hom. *Od.* 14.327-328, transl. Murray.

Aeschylus mentions this second divinatory method when, making the oak plural, he describes “the lofty ridge of Dodona, home of the oracular seat of Thesprotian Zeus and of the incredible marvel of the speaking oak trees.”⁷⁵ Aeschylus’ younger contemporary, the dramatist Sophocles, refers to the tree, doves, and Selloi in his *Women of Trachis*, in which Heracles’ wife mentions her husband’s fate “as he had heard the ancient oak at Dodona say through the two doves,”⁷⁶ and Heracles himself recalls “the prophecies of old, that when I entered the grove of the Selli who live in the mountains and sleep upon the ground I wrote down at the dictation of the ancestral oak with many voices.”⁷⁷ All the above literary sources are presumably mentioning divinatory methods (Selloi (Helloi), tree(s), and doves) recognizable to their contemporary audiences as those associated with Dodona.

Parke believes that Dodona’s sacred oak was a Valonia oak of the species *Quercus macrolepis*, which can grow 80 feet high and possibly live as long as 700-800 years. As Homer in the 9th century BCE describes the oak as already “high-crested” in c.1200 BCE,⁷⁸ Parke calculates that the original sacred oak could not have survived beyond 500 BCE at the latest. He theorizes that the reality of the sacred oak’s pending and inevitable demise made Dodona’s variety of divinatory methods a necessity.⁷⁹

Herodotus mentions both prophetesses and doves: “[W]hat follows, is told by the prophetesses of Dodona: to wit, that two black doves had come flying from Thebes in

⁷⁵ Aesch. *PV* 830-832, transl. Sommerstein.

⁷⁶ Soph. *Trach.* 170-172, transl. Lloyd-Jones.

⁷⁷ Soph. *Trach.* 1166-1168, transl. Lloyd-Jones.

⁷⁸ Hom. *Od.* 14.327-328, transl. Murray.

⁷⁹ Parke 1967a: 92-93; 1967b: 29-31.

Egypt, one to Libya and one to Dodona: this last settled on an oak tree, and uttered there human speech, declaring that there must be there a place of divination from Zeus.”⁸⁰ Herodotus also says that the prophetesses who told him about the doves are three in number (at least in his time), and that “servants of the temple” confirmed the prophetesses’ tale of the two doves.⁸¹ Four centuries later, the Greek geographer Strabo makes the following claim: “At the outset, it is true, those who uttered the prophecies were men...but later on three old women were designated as prophets, after Dione also had been designated as temple-associate of Zeus.”⁸² Strabo also describes how the Boeotians, returning home “two generations after the Trojan War,”⁸³ were so angered by a Dodonaean oracular response that stated “that they would prosper if they committed sacrilege” that they promptly “seized the woman and threw her upon a burning pile,” thereby ensuring fulfillment of the precondition of sacrilege necessary to ensure their own success.⁸⁴ Strabo then makes mention of the other “priestesses, who were also the prophetesses, being the two survivors of the three.”⁸⁵ Two centuries later, the geographer Pausanias claims that “the Peleiae (Doves) at Dodona also gave oracles under the inspiration of a god...The Peleides are said to have been still earlier than Phe-monoe,” the traditional name of the first Pythia.⁸⁶ Both Strabo and Pausanias are echoing Plato’s much earlier view of the Dodonaean priestesses as inspired prophetesses:

[I]n reality the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods. For the prophetess [*prophetis*] at Delphi and the priestesses [*hierai*] at Dodona when they have been mad have conferred many splendid

⁸⁰ Hdt. 2.55, transl. Godley.

⁸¹ Hdt. 2.55, transl. Godley.

⁸² Strab. 7.7.12, transl. Jones.

⁸³ Parke 1967b: 71.

⁸⁴ Strab. 9.2.4, transl. Jones.

⁸⁵ Strab. 9.2.4, transl. Jones.

⁸⁶ Paus. 10.12.10, transl. Jones.

benefits upon Greece both in private and in public affairs, but few or none when they have been in their right minds.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, Parke contends that Plato's view of the Dodonaean priestesses as inspired prophetesses "is probably a mistake on his [Plato's] part,"⁸⁸ and that Dodona's "use of women to answer enquirers" was merely an attempt on Dodona's part to imitate "its great rival Delphi"⁸⁹ (see below).

The use of cleromancy as a divinatory method at Dodona is included in Cicero's comprehensive discussion of divinatory methods in which he describes a Spartan lot consultation at Dodona gone awry: "After their messengers had duly set up the vessel in which were the lots, an ape, kept by the king of Molossia for his amusement, disarranged the lots and everything else used in consulting the oracle, and scattered them in all directions."⁹⁰

The turn-of-the-millennium geographer Strabo and the 1st century CE Roman epic poet Lucan, mention yet another possible divinatory method practiced at Dodona. Strabo reports how "a copper vessel...with a statue of a man...holding a copper scourge...and...striking the copper vessel...would produce tones,"⁹¹ and Lucan mentions the "sound Dodona makes with the cauldron of Jupiter."⁹² Flacelière describes "there being several bronze bowls suspended side by side, so that when one of them blown by

⁸⁷ Pl. *Phd.* 244a-b, transl. Fowler.

⁸⁸ Parke 1967a: 93.

⁸⁹ Parke 1967b: 76.

⁹⁰ Cic. *Div.* 1.34.76, transl. Falconer.

⁹¹ Strab. 7. fr. 3, transl. Jones.

⁹² Luc. 6.427, transl. Duff.

the wind banged against another the sound produced was prolonged indefinitely.”⁹³ Parke explains that “many tripods were set up so near to one another that when one touched one of them it passed on the resonant vibration by touch until it had traversed them all and the echo took a long time to travel round.”⁹⁴ Finally, Johnston depicts this possible divinatory method in action:

[T]here were so many cauldrons that when they were set atop tripods and placed in a circle, they served as the temple’s exterior wall. The cauldrons were made of such fine bronze that when they were touched, a bell-like ringing filled the temple for the rest of the day. Touching just one, moreover, sympathetically set off the others, too.⁹⁵

Archeological exploration of Dodona has uncovered many bronze objects at the site, which supports both the ancient literary evidence and modern speculation.⁹⁶

Finally, at Dodona, Zeus is sometimes referred to as Zeus Naios, “which is most usually explained as derived from the Greek verb ‘to flow’ and is supposed to refer to him as a god of flowing water.”⁹⁷ However, Parke does not himself believe that the streams at Dodona were a source of divination.⁹⁸ In contrast, Johnston is prepared to consider “the idea that at Dodona one *listened* to a spring, rather than touching it, bathing in it or drinking of its water, as at other oracles.”⁹⁹

This variety of possible sources of divination—tree(s), doves, priestesses, cleromancy, cauldrons, and a spring—denies Dodona a tradition of one consistent divinatory

⁹³ Flacelière 1965: 16.

⁹⁴ Parke 1967b: 86-87.

⁹⁵ Johnston 2008: 66.

⁹⁶ Parke 1967b: 99-100, 116.

⁹⁷ Parke 1967b: 68.

⁹⁸ Parke 1967b: 68.

⁹⁹ Johnston 2008: 72.

method.¹⁰⁰ In addition, Dodona's priestesses appear to play the part both of inspired seers uttering prophecies and of skilled interpreters of rustling leaves, murmuring doves, lots, sounding cauldrons and/or water.¹⁰¹ Dodona dwindled in importance as an oracular site after being sacked twice, by the Aetolians in 219 BCE, and again by the Romans in 167 BCE.¹⁰²

Delphi

Delphi, situated in Phocis, emerged as an oracular center in the early 8th century BCE when its sanction of colonies helped to establish its oracular reputation.¹⁰³ Parke contends that a “rivalry of publicity” existed between Zeus’ Oracle at Dodona and Apollo’s Oracle at Delphi.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Johnston maintains that “the Oracle at Dodona was Delphi’s greatest rival.”¹⁰⁵ However, this modern view of a spirit of rivalry existing between Dodona and Delphi is not explicitly supported by ancient authors. Rather, both oracles are often mentioned together as representing the authority of both Zeus and Apollo, the highest divinity and the ultimate prophetic divinity respectively. For example, Aeschylus’ Io says that her father “sent envoys repeatedly to Delphi and Dodona” to obtain the correct interpretation of her disturbing and inexplicable dreams.¹⁰⁶ Euripides has his female protagonist Melanippe utilize both oracles to demonstrate the importance of women’s roles: “Now as for dealing with the gods, which I consider of prime importance,

¹⁰⁰ Parke 1967b: 30, 86; Johnston 2008: 72.

¹⁰¹ Flacelière 1965: 16; Morrison 1981: 97; Bonnechere 2007: 155; Johnston 2008: 64, 67.

¹⁰² Hammond & Scullard 1970: 358.

¹⁰³ Parke 1967a: 44; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 62; Forrest 1982a: 308.

¹⁰⁴ Parke 1967a: 93.

¹⁰⁵ Johnston 2008: 60.

¹⁰⁶ Aesch. *PV* 658-659, transl. Sommerstein.

we have a very great role in them. Women proclaim Loxias' mind in Phoebus' halls, and by Dodona's holy foundations, beside the sacred oak, womankind conveys the thoughts of Zeus to those Greeks who want to know it."¹⁰⁷ A half-century later, the Greek historian Xenophon, after offering financial advice to the Athenian people who were still suffering financial hardship a half-century after their defeat in the Peloponnesian War, recommends that, "if you decide to go forward with the plan, I would advise you to send to Dodona and Delphi, and inquire of the gods whether such a design is fraught with weal for the state both now and in days to come."¹⁰⁸ Rather than implying rivalry, ancient authors suggest that a successful outcome is assured when both Zeus and Apollo sanction a proposal.

As Dodona is Delphi's only documented predecessor, it was not possible for Delphi to claim the honor of being *the* earliest ancient Greek oracle.¹⁰⁹ Modern scholarship suggests that Delphi challenged Dodona's precedence by claiming continuity with its own pre-existing cult of Gaia at Delphi.¹¹⁰ Perhaps Plutarch's pride in his position as a Delphic priest 90-120 CE is responsible for his own reference to "the oracle here at Delphi, the most ancient in time and the most famous in repute."¹¹¹

In the face of Dodona's claiming Deucalion, a Greek Noah-like figure, as its founder, modern scholars imply that Delphi assumed the role of instructing Deucalion in how to

¹⁰⁷ Eur. Fr. 494, transl. Collard & Cropp.

¹⁰⁸ Xen. *Ways and means* 6.2, transl. Marchant.

¹⁰⁹ Parke 1967a: 38.

¹¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones 1976: 61.

¹¹¹ Plut. *De def. or.* 414a-b, transl. Babbitt.

restore the human race after the Great Flood.¹¹² In addition, Delphi may have sought to diminish Dodona's claim to speak for the highest divinity Zeus by asserting for its own Apollo the ancient right to speak for his father Zeus.¹¹³ Delphi's claim that Zeus speaks through Apollo is supported by two ancient literary texts. In the 6th century BCE *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, the god Apollo himself proclaims "I will declare to men the unfailing will of Zeus."¹¹⁴ Furthermore, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Apollo's mouthpiece the Pythia explicitly claims that "Zeus caused his [Apollo's] mind to be inspired with seercraft...Loxias [Apollo] is thus the spokesman of father Zeus."¹¹⁵

The Delphic Oracle boasted its own two special ancient claims. First, Delphi enjoyed the ancient reputation as the most truthful oracle, presumably meaning that its oracles were reputed to be the most accurate predictors of the truth. Herodotus claims that Croesus, the king of Lydia, considered that "Delphi was the only true place of divination."¹¹⁶ Almost 400 years later, Cicero has his brother Quintus admit that "the oracle at Delphi never would have been so much frequented, so famous, and so crowded with offerings from peoples and kings of every land, if all ages had not tested the truth of its prophecies."¹¹⁷ Quintus then asserts that "the oracle at Delphi made true prophecies for many hundreds of years."¹¹⁸ Strabo, writing a little later in the same century, describes the Delphi Oracle as follows: "[O]f all oracles in the world it had the repute of being the most truthful."¹¹⁹

Strabo also quotes Ephorus, a 4th century BCE Greek historian, as confirming the Delphic

¹¹² Parke 1967a: 37-38; 1967b: 40-41; Johnston 2008: 60.

¹¹³ Parke 1939: 377; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 369.

¹¹⁴ *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 131, transl. West.

¹¹⁵ Aesch. *Eum.* 19, transl. Sommerstein.

¹¹⁶ Hdt. 1.48, transl. Godley.

¹¹⁷ Cic. *Div.* 1.19.37, transl. Falconer.

¹¹⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.19.38, transl. Falconer.

¹¹⁹ Strab. 9.3.6, transl. Jones.

Oracle as “the oracle which is the most truthful of all.”¹²⁰ Delphi’s second claim was its *omphalos*,¹²¹ an ancient conical stone, which supposedly marked the center of the earth as identified by Zeus’ eagles, which flew from opposite ends of earth and met at Delphi, “the central navel of earth, the oracular sanctuary of Pytho.”¹²²

A number of modern scholars acknowledge the Delphic Oracle as the most prestigious, revered, authoritative, consulted, long-lived and widely recognized panhellenic religious oracular sanctuary in the ancient Greek world.¹²³ The Delphic Oracle was continuously served throughout its existence by female prophetesses, Pythias, who, inspired by the inhalation of subterranean vapors, served as mouthpieces for the male god Apollo and traditionally uttered his prophecies or oracles.¹²⁴ The Delphic Oracle was the longest-surviving ancient Greek oracle without any interruption of operation—even when, after fire destroyed the temple in 548 BCE and the aftermath of an earthquake damaged it in 373 BCE, the respective restorations each took 40 years to complete. Delphi could also boast three honorable mentions of its own in the works of Homer;¹²⁵ these and the Delphic founding myths are considered in the following chapter of this dissertation, in conjunction with pre-3rd century BCE ancient authors’ presentation of the respective roles of Pythia and Delphic priesthood in the Delphic oracular consultative process.

¹²⁰ Strab. 9.3.11, transl. Jones.

¹²¹ Aesch. *Eum.* 40, 166.

¹²² Aesch. *Sept.* 747-748, transl. Sommerstein.

¹²³ Parke 1939: 3-4; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 1-2; Fontenrose 1978: 1; Robertson 1982: 358; Morgan 1990: 150, 171.

¹²⁴ The discussion of ancient accounts of the Delphic preliminary purification and inspirational rites and of the Delphic mantic procedure itself is reserved for the following two chapters of this dissertation.

¹²⁵ Hom. *Il.* 9.401-405; *Od.* 8.79-81, 11.580-581.

The Delphic Oracle rose to pre-eminence between 700 and 550 BCE. Its oracles reflected and influenced all aspects of ancient society, religious, political, cultural, and social. The temple precinct was the recipient of grateful enquirers' valuable gifts. After the Oracle's judgment (during the Persian War) and its impartiality (during the Peloponnesian War) were called into question, the Oracle experienced a diminishing demand for its sanction of colonies, state constitutions, and declarations and outcomes of wars.

The oracle appears to have already been in decline by the 3rd century BCE.¹²⁶ However, it enjoyed a brief but limited revival under the Roman emperors Trajan and Hadrian in the 2nd century CE¹²⁷ although the oracle was increasingly consulted about private personal concerns rather than on weighty matters of state. By 300 CE, the oracle was essentially extinct as an oracular center.¹²⁸ Delphi's decline in prestige and influence is often attributed to a combination of the following possible causes: the dwindling of the inspirational subterranean vapors, the decline in the Greek population, the rise of Macedonian power, the decline in the independence of Greek city-states, the increasing importance of philosophical schools of thought, and/or the influence of Christianity.¹²⁹

Claros

Another Apolline oracle was situated at Claros, near Colophon on the west coast of Asia Minor. Archeological evidence supports the presence of an oracle at Claros as early as

¹²⁶ Parke 1967b: 120; Price 1999: 75.

¹²⁷ Parke 1967b: 124.

¹²⁸ Parke 1985: 107.

¹²⁹ Plut. *De def. or.* 414a,434c; Whittaker 1965: 29, 46; Parke 1967a: 147; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 71-72; Fontenrose 1978: 5; Morrison 1981: 89.

the 8th century BCE.¹³⁰ The 7th century BCE *Homeric Hymn to Artemis* mentions Claros: “Artemis...who...drives her chariot all of gold swiftly through Smyrna to vine-terraced Claros, where silverbow Apollo sits awaiting the far-shooting one.”¹³¹ However, it is during the 2nd century CE that Claros flourished as one of the chief centers for inspired divination although it attracted the majority of its enquirers from Asia Minor as opposed to mainland Greece.¹³²

Male prophets, who claimed Mopsus, son of Manto and grandson of Tiresias (see previous chapter of this dissertation), as their traditional founder, delivered the oracles at Claros.¹³³ Enquirers “frequently left a record of their visit on the exterior walls, steps and columns of the temple itself. They inscribed their names, the names of their cities, the dates of their visits and the names of the officials who took care of them.”¹³⁴ This inscriptional evidence reveals that the temple staff included a prophet, a priest, a singer of prophecies, and scribes who recorded the consultations.¹³⁵

There are several references to Claros in ancient Roman sources. The 1st century CE Roman historian Tacitus describes Germanicus’ consultation of the Clarian Oracle:

[H]e...anchored off Colophon, in order to consult the oracle of the Clarian Apollo. Here it is not a prophetess, as at Delphi, but a male priest, chosen out of a restricted number of families, and in most cases imported from Miletus, who hears the number and names of the consultants, but no more, then descends into a cavern, swallows a draught of water from a mysterious spring, and—though

¹³⁰ Johnston 2008: 76.

¹³¹ *Hymn. Hom. Art.* 1-6, transl. West.

¹³² Parke 1985: 148; Johnston 2008: 78.

¹³³ Parke 1985: 112-115.

¹³⁴ Johnston 2008: 77.

¹³⁵ Johnston 2008: 77.

ignorant generally of writing and of metre—delivers his response in set verses dealing with the subject each inquirer has in mind.¹³⁶

The 1st century CE Roman author Pliny the Elder offers this unusual information about the peculiar properties of this Clarian spring: “In the cave of Apollo of Claros at Colophon there is a pool a draught from which causes marvelous oracular utterances to be produced, though the life of the drinkers is shortened.”¹³⁷

Iamblichus, a 3rd century CE philosopher, quotes his slightly older contemporary and teacher Porphyry: “Some are inspired while drinking water, like the priest of Clarian Apollo in Colophon.”¹³⁸ Iamblichus then describes the Clarian prophet’s preliminary rites and oracular delivery:

It is agreed by everyone that the oracle at Colophon prophesies by means of water. There is a spring in a subterranean chamber, and from it the prophet drinks on certain appointed nights, after performing many preliminary ceremonies, and after drinking, he delivers his oracles, no longer seen by the spectators present. That this water has oracular power is immediately obvious...Even before drinking, he fasts the whole day and night, and after becoming divinely inspired, he withdraws by himself to sacred, inaccessible places, and by this withdrawal and separation from human affairs, he purifies himself for receiving the god.¹³⁹

Certainly, a sacred spring in an underground cavern features consistently as the source of inspired divination for the male prophet at Claros, and archeological excavation confirms the presence of “an extremely well preserved subterranean sanctuary.”¹⁴⁰ The Clarian Oracle fell into obscurity at some point during the first half of the 3rd century CE.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 2.54, transl. Jackson.

¹³⁷ Pliny, *HN* 2.232, transl. Rackham et al.

¹³⁸ Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11, transl. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell.

¹³⁹ Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11, transl. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell.

¹⁴⁰ Flacelière 1965: 44.

¹⁴¹ Parke 1985: 169.

Didyma

The Apolline Oracle of Didyma, also on the west coast of Asia Minor, was situated south of Claros near Miletus. Didyma was already issuing oracles in the 6th century BCE¹⁴² and is described by Fontenrose as “second to the Delphic Oracle in fame and prestige among Apolline Oracles.”¹⁴³ Herodotus reports that, in 550 BCE, Croesus included Didyma among the seven ancient oracles he subjected to the test of truthfulness that Delphi won.¹⁴⁴ Didyma’s enquirers, like those at Claros, were primarily local although important foreign enquirers included the Roman emperors Diocletian and Julian.¹⁴⁵ Prior to 494 BCE, as at Claros, oracles were delivered by hereditary male prophets, who were male members of the Branchidae family, descendants of Branchus, who possessed prophetic gifts bestowed on him by Apollo.¹⁴⁶

The Persians destroyed the oracle in 494 BCE.¹⁴⁷ Herodotus states that “the temple at Didyma with its shrine and place of divination was plundered and burnt.”¹⁴⁸ After 160 years of silence, the oracle was rebuilt in 334 BCE, possibly as a consequence of Alexander’s liberation of Ionian cities, including neighboring Miletus, from Persian rule.¹⁴⁹ Archeological remains preserve the unusual construction of this Apolline temple and its *adyton*. The temple building surrounds an inner area open to the sky; this open

¹⁴² Parke 1985: 28.

¹⁴³ Fontenrose 1988: 1.

¹⁴⁴ Hdt. 1.46-49.

¹⁴⁵ Fontenrose 1988: 105; Johnston 2008: 88.

¹⁴⁶ Parke 1985: 2, 4-5; Fontenrose 1988: 45, 78; Johnston 2008: 83-84.

¹⁴⁷ Parke 1985: 21.

¹⁴⁸ Hdt. 6.19, transl. Godley.

¹⁴⁹ Arr. *Anab.* 1.18.1-2; Parke 1985: 36; Fontenrose 1988: 15.

courtyard constitutes the *adyton* itself and houses the sacred spring, the main source of prophetic inspiration.¹⁵⁰

The mantic procedure now approximated that of Delphi in that a woman functioned as Didyma's prophetess.¹⁵¹ Inscriptions at Didyma include also a *prophetes* and scribes as members of the temple staff and record the presence of a *chresmographeion*, a structure in which written oracles were stored.¹⁵²

Again, Iamblichus quotes his older contemporary teacher Porphyry, and introduces the topic of sources of prophetic inspiration with "others while inhaling vapours from waters, like the prophetesses of the Branchidai."¹⁵³ Iamblichus then proceeds to suggest five possible sources of prophetic inspiration:

And as for the woman at Branchidai who gives oracles, it is either by holding the staff first given by a certain god that she is filled by the divine radiance; or else when sitting on the axle she predicts the future; or whether dipping her feet or skirt in the water, or inhaling vapour from the water, at any rate, she receives the god. That is what is shown by the abundance of sacrifices, the established custom of the whole ritual, and everything that is performed with due piety prior to divination: also the baths of the prophetess, her fasting for three whole days, abiding in the innermost sanctuaries, already possessed by light, and rejoicing in it for a long time.¹⁵⁴

Christian hostility, possibly initially engendered by Didyma's sanction of Diocletian's prosecution of the Christians in 303 CE, and later exacerbated by both the end of pagan Julian's reign in 363 CE and Theodosius' ban on pagan divination in 391 CE,

¹⁵⁰ Fontenrose 1988: 9; Johnston 2008: 88.

¹⁵¹ Parke 1985: 42; Fontenrose 1988: 55.

¹⁵² Johnston 2008: 84-85.

¹⁵³ Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11, transl. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell.

¹⁵⁴ Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11, transl. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell.

brought about the oracle's decline.¹⁵⁵ Fontenrose sums up Didyma's fate: "The Christians succeeded in destroying what Persians, Gauls, Cilician pirates, and the Goths had failed to destroy."¹⁵⁶

The four oracles discussed above were the most famous in the ancient Greek world. However, there were other ancient oracles that warrant consideration, two because, like Dodona, they served the supreme god Zeus, and two because they involved less common methods of consultation.

Olympia

Olympia, in Achaëa, possessed an Oracle of Zeus that enjoyed "an ancient tradition of oracular enquiry."¹⁵⁷ According to Pausanias, an earlier sanctuary to Gaia, as at both Dodona and Delphi, predated this later oracle serving Zeus: "In more ancient days they say that there was an oracle also of Earth in this place."¹⁵⁸ In his Olympian odes, the 5th century BCE Greek poet Pindar describes Olympia as an "oracle on the summit of Zeus' altar"¹⁵⁹ and one "where men who are seers examine burnt offerings."¹⁶⁰ The method of divination practiced was empyromancy, the interpretation of omens from burnt sacrifices. There was no temple to Zeus in the sanctuary before the 5th century BCE, only "a

¹⁵⁵ Fontenrose 1988: 24-25; Johnston 2008: 88.

¹⁵⁶ Fontenrose 1988: 25.

¹⁵⁷ Parke 1967b: 164.

¹⁵⁸ Paus. 5.14.10, transl. Jones & Ormerod.

¹⁵⁹ Pind. *Ol.* 6.70-71, transl. Race.

¹⁶⁰ Pind. *Ol.* 8.2-3, transl. Race.

peculiar altar in the open air.”¹⁶¹ Pausanias describes this Olympian altar as “made out of the ashes of the thighs of the victims sacrificed to Zeus.”¹⁶² By the 6th century BCE, Olympian oracles were primarily concerned with the outcomes of Olympia’s quadrennial panhellenic games.¹⁶³ The oracular site was one of many obliterated in 391 CE on the orders of the anti-pagan Roman emperor Theodosius.¹⁶⁴

Siwah

There was also an Oracle of Ammon (whom the Greeks equated with Zeus) at Siwah, 200 miles inside the Libyan desert, which was far more inaccessible for consultation than even Dodona.¹⁶⁵ Of the two black Egyptian doves mentioned above in connection with Dodona, “[t]he dove which came to Libya bade the Libyans (so they say) to make an oracle of Ammon; this also is sacred to Zeus.”¹⁶⁶ A 1st century CE author describes Siwah’s Oracle: “The image of the god is encrusted with emeralds and other precious stones, and answers those who consult the oracle in a quite peculiar fashion. It is carried about upon a golden boat by eighty priests, and these, with the god on their shoulders, go without their own volition wherever the god directs their path.”¹⁶⁷ Parke explains the unusual mantic method: “The image of Ammon in a shrine was carried on the shoulders of priests and its movements towards or away from a written enquiry laid on the ground

¹⁶¹ Parke 1967b: 164.

¹⁶² Paus. 5.13.8, transl. Jones & Ormerod.

¹⁶³ Parke 1967a: 93.

¹⁶⁴ Hammond & Scullard 1970: 750.

¹⁶⁵ Parke 1967a: 109.

¹⁶⁶ Hdt. 2.55, transl. Godley.

¹⁶⁷ Diod. Sic. 17.50.6, transl. Welles.

would be interpreted as expressing the god's approval or disapproval."¹⁶⁸ The oracle is best known to modern commentators for having been consulted by Lysander in 402 BCE and by Alexander in 331 BCE.¹⁶⁹

The following two oracular sites were unusual in that enquirers, using personal methods of consultation, produced their own oracles by seeking direct contact with heroes, renowned mortal men who, before or after death, were accorded divine or semi-divine status. Pausanias explains how "in those days men were changed to gods, who down to the present day have honours paid to them."¹⁷⁰

Oropus

Enquirers could seek their own incubation, sleeping or dream visions or oracles by sleeping in the incubation sanctuaries of the hero-physician Asclepius, such as the one in Epidaurus in the Peloponnese, or in the incubation sanctuary of the hero-warrior Amphiaraus at Oropus in Boeotia. Incubation sanctuaries tended to specialize in healing.¹⁷¹ Herodotus reports that Croesus included Amphiaraus' oracle among the seven ancient oracles he subjected to his test of truthfulness in 550 BCE. Although Delphi won the contest, Herodotus claims "that Croesus held that from this oracle too he had obtained a true answer."¹⁷² Pausanias has this to offer about the origin of Amphiaraus' oracle: "Legend says that when Amphiaraus was exiled from Thebes the earth opened and

¹⁶⁸ Parke 1967a: 110.

¹⁶⁹ Diod. Sic. 14.13.5-7; Strab. 17.1.43; Arr. *Anab.* 3.3.1-6; Parke 1967b: 220-223.

¹⁷⁰ Paus. 8.2.4, transl. Jones.

¹⁷¹ Halliday 1913: 128-129; Johnston 2008: 91.

¹⁷² Hdt. 1.49, transl. Godley.

swallowed both him and his chariot.”¹⁷³ Three centuries earlier, Cicero makes the following claim: “As for Amphiaraus, his reputation in Greece was such that he was honoured as a god, and oracular responses were sought in the place where he was buried.”¹⁷⁴

Pausanias describes the consultation procedure at Amphiaraus’ sanctuary:

One who has come to consult Amphiaraus is wont first to purify himself. The mode of purification is to sacrifice to the god, and they sacrifice not only to him but also to all those whose names are on the altar. And when all these things have been first done, they sacrifice a ram, and, spreading the skin under them, go to sleep and await enlightenment in a dream.¹⁷⁵

Furthermore, “when a man has been cured of a disease through a response the custom is to throw silver and coined gold into the spring.”¹⁷⁶ The consultation process at healing sanctuaries, including Asclepius’ incubation sanctuary at Epidaurus, follows a similar pattern of purification, offerings to the healing powers, and incubation in the sanctuary.¹⁷⁷

Lebadea

Perhaps the most peculiar and disturbing of all oracular consultation procedures is that of the Oracle of Trophonius (who was also reputed to have been swallowed by the earth) at Lebadea in Boeotia.¹⁷⁸ The method of consultation of this oracle was so unusual that it warrants inclusion of Pausanias’ lengthy (even when abbreviated) first-hand account:

¹⁷³ Paus. 1.34.2, transl. Jones.

¹⁷⁴ Cic. *Div.* 1.40.88, transl. Falconer.

¹⁷⁵ Paus. 1.34.5, transl. Jones.

¹⁷⁶ Paus. 1.34.4, transl. Jones.

¹⁷⁷ Kearns 2010: 310.

¹⁷⁸ Paus. 9.37.7; Johnston 2008: 95.

When a man has made up his mind to descend to the oracle of Trophonius, he first lodges in a certain building for an appointed number of days...While he lodges there, among other regulations for purity he abstains from hot baths, bathing only in the river...Meat he has in plenty from the sacrifices...At each sacrifice a diviner is present, who looks into the entrails of the victim, and after an inspection prophesies to the person descending whether Trophonius will give him a kind and gracious reception...The procedure of the descent is this. First, during the night he is taken to the river...by two boys...who anoint him with oil and wash him...After this he is taken by the priests...to fountains...Here he must drink water called the water of Forgetfulness...and...the water of Memory...he proceeds to the oracle...After going down he finds a hole...The descender lies with his back on the ground...thrusts his feet into the hole and himself follows...the rest of his body is at once drawn swiftly in...After this those who have entered the shrine learn the future, not in one and the same way in all cases, but by sight sometimes and at other times by hearing. The return upwards is by the same mouth, the feet darting out first. They say that no one who has made the descent has been killed [however, I omit here the description of two deaths]...After his ascent from Trophonius the inquirer is again taken in hand by the priests, who set him upon a chair of Memory...and they ask of him, when seated there, all he has seen or learned. After gaining this information they then entrust him to his relatives. These lift him, paralysed with terror and unconscious both of himself and of his surroundings, and carry him to the building where he lodged before...Afterwards, however, he will recover all his faculties, and the power to laugh will return to him.¹⁷⁹

One is forced to wonder why anyone seeking divination would even consider subjecting himself to such a physically and psychologically traumatic ordeal. Six centuries earlier, Herodotus records that, during the Persian War, the Persian commander Mardonius employed “a man of Europus called Mys” who “is known to have gone to Lebadea and to have bribed a man of the country to go down into the cave of Trophonius”¹⁸⁰ in an apparent descent by proxy.

¹⁷⁹ Paus. 9.39.5-13, transl. Jones.

¹⁸⁰ Hdt. 8.133-134, transl. Godley.

Finally, three further oracles warrant a mention. The first two, like Delphi, are Apolline oracles. The third utilized a female prophetess whose similarities to the Delphian Pythia are discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Delos

The island of Delos, the birthplace of Apollo, the prophetic god, was depicted as the site of an ancient Apolline oracle in three poetic sources. First, in the 6th century BCE *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, in return for providing a birthplace for Apollo, Delos asks Apollo's mother Leto "to swear a powerful oath that this will be the first place he [Apollo] makes his beautiful temple to be an oracular site for men,"¹⁸¹ and she agrees. Second, the Roman poet Virgil, writing in the 1st century BCE, makes Delos the fictional site of an oracular consultation by his epic hero Aeneas who has fled from burning Troy.¹⁸² Third, the 1st century CE epic poet Lucan lists "the tripod of Delos" as a reputable oracular site.¹⁸³ Delos' temple, sanctuary of Apollo, and marketplace flourished until the island was sacked by Mithridates of Pontus in 98 BCE,¹⁸⁴ by which time the Oracle of Delos had presumably long since ceased to function, assuming that, considering the lack of supporting historic or archeological evidence, it had ever, in fact, existed.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 79-81, transl. West.

¹⁸² Verg. *Aen.* 3.79-98.

¹⁸³ Luc. 6.425, transl. Duff.

¹⁸⁴ Hammond & Scullard 1970: 321.

¹⁸⁵ Parke 1967a: 94; Richardson 2010: 93.

Argos

Yet another Apolline temple, in Argos in the Peloponnese, deserves a mention because, like Delphi and late Didyma, its seer was a woman: “The only other site in Greece where a woman uttered Apolline prophecies was at Argos where the temple of Apollo Pythaeus was supposed to be directly founded from Delphi.”¹⁸⁶ Two ancient authors mention this oracle. Plutarch, discussing the military operations of Pyrrhus in the Peloponnese in 272 BCE, reports a prophecy that was delivered as Pyrrhus advanced on Argos: “In the city of Argos the priestess of Apollo Lyceius ran forth from the temple crying that she saw the city full of corpses and slaughter.”¹⁸⁷ A century later, Pausanias mentions this temple as one of the sights of Argos:

[Y]ou come to...a temple of Apollo, which is said to have been first built by Pythaeus when he came from Delphi....Oracular responses are still given here, and the oracle acts in the following way. There is a woman who prophesies, being debarred from intercourse with a man. Every month a lamb is sacrificed at night, and the woman, after tasting the blood, becomes inspired by the god.¹⁸⁸

Aegira

A similar pre-consultation procedure was practiced at a temple to Gaia in Aegira in Achaëa. Pliny the Elder, a 1st century CE Roman prose author, offers this strange account: “Fresh bull’s blood indeed is reckoned one of the poisons, except at Aegira. For there the priestess of Earth, when about to prophesy, drinks bull’s blood before she goes

¹⁸⁶ Parke 1939: 14; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 10.

¹⁸⁷ Plut. *Pyrrh.* 31.3, transl. Perrin.

¹⁸⁸ Paus. 2.24.1, transl. Jones.

down into the caves.”¹⁸⁹ Parke contends that the “motive underlying the method was no doubt a belief that by entering a cavern the servant of the goddess came into closer contact with the divine”¹⁹⁰ and again that “in primitive times the deities could be approached by entering caves.”¹⁹¹ A century after Pliny, Pausanias confirms and expands Pliny’s story:

The woman who from time to time is priestess henceforth remains chaste, and before her election must not have had intercourse with more than one man. The test applied is drinking bull's blood. Any woman who may chance not to speak the truth is immediately punished as a result of this test.¹⁹²

Although the priestess at Aegira drinks the bull’s blood “when about to prophesy,” the act apparently served, not so much as a source of prophetic inspiration as in the case of the Apolline priestess at Argos, but rather as a test of the priestess’ relative sexual purity.

An attempt can be made to summarize and categorize the eleven oracular sites discussed above. As regards deities consulted, five of the sites were dedicated to Apollo (Delphi, Claros, Didyma, Delos, and Argos), three to Zeus (Dodona, Olympia, and Siwah), two to heroes or demigods (Oropus and Lebadea), and one to Gaia (Aegira).

At four of the five Apolline oracular sites, a prophet (at Claros, and at Didyma during its early history) or prophetess (at Delphi, at Didyma during its later history, and at Argos) communicated Apollo’s answer to the enquirer. The Delian oracular site is speculative and its procedure therefore unknown. In addition, the four Apolline prophets/prophetesses required and sought inspiration prior to consultation: two

¹⁸⁹ Pliny, *HN* 28.41.147, transl. Jones.

¹⁹⁰ Parke 1956a: 10.

¹⁹¹ Parke 1967a: 26.

¹⁹² Paus. 7.25.13, transl. Jones.

descended to a subterranean level (at Delphi and Claros), one drank water from a particular source (at Claros), two inhaled fumes or vapor from and/or drank water from a particular source (at Delphi and Didyma), and one drank lamb's blood (at Argos). At Aegira, Gaia's priestess both drank bull's blood (perhaps as a test of her relative sexual purity rather than as a source of inspiration) and descended to a subterranean level.

Of the remaining five non-Apolline sites, Dodona employed a variety of divinatory methods, Olympia practiced empyromancy, Oropus utilized dream oracles, Lebadea involved an attempted direct encounter or communication with a deceased hero, and Siwah enlisted god-inspired, priest-driven action.

Modern scholars tend to describe inspired oracles in superlative terms. Myers extols inspired oracles in particular as "the most celebrated class of oracles" and "the highest point of development to which Greek oracles attained."¹⁹³ Parker makes the following statement: "Consultation of an oracle is the most powerful of several forms of divination."¹⁹⁴ These oracles certainly offered a direct and personal form of divination. In antiquity, the esteem in which such inspired oracles were held appears to have been related to their perceived prestige, authority, and reputation for truthfulness.

The Delphic Oracle was just such an inspired oracle that offered consultation of divine will by means of inspired divination in the form of ecstatic prophecy uttered by a female Pythia speaking on behalf of Apollo, the god of prophecy himself. Visitors to the site of

¹⁹³ Myers 1880: 436.

¹⁹⁴ Parker 1985: 298.

the Delphic Oracle remark on its spectacular and awe-inspiring natural setting. The preparatory purification rituals for all persons involved in the mantic session and the consultation procedure itself are gleaned from ancient sources that are explored in the following two chapters of this dissertation. An ancient enquirer visiting the Delphic Oracle expected his encounter to be a deeply significant, unique, momentous, and memorable experience.

Johnston captures the essential significance that site-specific oracular consultations, such as those at Delphi, held for ancient Greeks: “These were impressive places—places where one felt not only closer to the gods but also enwrapped in importance oneself. A consultation at Delphi or Dodona must have given the business about which one came to enquire a certain additional gravity—not only in the eyes of the world, perhaps, but also in one’s own eyes.”¹⁹⁵

In this chapter, the Delphic Oracle was set in its historical and religious context among ten other Greek oracles. The Delphic Oracle, in particular the role that the Pythia provided in the working of the Delphic Oracle, is traced in the following four chapters of this dissertation through an exploration of its depiction in the written records of both ancient authors and modern scholars. The goal remains to elucidate the Pythia’s role in the Delphic Oracle and to attempt to understand, evaluate, and explain how both ancient authors and modern scholars view and present her role.

¹⁹⁵ Johnston 2008: 72.

Chapter 3:

Pre-3rd Century BCE Greek Views of the Pythia's Role

The decision to divide the ancient sources' views of the Pythia's role into two periods, pre-3rd century BCE and post-4th century BCE, was influenced by three considerations. First, a gap of almost two-and-a-half centuries, between the death of Plato in 348 BCE and the birth of Cicero in 106 BCE, occurs in a chronological listing of ancient authors that discuss the Pythia's role. Second, the aforementioned gap also divides Greek-only sources from later Greek and Roman sources that discuss the Pythia's role. Third, this same gap separates the period of the Delphic Oracle's rise, peak and early decline from its subsequent period of frank decline and ultimate demise.¹⁹⁶

The antiquity and respectability of Delphi and the Delphic Oracle itself are established with Homer's three references to Delphi (Pytho). First, Achilles confirms the proverbial wealth of Delphi when he proclaims that "in my eyes not of like worth with life is all the wealth that men say Ilios possessed, the well-peopled city, formerly, in time of peace, before the sons of Achaeans came, nor all that the marble threshold of the Archer, Phoebus Apollo, encloses in rocky Pytho."¹⁹⁷ Next, Homer's *Odyssey* refers to an occasion when Agamemnon himself consults the Delphi Oracle: "[F]or thus Phoebus Apollo, in giving his response, had told him that it should be, in sacred Pytho, when he

¹⁹⁶ McCleod 1961: 317; Flacelière 1965: 54-55.

¹⁹⁷ Hom. *Il.* 9.401-405, transl. Wyatt.

passed over the threshold of stone to enquire of the oracle.”¹⁹⁸ Finally, a brief reference to “Leto, the glorious wife of Zeus, as she went toward Pytho” is recorded.¹⁹⁹

The Delphic Oracle also possesses three foundation myths, all of which serve to confirm its pedigree, the respectable antiquity of its origins, and to establish feminine precedents for the Pythia. The earliest is from the 6th century *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* that depicts Apollo’s slaying of a serpent at Delphi as the justified extermination of a local, and female, monster by the helpful hand of Apollo:

Nearby is the fair-flowing spring where the lord, the son of Zeus, shot the serpent from his mighty bow, a great bloated creature, a fierce prodigy that caused much harm to people in the land—much to them, and much to their long-shanked flocks, for she was a bloody affliction.²⁰⁰

This hymn also explains that the ancient Homeric name “Pytho” for the Delphic site— together with the title of Pythios for Apollo and, therefore, presumably, the title of “Pythia” for Apollo’s female Delphic prophetess—is derived from the rotting (*puthon*) corpse of this female serpent slain by Apollo.²⁰¹

The remaining two foundation myths are both presented by 5th century BCE Athenian tragic poets. Aeschylus depicts Apollo as the accepted, legitimate, respected heir to a previously female prophetic tradition. In Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, the priestess of Apollo, the Pythia, proclaims the following:

First among the gods, in this my prayer, I give pride of place to the first of prophets, Earth; and next to her daughter Themis, who, as a tale has it, was the second to occupy this prophetic seat which had been her mother’s. The third to

¹⁹⁸ Hom. *Od.* 8.79-81, transl. Murray.

¹⁹⁹ Hom. *Od.* 11.580-581, transl. Murray.

²⁰⁰ *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 300-304, transl. West.

²⁰¹ *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 371-374; Parke 1939: 6; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 3; Fontenrose 1974: 14.

have the seat assigned to her—with her predecessor’s consent and not by the use of force against anyone—was another Titaness and child of Earth, Phoebe; and she gave it as a birthday gift to Phoebus...he was escorted, and shown great reverence...he was greatly honoured by our people...and Zeus caused his mind to be inspired with seercraft, and installed him on the throne here as its fourth prophet.²⁰²

This dignified foundation myth also establishes a respectable feminine precedent for the Pythia to serve as Apollo’s mouthpiece. In the Ancient Greek world, for a male god to be served by a woman (and *vice versa*) was “nearly unique.”²⁰³ However, Apollo chose to speak through female prophetesses at Delphi, late Didyma, and Argos.

In contrast to the above foundation myths, Euripides, who possesses a reputation for challenging conventions, offers an account of Apollo’s takeover of the Delphic Oracle that depicts a violent invasion and conquest of the domain of the original deity, the earth-goddess Gaia, rather than the Homeric hymn’s version of a justified killing of a local menace:

There a dark-visaged dragon with speckled back
held in thrall the rich laurel-shaded grove—
a monstrous portent brought forth by Earth—and ranged the oracular shrine.
Though still a child, still
frolicking in the arms of your dear mother,
you killed him, Phoebus, and stepped as conqueror upon the oracular shrine,
and now you sit on the tripod of gold, from your truthful throne
dispensing prophecies of divine decrees to mortals
from your inmost chamber next to the streams of Castalia,
having your shrine at earth’s midpoint.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, Euripides’ inclusion of the earth goddess Gaia in his foundation myth also supports a feminine foundation for the role of the Pythia. There is incidentally a short-

²⁰² Aesch. *Eum.* 1-18, transl. Sommerstein.

²⁰³ Fontenrose 1978: 10.

²⁰⁴ Eur. *IT* 1245-1258, transl. Kovacs.

lived aftermath to Euripides' foundation myth: Gaia attempts an underhand comeback, Apollo appeals to Zeus, and Zeus makes a final judgment in Apollo's favor.²⁰⁵

The above early ancient literary sources all serve to set the scene for the Delphi Oracle. Its origins are ancient and respectable. A precedent for the female prophetic voice of its Pythia is firmly established.

Pythia

Because this dissertation is concerned with scrutinizing the Pythia's role, comprehending the person of the Pythia, in her role as Apollo's mouthpiece in particular, is crucial. Early Greek authors utilize a variety of terms when referring to the Pythia in their works. The earliest reference to the Pythia is in a poem by Theognis, who, in the 6th century BCE, calls her "*hiereia*," which Edmonds translates as "priestess."²⁰⁶ Aeschylus calls her "*mantis*."²⁰⁷ Euripides and Plato refer to her as "*prophetis*."²⁰⁸ Herodotus usually calls her "*Pythia*" but also refers to her as "*promantis*."²⁰⁹ Maurizio comments on this variety of ancient terminology:

If we are to grant that the etymology of *mantis* and *prophetes* can provide clues as to the function of persons so labeled, we would expect some consistency in such labeling. However, in the case of the Pythia and Apollo, there is no such consistency....Throughout antiquity, the Pythia is called variously, *mantis*, *prophetis*, and, in addition, *promantis*.²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ Eur. *IT* 1259-1282.

²⁰⁶ Theog. 1.807, transl. Edmonds.

²⁰⁷ Aesch. *Eum.* 29, transl. Sommerstein.

²⁰⁸ Eur. *Ion* 42, transl. Kovacs; Pl. *Phdr.* 244a-b, transl. Fowler.

²⁰⁹ Hdt. 1.47, 7.141, transl. Godley.

²¹⁰ Maurizio 1993: 26.

Maurizio implies that labels alone cannot reveal how the earliest ancient sources viewed the Pythia's role in the Delphic Oracle. All the other clues that ancient sources offer about the Pythia herself and her role in the Delphic Oracle need to be examined in order to attempt to comprehend her role.

Fortunately, literary sources mention the Pythia. The problem is whether what they say depicts a reality that now lies beyond the reach of our own ability to personally confirm. The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides offer glimpses of the person of the Pythia and the duties she performed. The question is whether their depiction represents a realistic portrayal or poetic license and whether, therefore, the views expressed by dramatists and poets in "myth and imaginative literature"²¹¹ can be taken into serious consideration when determining the role of Pythia (and of members of the Delphic priesthood). Classical dramatic poetry was written for public performance and was performed before a male, or at least a male-dominated, audience. Some of its members may have attended (or known people, or of people, who had attended) real-life oracular consultations. Many members of the audience must have possessed, at the very least, theories or expectations concerning how oracular consultations were conducted. The playwrights' dramatic portrayal must conceivably have been sufficiently and recognizably true to expectation or reality, even if exaggerated for dramatic effect, in order to be acceptable in its dramatic context by a contemporary audience. In Brenk's words, the depiction "did not fly in the face of their own experience of oracular

²¹¹ Gould 1980: 39.

responses.”²¹² Robertson also points out that “whether they [oracular enquiries] are real or legendary does not matter, for legendary cases will be true to life.”²¹³

In addition to the previously mentioned literary sources, the Pythia features frequently in Herodotus’ history. Dewald points out that, “[i]f we were to count number of appearances as the principal criterion, the Pythia would be the most important woman in the *Histories*: she appears in every book but the second and on forty-five occasions advises kings, tyrants, aristocrats, and commoners, both Greek and barbarian.”²¹⁴ Herodotus appears to be a sincere believer in religious matters, but modern scholars are inclined to criticize, even condemn, Herodotus for his perceived credulity. Kindt notes “a widespread scholarly unhappiness about Herodotus’ use of religion in the *Histories*” and “the scholarly assumption that Herodotus’ use of religious phenomena is a deplorable failure of his otherwise acute analytical skills and skepticism.”²¹⁵ In fact, Herodotus may have included these frequent references to both the Delphic Oracle and its oracles in order to confer their respectability and authority vicariously on both himself as historian and on his new genre of historical writing.²¹⁶

Two sources explicitly claim the Pythia as the speaker of—the one who utters—Apollo’s oracles. Euripides’ *Ion* describes the Pythia in action: “Upon her holy tripod sits the Delphian priestess, who cries aloud to the Greeks whatever Apollo utters.”²¹⁷ Xenophon,

²¹² Brenk 1980: 702.

²¹³ Robertson 1987: 4.

²¹⁴ Dewald 1981: 113.

²¹⁵ Kindt 2006: 45, 46.

²¹⁶ Kindt 2006: 48, 49.

²¹⁷ Eur. *Ion* 91-93, transl. Kovacs.

a historian writing a half-century later, also acknowledges the Pythia as the mouthpiece of Apollo: “Does not the very priestess who sits on the tripod at Delphi divulge the god’s will through a ‘voice’?”²¹⁸ The “voice” or words are not the Pythia’s, but Apollo’s. Apollo speaks through her person. When she prophesies, she serves and functions as his instrument or vehicle of expression. When forms of the first-person pronoun occur in Delphic oracles, they refer to Apollo, not to the Pythia.²¹⁹

The 5th-4th century BCE Greek historians Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon all mention Delphic oracles in their works. Their citations pertaining to Delphic oracles, as listed in Parke and Wormell’s *Index Locorum*,²²⁰ were examined for the purposes of this dissertation in order to determine the speaker, whenever explicitly identified, of each cited oracle. In Herodotus, who is a devotee of divination, the identity of the one who speaks (gives, delivers) a Delphic oracle is the Pythia in 49 instances and “the god” in one. Parke and Wormell suggest that Herodotus (who claims to have conversed with the Dodonaean priestesses²²¹) almost certainly also interviewed members of the Delphic temple personnel, including, presumably, the Pythia.²²² This may explain Herodotus’ inclination to identify the Pythia explicitly as the speaker of Delphic oracles. For Thucydides, who has a reputation for being both wary of divination in general and insistent on the importance of correct interpretation of oracles, the speaker is “the god” on six occasions and Apollo himself on one.²²³ Xenophon, who respects and supports

²¹⁸ Xen. *Ap.* 12, transl. Todd.

²¹⁹ Dodds 1951: 70.

²²⁰ Parke & Wormell 1956b: 260-268.

²²¹ *Hdt.* 2.55.

²²² Parke & Wormell 1956b: viii.

²²³ Marinatos 1981: 138.

divination, identifies the speaker of Delphic oracles as the Pythia once, as “the god” five times, and as Apollo three times.²²⁴ In all instances when the tragic poets Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides explicitly identify the speaker of Delphic oracles, it is Apollo who speaks the oracles in two, six and ten instances respectively. None of the above-mentioned ancient sources ever identify any human agent other than the Pythia as uttering Delphic oracles to enquirers. The significance of the above findings becomes evident in Chapter 5 of this dissertation in which the views of early 20th century scholarship are explored.

Understanding how the early ancient authors of this period viewed the Pythia as a person proves elusive. Herodotus alone of all ancient authors mentions the names of only two Pythias: Aristonice, who delivered the famous “wooden wall” oracle,²²⁵ and Perialla, whose unfortunate claim to fame is discussed below.²²⁶ For the most part, the ancient authors are primarily interested in depicting the Pythia in her official capacity as vehicle of expression for Apollo’s prophecies. In order to prepare for this role as Apollo’s mouthpiece, the Pythia apparently undergoes a purification ritual similar to that mentioned in the previous chapter of this dissertation in connection with the baths of the Didymaeen prophetess. The Pythia is required to bathe in the “waters of Castalia...to moisten the maidenly luxuriance of [her] hair in the service of Phoebus.”²²⁷

²²⁴ Hammond & Scullard 1970: 1143.

²²⁵ Hdt. 7.140.

²²⁶ Hdt. 6.66.

²²⁷ Eur. *Phoen.* 221-225, transl. Kovacs.

The dramatic poets of this period present the Pythia as a mature, rather than a young, woman. Aeschylus depicts her as frankly old. Terrified by the ghastly appearance and unexpected presence of the Furies in the temple of Apollo, the Pythia in his *Eumenides* describes herself in these terms: “[T]hey have taken away my strength and made me unable to stand upright, so that I run on my hands instead of making speed with my legs! A frightened old woman is nothing—or rather no better than a little child!”²²⁸ The Pythia who appears in Euripides’ *Ion* is a woman of definitely mature years. She raised Ion as a baby, and he is now a young man; she calls Ion “my son,”²²⁹ and Ion, in turn, greets the Pythia as “[d]ear mother in all but birth.”²³⁰

Early ancient sources also reveal Pythias who are unusually assertive by ancient standards for feminine behavior. There is a scene in Euripides’ *Ion* in which the Pythia restrains Ion from committing sacrilege. Ion is enraged by Creusa’s murderous attempt on his life and is trying to force Creusa to release her hold on Apollo’s altar to which she clings for sanctuary. Euripides’ Pythia appears authoritative, even forceful, and she succeeds in restraining Ion: “Stop, my son! I, Phoebus’ priestess, chosen out of all the women of Delphi to preserve the tripod’s ancient law, have left the oracular tripod and crossed the threshold...Don’t! Listen to what I have to say.”²³¹ The historian Herodotus, “a writer who was really interested in the Delphic oracle and well acquainted with the traditions preserved at Delphi”²³² and “a sincere believer in oracles,”²³³ also reveals

²²⁸ Aesch. *Eum.* 35-39, transl. Sommerstein.

²²⁹ Eur. *Ion* 1320, transl. Kovacs.

²³⁰ Eur. *Ion* 1324, transl. Kovacs.

²³¹ Eur. *Ion* 1320-1323, 1335, transl. Kovacs.

²³² Parke 1939: 194; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 180.

²³³ Parke & Wormell 1956b: vii.

assertive Pythias on at least two occasions when they are acting in their official capacity as Apollo's mouthpiece. The Pythia's claim to omniscience at the commencement of the reply to Croesus' test oracle constitutes a strongly worded assertion:²³⁴ "Grains of sand I reckon and measure the spaces of ocean, / Hear when dumb men speak, and mark the speech of the silent."²³⁵ In another instance, Theraeans settle on the island of Platea instead of in Libya as recommended by the Pythia. When they return to Delphi and whine about their lack of prosperity, the Pythia speaks scathingly to them: "I have seen Libya's pastures: thine eyes have never beheld them. / Knowest them better than I? then wondrous indeed is thy wisdom."²³⁶ In both instances, the "I" is assumed to refer to Apollo, who is speaking through his mouthpiece, the Pythia, which would serve to explain, to some extent, what would otherwise seem extraordinarily assertive and unusual behavior in a woman addressing male enquirers.

One is forced to wonder just how much autonomy, as in freedom from interference by any other human agency, the Pythia enjoyed and wielded in her delivery of the oracles. If Herodotus' reports of oracular corruption are to be believed—and many modern scholars are frank in their criticism of his perceived credulity²³⁷ in spite of the fact that he is the author of "our major ancient account of archaic Greece" and, as a particularly interested contemporary of Delphi's heyday, he also "has strong claims to historicity"²³⁸—it is always the Pythia who is involved in such cases of corruption. Herodotus records that the exiled Athenian Alcmeonids bribed the Pythia to reply to all Spartan enquirers with a

²³⁴ Parke 1967a: 67; Dobson 1979: 352; Kindt 2006: 38.

²³⁵ Hdt.1.47, transl. Godley.

²³⁶ Hdt. 4.156-157, transl. Godley.

²³⁷ Pearson 1941: 337, 342, 344, 346.

²³⁸ Price 1999: 74.

command to first free Athens from the Pisistradids; Herodotus also claims that the Spartan Cleomenes attempted to suborn a Pythia, Perialla, but she was found out and dismissed from office and her local coconspirator, Cobon, exiled from Delphi.²³⁹ These accounts appear to support the Pythia as being aware of, and having sole control over, her utterances from (what she actually said when seated on) the tripod.

In summary, early Greek sources portray the Pythia, through whom Apollo speaks, as a mature woman, capable of autonomous and confident, even assertive, behavior, in particular when acting in her capacity as Apollo's mouthpiece.

Delphic Priesthood

How early ancient sources depict the structure, duties, and functions of the Delphic priesthood must be considered because their accounts tend to reinforce the above depiction of the Pythia's role.

A 6th century BCE *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* is the earliest source for information concerning how Apollo selects and imports priests to serve in his temple in Delphi:

Then Phoibos Apollo started to consider what men he should bring in as ministers to serve him at rocky Pytho. While he was pondering this, he noticed a swift ship on the wine-faced sea, and in it were many fine men, Cretans from Cnossos the city of Minos, the ones who perform sacrifices for the god, and who announce the rulings of Phoibos Apollo of the golden sword, whatever he says when he gives his oracles from the bay tree down in the glens of Parnassus.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Hdt. 5.63, 6.66.

²⁴⁰ *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 388-396, transl. West.

Disregarding some modern scholars' dismissive description of these "fine men" as merely "the crew of a Cretan vessel,"²⁴¹ "some Cretan merchants,"²⁴² and "Cretan sailors,"²⁴³ it is still difficult to know how to interpret the description of these Cretan travelers as "the ones who perform sacrifices for the god." When Farnell describes the Cretans as a "guild of specially trained priests from Crete," Farnell obviously interprets these words as a reference to their previous duties as priests on Crete before embarking on their fateful voyage.²⁴⁴ However, the terms "Phoibos Apollo" and "Parnassus," must surely refer to Delphi. Therefore, the whole of the second half of the sentence ("the ones who perform sacrifices for the god, and who announce the rulings of Phoibos Apollo of the golden sword, whatever he says when he gives his oracles from the bay tree down in the glens of Parnassus") must be a reference to Apollo's description of the Cretans' future role in the Delphic Oracle. Some modern scholars interpret this passage as a reference to an early pre-Pythian era when Apollo spoke through a laurel tree at Delphi just as Zeus spoke through an oak tree at Dodona.²⁴⁵ Miller further resolves the issue by explaining this passage as "a parenthetical flash-forward to 'present general' time," which "reveals the successful outcome of the quest," an interpretation supported by Richardson as "an anticipation of what is to come later."²⁴⁶

After the Cretans express concern at Apollo's seizing of their ship,

²⁴¹ Cary 1965: 625.

²⁴² Flacelière 1965: 35.

²⁴³ Lloyd-Jones 1976: 62.

²⁴⁴ Farnell 1907: 185.

²⁴⁵ Parke 1939: 6-7, 24; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 3, 25; Parke 1967a: 41; Morrison 1981: 99; Smith & Pearcy 1981: 24.

²⁴⁶ Miller 1986: 91-92; Richardson 2010: 135.

Apollo answered them: “Sirs, who dwelt in wooded Cnossos before, now you will return no more to your lovely city and your fine individual homes and your dear wives: you will occupy my rich temple here, which is widely honored by men. For I am Zeus’ son. I declare myself Apollo; and I brought you here over the mighty main not with any ill intent, but you are to occupy my rich temple here, which is greatly honored by all men, and you shall know the gods’ intentions. By their will you shall be held in honor for all time...”

He led them and showed them the holy sanctum and the rich temple, and their hearts were stirred within them. The leader of the Cretans turned to him and asked:

“Lord, as you have brought us far from our dear ones and our native land—so it must have pleased your heart—how are we going to feed ourselves now. That’s what we want you to consider. This land is not attractive as a bearer of harvest, nor rich in grassland, so as us to live off it and serve the public at the same time.”

Zeus’ son Apollo smiled at them and said, “O Foolish men of misplaced suffering, who want anxiety, hard toil, and heartache! I will give you a simple answer to bear in mind. Each of you must just keep a knife in his right hand and keep slaughtering sheep: they will be available in abundance, as many as the thronging peoples bring for me. Watch over my temple, and welcome the peoples as they gather here.”²⁴⁷

In short, the Cretans are to serve Apollo, maintain his temple, receive enquirers, and slaughter sacrificial animals. In return, Apollo promises them a prosperous living. The possibility of very early contact or trade with Crete cannot be discounted. Archeological evidence supports the presence of Cretan artifacts in archaic Delphi as early as 750 BCE.²⁴⁸

Other early ancient literary sources expand on this depiction of the Delphic priesthood. Herodotus, speaking of the threat that the Persian invasion presents to Delphi, mentions a certain Aceratus by name and calls him *prophetes*, which Godley translates as “prophet,”

²⁴⁷ *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 475-486, 523-539, transl. West.

²⁴⁸ Forrest 1958: 68; McLeod 1961: 317; Cary 1965: 625; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 62; Forrest 1982a: 308; Morgan 1990: 142; Richardson 2010: 135.

and to which translation Liddell and Scott add the term “interpreter.”²⁴⁹ However, it is Euripides who is our main source for the duties of the Delphic priesthood. Although Euripides is a dramatic poet as opposed to an historian, his contributions warrant consideration for the reasons discussed earlier in connection with the Pythia and her role. Euripides concurs with the earlier *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*: the function of the Delphic priesthood entails custodial duties involving the temple precinct.²⁵⁰ Just as the Pythia purifies herself to prepare for her role as Apollo’s spokesperson, so the members of the Delphic priesthood prepare to serve as Apollo’s servants by participating in their own preparatory purification rituals. Ion, a youthful—and surprisingly gregarious and self-assured—temple attendant, instructs the Delphic priesthood as follows:

So you Delphian servants of Apollo, go to the silvery streams of Castalia; and when you have bathed in the pure water, return to the temple. Keep pious silence and guard the goodness of your lips, so that to those who wish to consult the god you may utter words of good omen.²⁵¹

Apparently, physical purification must be coupled with attitudes and speech befitting servants of Apollo.²⁵² The priesthood’s duties also include instructing enquirers in the pre-consultation sacrifices of holy cake and sheep.²⁵³ Both the Delphic priesthood and enquirers are permitted to stand near the altars. The Delphic priesthood acts as spokesman for enquirers (especially foreigners).²⁵⁴ In addition, “inside the temple others who sit near the tripod will handle matters, the Delphian noblemen chosen by lot.”²⁵⁵ The probable identity of these aristocratic members of the Delphic priesthood “chosen by lot”

²⁴⁹ Hdt. 8.37, transl. Godley; Liddell & Scott 1889: 704.

²⁵⁰ Eur. *Ion* 54-55.

²⁵¹ Eur. *Ion* 94-99, transl. Kovacs.

²⁵² Eur. *Ion* 369-372.

²⁵³ Eur. *Ion* 226-229.

²⁵⁴ Eur. *Andr.* 1100-1105; Eur. *Ion* 334-335.

²⁵⁵ Eur. *Ion* 414-416, transl. Kovacs.

is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation. In general, early ancient accounts depict the priesthood engaged in a supportive, not oracular, role in the Delphic Oracle.

Incidentally, the 5th century dramatist Sophocles introduces the theme of possible Delphic oracular corruption in his play *Oedipus Tyrannus*. After Creon accuses Oedipus of murdering Laius, Iocaste tries to reassure and calm Oedipus:

[L]isten to me and learn that nothing that is mortal is possessed of the prophetic art! I shall show you in brief the proof of this. An oracle once came to Laius. I will not say from Phoebus himself, but from his servants, saying that it would be his fate to die at the hands of the son who should be the child of him and me.²⁵⁶

It is unclear who exactly, Delphic priesthood or Pythia or both, these “servants” are to whom Iocaste is referring. What is apparent is that she suspects, or seeks to suggest, that these individuals are capable of fabricating or corrupting prophecies. Ironically, she bases her reassurance of Oedipus on the premise that the respective statements of Laius and the Delphic Oracle (namely that Oedipus murdered Laius and that Laius was murdered by his own son) cannot both be true. Of course, the tragedy of the play rests on the, as yet, unrevealed, truth that Oedipus is indeed both Laius’ murderer and son and is thus guilty, without intent, of the unpardonable crime of patricide (and, incidentally, incest with his mother Iocaste).

Chain of Communication

Early ancient authors depict the Pythia and Delphic priesthood’s respective contributions during a mantic session clearly and simply. In Herodotus, the Pythia’s delivery of oracles

²⁵⁶ Soph. *OT* 711-712, transl. Lloyd-Jones.

is oral. In essence, the enquirer puts his question to the Pythia, and Apollo answers the enquirer through the person of the Pythia. It is also noteworthy that no early ancient source ever explicitly states that the Delphic priesthood is responsible for the announcement, recording, or interpretation of Apollo's oracles.

Herodotus does mention two written oracles, but, in both cases, the enquirers are state officials who themselves write the oracles down in order to facilitate their duty to report the oracles accurately to those they represent. The Lydians themselves record Croesus' famous "test oracle": "Having written down this inspired utterance of the Pythian priestess, the Lydians went away back to Sardis."²⁵⁷ Similarly, at the start of the Persian War, the Athenian delegation records its second oracle, the equally famous "wooden wall" oracle: "This being in truth and appearance a more merciful answer than the first, they wrote it down and departed back to Athens. So when the messengers had left Delphi and laid the oracle before the people, there was much enquiry concerning its meaning."²⁵⁸ It is significant that it is the Athenian people, not anyone else (including members of the Delphic priesthood), who assume responsibility for the oracle's interpretation. Both these instances also negate the necessity for the priesthood to intercede between the Pythia and enquirers. Other than the Lydians and Athenians themselves, no one else is required to reduce the Pythia's words to a written form and to convey it to, or interpret it for, enquirers.

²⁵⁷ Hdt. 1.48, transl. Godley.

²⁵⁸ Hdt. 7.142, transl. Godley.

Adyton

The last issue that requires consideration is the location in which the oracular consultation takes place because location dictates who is able to hear and see whom or what.

Herodotus states that “the Lydians entered the hall [*megaron*] to inquire of the god.”²⁵⁹ Herodotus also describes how “Lycurgus, a notable Spartan, visited the oracle at Delphi, and when he entered the temple hall [*megaron*], straightway the priestess gave him this response.”²⁶⁰ Thirdly, Herodotus says that, “when [the Athenians] had performed all due rites at the temple and sat them down in the inner hall [*megaron*], the priestess, whose name was Aristonice, gave them this answer.”²⁶¹ Finally, Herodotus claims that “the prophet, whose name was Aceratus, saw certain sacred arms, that no man might touch without sacrilege, brought out of the chamber within and laid before the shrine [*megaron*].”²⁶²

Presumably either this *megaron* is the *adyton* (literally, not to be entered), the inner sanctuary, where the Pythia utters the oracles, or perhaps the *adyton* proper, where the Pythia sits on the tripod, is part of this *megaron*. The enquirer is present at the time of oracular delivery. Perhaps members of the Delphic priesthood are, too. The enquirer and Pythia appear to be able to hear one another; in each of the above instances, the enquirer

²⁵⁹ Hdt. 1.47, transl. Godley.

²⁶⁰ Hdt. 1.65, transl. Godley.

²⁶¹ Hdt. 7.140, transl. Godley.

²⁶² Hdt. 8.37, transl. Godley.

asks his question, and the Pythia utters Apollo's prophetic response to the enquirer. Whether the enquirer and Pythia can see one another is not explicitly stated. However, Herodotus relates how, when "Lycurgus, a notable Spartan...entered the temple hall, straightway the priestess gave him this response."²⁶³ Similarly, when Eetion visits the Delphic Oracle, "straightway as he entered the Pythian priestess spoke these verses to him."²⁶⁴ These passages seem to imply that the Pythia, already seated on the tripod, could see and recognize the enquirers—in fact she greets each by name—as they approach her.²⁶⁵ Alternatively, the Pythia's (or rather Apollo's) oracular omniscience may be at work here.

Unfortunately, when the Christians demolished the remains of Apollo's temple in the 4th century BCE, they targeted and utterly obliterated the suspected site of the *adyton* in the southwestern corner of the temple.²⁶⁶ To usurp Fontenrose's Didymaeon epitaph from the previous chapter of this dissertation and to paraphrase it to cover Delphi's demise, the Christians succeeded in finally annihilating what fire, Persians, earthquake, Phocians, and Gauls failed to destroy. Therefore, archeological evidence, obtained by the French archeologists excavating the Delphic site at the end of the 19th century CE, is unable to either affirm or deny the above ancient literary evidence.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Hdt. 1.65, transl. Godley.

²⁶⁴ Hdt. 5.92, transl. Godley.

²⁶⁵ Fontenrose 1978: 226.

²⁶⁶ Price 1999: 166.

²⁶⁷ Parke 1939: 20; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 21, 28; Flacelière 1965: 43; Parke 1967a: 147; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 73.

In summary, pre-3rd century BCE ancient sources present the role of the Pythia as one in which she is the sole speaker of Apollo's oracles directly to enquirers without intermediaries. Her role is central to any oracular consultation. In contrast, the Delphic priesthood's role is depicted as supportive. The priesthood's members perform the preliminary sacrifice on behalf of the day's enquirers, guide enquirers through their individual pre-consultation rituals, preside over the mantic session, and attend the Pythia as she prophesies from the tripod.

Chapter 4:

Post-4th Century BCE Greek and Roman Views of the Pythia's Role

In this chapter, the works of Greek and Roman ancient authors from the 3rd century BCE through the 4th century CE—poets, historians, geographers, philosophers, and other prose authors—are examined for further evidence of ancient views concerning the Pythia and her role, the Delphic priesthood and its role, the chain of communication during a Delphic consultation, and the *adyton*. Two new issues, not raised in the previous chapter, emerge: the sources of the Pythia's inspiration, and verse oracles. The ultimate goal of examination of evidence in this chapter remains clarification of the Pythia's role during the oracular consultation and of her contribution to the chain of communication. This chapter's ancient sources describe the operation of the Delphic Oracle in the period following its acme. Nevertheless, when the ancient sources on a topic are both finite and more contemporary with the Delphic Oracle than modern commentaries are, all ancient evidence warrants consideration.

The 1st century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus and geographer Strabo “had no great personal acquaintance with it [the Delphic Oracle], and simply reproduced from literary sources various prophecies which concerned their historical or geographical subjects.”²⁶⁸ However, the 2nd century CE geographer “Pausanias, the guide–book writer” and “a sincere and honest writer with a special interest in oracles,” while he also consulted literary sources, both visited Delphi in person and appears to have included information

²⁶⁸ Parke & Wormell 1956b: viii.

gleaned from the Delphic sanctuary guides as well.²⁶⁹ Another of this era's authors, 1st-2nd century CE Plutarch, "the one late author who knew Delphi well"²⁷⁰ because of his unique (among the ancient sources consulted for this dissertation) position as a member of the Delphic priesthood, was able to provide a wide range of snippets of information not mentioned by other sources. One wishes that, as an insider, he could have shared more, much more, about the workings of the Delphic Oracle. Perhaps he did not know more than he shared, or he was possibly too devoted and loyal to the Delphic Oracle to divulge more than he did share.²⁷¹ It is also possible that his loyalty led him to include information and interpretations that served his own bias and loyalties rather a reality that the intervening centuries now conceal from us.

Pythia

Several authors of this later period in the existence of the Delphic Oracle comment on the possible origin of a female Pythia functioning as Apollo's mouthpiece. Strabo's information is as follows: "They say that the first to become Pythian priestess [*Pythia*] was Phemonoe."²⁷² Plutarch for his part combines Aeschylus' and Euripides' foundation myths (see previous chapter of this dissertation): after slaying the Python, "he [Apollo] took over the oracle which had been guarded...by Themis."²⁷³ Pausanias omits Phoebe but otherwise repeats Aeschylus' foundation myth. Pausanias then concurs with Strabo that the "most prevalent view, however, is that Phemonoe was the first prophetess

²⁶⁹ Paus. 8.8.10-8.9.1; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 324; 1956b: x; Parke 1967a: 128.

²⁷⁰ Oppé 1904: 215.

²⁷¹ Littleton 1986: 82, 87.

²⁷² Strab. 9.3.5, transl. Jones.

²⁷³ Plut. *De def. or.* 421c, transl. Babbitt.

[*promantis*] of the god, and first sang in hexameter verse.” However, Pausanias subsequently confuses the issue somewhat by adding that it was a Hyperborean, Olen, who “was the first to prophesy and the first to chant the hexameter oracles....Tradition, however, reports no other man as prophet, but makes mention of prophetesses only.”²⁷⁴ For the most part, Delphi’s earlier feminine founding myths are upheld, supporting a female Pythia in the role of Apollo’s prophetess.

A sampling of the variety of terms used by this chapter’s ancient authors to designate the Pythia follows. Strabo, Plutarch, and Iamblichus call her “*prophetis*.”²⁷⁵ Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Plutarch, and Pausanias also refer to her as “*Pythia*,”²⁷⁶ which the Loeb Classical Library translators consulted for this dissertation usually render as “Pythian priestess.” Pausanias also calls her “*promantis*.”²⁷⁷ As in the case of earlier ancient sources, the variety of terminology does not appear to support any particular semantic significance for the Pythia’s role.²⁷⁸

If the same rules of analysis employed in the previous chapter of this dissertation (i.e. examination of Parke and Wormell’s *Index Locorum* in order to determine the identity of the speaker of the oracle in each instance) are applied to this chapter’s ancient sources, the results are as follows. In Diodorus Siculus’ references, the Pythia utters the oracles in 24 instances, Apollo himself in two, “the god” in five, and “the Oracle” in four. Strabo

²⁷⁴ Paus. 10.5.6-8, transl. Jones.

²⁷⁵ Strabo 9.3.5, transl. Jones; Plut. *De def. or.* 414b, transl. Babbitt; Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11, transl. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell.

²⁷⁶ Diod. Sic. 15.18.2, transl. Oldfather; Strabo 9.3.5, transl. Jones; Plut. *De def. or.* 412c, transl. Babbitt; Paus. 10.14.5, transl. Jones.

²⁷⁷ Paus. 10.13.8, transl. Jones.

²⁷⁸ Maurizio 1993: 26.

explicitly identifies the speaker of a Delphic Oracle only five times: Apollo twice, and “the god” three times. In Plutarch, the Pythia speaks the oracles on 27 occasions, Apollo on five, and “the god” on 17. Pausanias has the Pythia speak the oracle 38 times, Apollo twice, “the god” 11 times, and “the Oracle” seven times. Finally, an analysis of the references of Oenomaus, a *c.* 120 CE Cynic philosopher (as quoted in Eusebius, an anti-pagan Christian apologist writing almost two centuries after Oenomaus), reveals that Oenomaus identifies Apollo as the speaker of nine of the oracles that are quoted in Eusebius’ work *Preparation for the Gospel*. As with earlier ancient sources, none of the post-4th century BCE authors consulted for this chapter state that any human being other than the Pythia speaks the Delphic oracles to enquirers. The importance of this finding is addressed in the following chapter of this dissertation.

Where the earlier ancient authors offered limited information about the Pythia herself, later ancient authors have more to proffer about the qualities for which Pythias were chosen and the standards to which practicing Pythias were expected to adhere. The underlying motivation appears to be a Pythia’s worthiness to serve as Apollo’s mouthpiece and the need to preserve the ritual purity appropriate for any woman serving Apollo in this capacity. For example, Diodorus Siculus offers the following information about the dangers inherent in choosing a too-young and too-attractive young woman to serve as Pythia:

It is said that in ancient times virgins delivered the oracles because virgins have their natural innocence intact and are in the natural case as Artemis: for indeed virgins were alleged to be well-suited to guard the secrecy of disclosures made by oracles. In more recent times, however, people say that Echebrates the Thessalian, having arrived at the shrine and beheld the virgin who uttered the oracle, became enamoured of her because of her beauty, carried her away with him and violated

her; and that the Delphians because of this deplorable occurrence passed a law that in future a virgin should no longer prophesy but that an elderly woman of fifty should declare the oracles and that she should be dressed in the costume of a virgin, as a sort of reminder of the prophetess of olden times.²⁷⁹

Incidentally, Diodorus Siculus' mature Pythia resembles Aeschylus and Euripides' portrayals in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Two centuries later, Pausanias offers three stories that relate to the themes of the above tale as related by Diodorus Siculus. Pausanias' first two accounts provide parallels that further illustrate the necessity and importance of maintaining respectful appearances of ritual purity in religious practices. First, at a temple of Apollo in Argos in the Peloponnese, "the oracle acts in the following way. There is a woman who prophesies, being debarred from intercourse with a man."²⁸⁰ Second, at a temple to Gaia in Aegira in Achaëa, "[t]he woman who from time to time is priestess henceforth remains chaste, and before her election must not have had intercourse with more than one man. The test applied is drinking bull's blood. Any woman who may chance not to speak the truth is immediately punished as a result of this test."²⁸¹

Pausanias' third account also parallels Diodorus Siculus in that it is a cautionary tale that warns of the danger of, and temptations offered by, young women serving in temples, in this case at a sanctuary of Artemis in Arcadia:

[T]he office of priestess to the goddess was still always held by a girl who was a virgin. The maiden persisted in resisting the advances of Aristocrates, but at last, when she had taken refuge in the sanctuary, she was outraged by him near the image of Artemis. When the crime came to be generally known, the Arcadians stoned the culprit, and also changed the rule for the future; as priestess of Artemis

²⁷⁹ Diod. Sic. 16.26.6, transl. Sherman.

²⁸⁰ Paus. 2.24.1, transl. Jones.

²⁸¹ Paus. 7.25.13, transl. Jones.

they now appoint, not a virgin, but a woman who has had enough of intercourse with men.²⁸²

In summary, while an ideal virgin servant of the gods embodies the concept of suitable purity, her very youth and attractiveness may offer temptations to men who must interact with her while consulting the gods. In contrast, an older woman who has had legitimate, yet limited, past sexual experience, but who is now past the age of either experiencing or offering sexual temptation, is preferable in practice because she neither feels nor presents any element of sexual distraction while performing her duties. Her current state of ritual sexual purity establishes her worthiness to serve as the vessel through which the god Apollo elects to make his will known to enquirers.

Not unexpectedly, it is Plutarch, the Delphic priest, who offers the fullest picture of the simple origins and upbringing of the ideal Pythia:

[T]he maiden who now serves the god here was born of as lawful and honourable wedlock as anyone, and her life has been in all respects proper; but, having been brought up in the home of poor peasants, she brings nothing with her as the result of technical skill or of any other expertness or faculty, as she goes down into the shrine. On the contrary...this girl, inexperienced and uninformed about practically everything, a pure, virgin soul, becomes the associate of the god.²⁸³

Plutarch presents the profile of the perfect Pythia as a respectable, uneducated, and unsophisticated peasant. However, Plutarch's "girl" does not quite accord with Diodorus Siculus' "elderly woman of fifty."

In the Delphic Oracle's heyday, the physical toll taken on the Pythia on consultation days appears have been considerable. Plutarch informs us that, "when Greece, since God so

²⁸² Paus. 8.5.12-13, transl. Jones.

²⁸³ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 405c-d, transl. Babbitt.

willed, had grown strong in cities and the place was thronged with people, they used to employ two prophetic priestesses who were sent down in turn; and a third was appointed to be held in reserve.”²⁸⁴ Perhaps the increase in number of oracular consultation days also contributed to the demand for several concurrent Pythias to meet the need: “For only recently have monthly oracles been given to inquirers; formerly the prophetic priestess [*Pythia*] was wont to give responses but once a year on this day.”²⁸⁵ Plutarch then points out that “today there is one priestess [*prophetis*] and we do not complain, for she meets every need. There is no reason, therefore, to blame the god: the exercise of the prophetic art which continues at the present day is sufficient for all, and sends away all with their desires fulfilled.”²⁸⁶

As in the previous chapter of this dissertation, later ancient reports of oracular corruption always involved bribery of the Pythia. Diodorus Siculus says of Lysander the Spartan that “he attempted to bribe the prophetess [*prophetis*] in Delphi.”²⁸⁷ Diodorus Siculus then proceeds to somewhat complicate matters by adding that Lysander “could not win over the attendants of the oracle, despite the large sum he promised them.”²⁸⁸ He does not elaborate on the identity of these plural “attendants.” Pausanias also notes one case of bribery of the Pythia (mentioned previously by Herodotus, too), which serves as evidence supporting her as the autonomous speaker of the oracles: “Cleomenes...bribed the Pythian prophetess [*prophetis*]...and the prophetess [*promantis*] gave them a response which

²⁸⁴ Plut. *De def. or.* 414b, transl. Babbitt.

²⁸⁵ Plut. *Quaest. Graec.* 292f, transl. Babbitt.

²⁸⁶ Plut. *De def. or.* 414b-c, transl. Babbitt.

²⁸⁷ Diod. Sic. 14.13.3, transl. Oldfather.

²⁸⁸ Diod. Sic. 14.13.4, transl. Oldfather.

favoured the designs of Cleomenes...Cleomenes met his end in a fit of madness...the Delphians put it down to the bribes he gave the Pythian prophetess.”²⁸⁹

As regards the Pythia’s prophetic inspiration, Plutarch describes how Apollo engenders her inspiration: “ [Apollo] puts into her mind only the visions, and creates a light in her soul in regard to the future; for inspiration is precisely this.”²⁹⁰ However, there is no earlier precedent for later ancient sources’ claims that two specific events have to occur before a consultation can take place and result in an oracle: Apollo must indicate that the day is auspicious for consultation, and then the Pythia must become inspired or enthused in order to prophesy. Earlier authors made no mention of these notions of auspiciousness and sources of inspiration (other than Apollo himself) as necessary precursors to consultation.

Apollo achieves the first objective (of indicating auspiciousness) by causing the sacrificial goat offered on behalf of all the day’s enquirers to tremble when the officiating priest pours water on it. Its trembling indicates Apollo’s presence. Plutarch explains:

And what is the significance of the libations poured over the victims and the refusal to give responses unless the whole victim from the hoof-joints up is seized with a trembling and quivering, as the libation is poured over it. Shaking the head is not enough, as in other sacrifices, but the tossing and quivering must extend to all parts of the animal alike accompanied by a tremulous sound: and unless this takes place they say the oracle is not functioning, and do not even bring in the prophetic priestess [*Pythia*].²⁹¹

Plutarch elaborates: “For when the priests [*hiereis*] and the holy men [*hosioi*] say they are offering sacrifice and pouring the libation over the victim and observing its movements

²⁸⁹ Paus. 3.4.3-5, transl. Jones & Ormerod.

²⁹⁰ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 397c, transl. Babbitt.

²⁹¹ Plut. *De def. or.* 435b-c, transl. Babbitt.

and its trembling, of what else do they take this to be a sign save that the god is in his holy temple?”²⁹² The appropriate behavior of the sacrificial goat indicates to both temple staff and enquirers that Apollo is present and willing to prophesy. The occasion is auspicious for divination, namely consultation of the will of the god.

Meanwhile, the Pythia prepares herself to serve as Apollo’s mouthpiece by performing a number of purification rituals. To the ritual bathing in the Castalia mentioned by Euripides in the previous chapter of this dissertation, Lucan adds her wearing a laurel wreath,²⁹³ Plutarch adds her burning “laurel and barley meal” on the altar,²⁹⁴ and Lucian adds her “drinking from “the holy well”²⁹⁵ (possibly the Cassotis)²⁹⁶ and chewing laurel leaves.²⁹⁷ The Pythian purification rites (and the sources of her prophetic inspiration discussed below) recall Iamblichus’ claims (see Chapter 2 of this dissertation) of purification and inspirational rites for the Clarian prophet (withdrawal, fasting for a day, and drinking from a subterranean sacred spring) and for the Didymaeon prophetess (withdrawal, fasting for three days, bathing, grasping a god-given staff, sitting on an axle, and dipping her hem or feet in, and/or inhaling vapors from, a sacred stream).²⁹⁸

Later ancient sources propose that, once the day has been declared auspicious for consultation of Apollo, the Pythia is able to achieve the second objective of the day, divine inspiration, from one or both of two possible sources: the tripod, and/or the chasm.

²⁹² Plut. *De def. or.* 437a, transl. Babbitt.

²⁹³ Luc. 5.142-144, 154-155, 170-171, transl. Duff.

²⁹⁴ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 397a, transl. Babbitt.

²⁹⁵ Lucian, *Bis Acc.* 1, transl. Harmon.

²⁹⁶ Paus. 10.24.7, transl. Jones.

²⁹⁷ Lucian, *Bis Acc.* 1, transl. Harmon.

²⁹⁸ Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11.

In the previous chapter of this dissertation, Euripides made three references to this tripod: Apollo sits on the tripod,²⁹⁹ the Pythia prophesies from the tripod,³⁰⁰ and the Delphic priesthood sits near the tripod inside the temple.³⁰¹ Xenophon also made reference to the tripod: “Does not the very priestess who sits on the tripod at Delphi divulge the god’s will through a ‘voice’?”³⁰²

Diodorus Siculus includes the origin of this tripod in a very full discussion concerning the chasm as the source of Pythian inspiration:

It is said that in ancient times goats discovered the oracular shrine, on which account even to this day the Delphians use goats preferably when they consult the oracle. They say that the manner of its discovery was the following. There is a chasm at this place where now is situated what is known as the "forbidden" sanctuary, and as goats had been wont to feed about this because Delphi had not as yet been settled, invariably any goat that approached the chasm and peered into it would leap about in an extraordinary fashion and utter a sound quite different from what it was formerly wont to emit. The herdsman in charge of the goats marvelled at the strange phenomenon and having approached the chasm and peeped down it to discover what it was, had the same experience as the goats, for the goats began to act like beings possessed and the goatherd also began to foretell future events. After this as the report was bruited among the people of the vicinity concerning the experience of those who approached the chasm, an increasing number of persons visited the place and, as they all tested it because of its miraculous character, whosoever approached the spot became inspired. For these reasons the oracle came to be regarded as a marvel and to be considered the prophecy-giving shrine of Earth. For some time all who wished to obtain a prophecy approached the chasm and made their prophetic replies to one another; but later, since many were leaping down into the chasm under the influence of their frenzy and all disappeared, it seemed best to the dwellers in that region, in order to eliminate the risk, to station one woman there as a single prophetess for all and to have the oracles told through her. And for her a contrivance was devised which she could safely mount, then become inspired and give prophecies to those who so desired. And this contrivance has three supports and hence was called a tripod, and, I dare say, all the bronze tripods which are constructed even to this day are made in imitation of this contrivance. In what manner, then, the oracle

²⁹⁹ Eur. *IT* 1253-4.

³⁰⁰ Eur. *Ion* 91-2.

³⁰¹ Eur. *Ion* 415.

³⁰² Xen. *Ap.* 12, transl. Todd.

was discovered and for what reasons the tripod was devised I think I have told at sufficient length.³⁰³

This chasm affects everyone who approaches it. The one woman who is chosen to sit on the tripod is presumably the first Pythia. She is offered the security and protection of a tripod that straddles the chasm, preventing her from falling into the chasm while inspired and prophesying.

This very full description of the chasm as a source of inspiration appears only now, apparently for the very first time, in an ancient source. One has to wonder why, if the event is such an ancient tale, it took so long before it was recorded. However, once told, the source of the Pythia's inspiration has subsequently seized the imagination of not only other ancient authors but also modern classical scholars, and even modern scholars from non-classical academic disciplines. Therefore, in spite of its delayed report in ancient sources, the chasm and the persistent controversy surrounding it are pertinent to any subsequent discussion of the Pythia and her role.

Diodorus Siculus' Roman contemporary, Cicero, presumably refers to this same chasm: "The Pythian priestess [*Pythia*] at Delphi was inspired by the power of the Earth."³⁰⁴ Yet another 1st century Greek author, Strabo, introduces the idea of breath emanating from an opening in the earth and thereby providing the source of Pythian inspiration: "They say that the seat of the oracle is a cave that is hollowed out deep down in the earth, with a rather narrow mouth, from which rises breath that inspires a divine frenzy; and that over the mouth is placed a high tripod, mounting which the Pythian priestess [*Pythia*] receives

³⁰³ Diod. Sic. 16.26.1-5, transl. Sherman.

³⁰⁴ Cic. *Div.* 1.26.79, transl. Falconer.

the breath and then utters oracles in both verse and prose.”³⁰⁵ Plutarch contributes his own version of the chasm as source of inspiration:

[T]hey record that here the power hovering about this spot was first made manifest when a certain shepherd fell in by accident and later gave forth inspired utterances, which those who came into contact with him at first treated with disdain; but later, when what he had foretold came to pass, they were amazed. The most learned of the people of Delphi still preserve the tradition of his name, which they say was Coretas.³⁰⁶

A century later, geographer Pausanias adds his own snippet of a summary to the above mix: “I have heard too that shepherds feeding their flocks came upon the oracle, were inspired by the vapour, and prophesied as the mouthpiece of Apollo.”³⁰⁷

Iamblichus, quoting his slightly older contemporary and teacher Porphyry, states that “others [are inspired] while sitting near apertures like the women who prophesy at Delphi.” Iamblichus then describes the Pythia’s source of prophetic inspiration:

The prophetess [*prophetis*] at Delphi, however, whether she gives oracles to human beings from a subtle and fiery spirit brought up from an aperture, or prophesies in the innermost sanctuary while seated on a bronze stool with three legs...she thus gives herself absolutely to the divine spirit...And as a result of both these preparations she becomes wholly the god’s possession.³⁰⁸

The Pythia, when enthused, does not speak as herself or of her own volition. It is the god within her who speaks through her person.

To summarize all the above contributions, the Pythia, seated on the tripod, is inspired to utter Apollo’s prophecies by inhaling the breath, vapor, or exhalation issuing from a

³⁰⁵ Strab. 9.3.5, transl. Jones.

³⁰⁶ Plut. *De def. or.* 433c-d, transl. Babbitt.

³⁰⁷ Paus. 10.5.7, transl. Jones.

³⁰⁸ Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11, transl. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell.

chasm, narrow-mouthed cave, or aperture in the earth. This is subsequently referred to, by modern scholars and in this dissertation, as the chasm-and-vapor theory.

Incidentally, at a time when all ancient oracular sites were in decline, Cicero and Plutarch offer one possible explanation for the Delphic Oracle's decline that is linked to this chasm-and-vapor theory: the major earthquake of 373 BCE, which may have occluded the chasm and blocked its exhalations. Cicero makes the following observation: "Possibly, too, those subterranean exhalations which used to kindle the soul of the Pythian priestess with divine inspiration have gradually vanished in the long lapse of time; just as...some rivers...have changed their course into other channels."³⁰⁹ A century later, Plutarch explains that "in the case of the powers associated with the earth it is reasonable that there should come to pass disappearances [presumably of the breath, vapor or exhalation mentioned above] in one place and generation in another place, and elsewhere shifting of location and, from some other source, changes in current."³¹⁰ Plutarch then elaborates: "[E]specially when the earth is shaken beneath by an earthquake and suffers subsidence and ruinous confusion in its depths, the exhalations shift their site or find completely blind outlets, as in this place they say that there are still traces of that great earthquake which overthrew the city."³¹¹ These theories of Cicero and Plutarch are especially intriguing because the French archeologists who excavated Apollo's temple at Delphi found no trace of evidence of a chasm at the supposed site of the *adyton*.³¹² The relevance of this conundrum is addressed in Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

³⁰⁹ Cic. *Div.* 1.19.38, transl. Falconer.

³¹⁰ Plut. *De def. or.* 433f, transl. Babbitt.

³¹¹ Plut. *De def. or.* 434c, transl. Babbitt.

³¹² Fontenrose 1978: 202-203.

Second-century CE Greek satirist Lucian contributes the last word on other possible sources of Pythian inspiration—drinking water from a particular source and chewing laurel, in addition to the tripod—in his portrayal of a stressed Apollo desperately attempting to fulfill multiple commitments:

Apollo, again, has taken up a very active profession, and has been deafened almost completely by people besetting him with requests for prophecies. One moment he has to be in Delphi; the next, he runs to Colophon; from there he crosses to Xanthus, and again at full speed to Delos or to Branchidae. In a word, wherever his prophetess, after drinking from the holy well and chewing laurel and setting the tripod ashake, bids him appear, there is no delaying—he must present himself immediately to reel off his prophecies, or else all is up with his reputation in the profession.³¹³

Three ancient sources are responsible for creating an incorrect image of how an enthused Pythia behaves during a consultation that have earned her a reputation that she does not deserve unless all other ancient sources' depiction of her essentially calm demeanor and “sober prophetic manner”³¹⁴ are to be rejected. Chronologically, the first (indirect) depiction is by 1st century BCE Roman poet Virgil in his epic patriotic poem the *Aeneid*. Virgil's portrayal is indirect because it pertains to the Sibyl, not the Pythia. However, Virgil's description of the Sibyl is relevant because it subsequently impacts Lucan's portrayal of the Pythia. Midway through Virgil's epic, Virgil's hero Aeneas visits the Sibyl in Cumae before speaking with his deceased father in the Underworld. Virgil accounts how the Sibyl's “bosom heaves, her heart swells with wild frenzy” and how “she storms wildly in the cavern.” His describes her “raving mouth” and “raving lips.”³¹⁵

³¹³ Lucian, *Bis Acc.* 1, transl. Harmon.

³¹⁴ Dietrich 1980: 239.

³¹⁵ Verg. *Aen.* 6.48-49, 77-78, 80, 102, transl. Rushton Fairclough.

The second description is by Roman 1st century CE poet Lucan in his epic poem, *The Civil War*, which includes a consultation forced on a reluctant Pythia by Appius Claudius, the indecisive Roman governor of Greece. Lucan's account of the Pythia's behavior is almost certainly based on Virgil's depiction of the Sibyl:³¹⁶ "[I]f the god enters the bosom of any, untimely death is her penalty, or her reward, for having received him; because the human frame is broken up by the sting and surge of that frenzy." Proof of genuine enthused inspiration produces an "inarticulate cry of indistinct utterance," a "tremulous cry," "bristling hair," and wildly unrestrained behavior. "Frantic she careers about the cave...whirls with tossing head...scatters the tripods...boils over with fierce fire...the wild frenzy overflowed through her foaming lips; she groaned and uttered loud inarticulate cries with panting breath...She still rolls wild eyes, and eyeballs that roam over all the sky."³¹⁷

The third account is Plutarch's description of an inauspicious consultation gone awry that ends in disaster for the Pythia:

As it happened, a deputation from abroad had arrived to consult the oracle. The victim, it is said, remained unmoved and unaffected in any way by the first libations; but the priests, in their eagerness to please, went far beyond their wonted usage, and only after the victim had been subjected to a deluge and nearly drowned did it at last give in. What, then, was the result touching the priestess? She went down into the oracle unwillingly, they say, and halfheartedly; and at her first responses it was at once plain from the harshness of her voice that she was not responding properly; she was like a labouring ship and was filled with a mighty and baleful spirit. Finally she became hysterical and with a frightful shriek rushed towards the exit and threw herself down, with the result that not only the members of the deputation fled, but also the oracle-interpreter Nicander and those holy men that were present. However, after a little, they went in and took her up, still conscious; and she lived on for a few days.

³¹⁶ Oppé 1904: 219; Fontenrose 1978: 210; Masters 1992: 91, 128-129.

³¹⁷ Luc. 5.116-120, 149, 153-154, 169-224, transl. Duff.

It is for these reasons that they guard the chastity of the priestess, and keep her life free from all association and contact with strangers, and take the omens before the oracle, thinking that it is clear to the god when she has the temperament and disposition suitable to submit to the inspiration without harm to herself. The power of the spirit does not affect all persons nor the same persons always in the same way, but it only supplies an enkindling and an inception, as has been said, for them that are in a proper state to be affected and to undergo the change.³¹⁸

Clearly, none of these three consultations resemble the facts usually pertaining to Delphic encounters as depicted by other ancient sources. Virgil's account concerns the Roman Sibyl, not the Greek Pythia. Regrettably, Lucan's account is based on, and is an even more wildly exaggerated version of, Virgil's account. Both Virgil and Lucan's accounts exude the high drama associated with epic themes and epic poetry. Lucan and Plutarch both obviously report unusual, forced, inauspicious consultations. Unfortunately, as is apparent in the following chapter of this dissertation, none of the above-mentioned reservations prevented some early modern scholars from assuming that these three descriptions depict normal behavior on the part of the Pythia.

Delphic Priesthood

In order to correctly delineate the Pythia's exact role in the Delphic Oracle, it is necessary to attempt to clarify the structure and overall role of the Delphic priesthood as presented in later ancient sources. Fortunately, Plutarch is able to provide us with information on the priesthood as it functioned in his day.

³¹⁸ Plut. *De def. or.* 438a-c, transl. Babbitt.

Plutarch twice distinguishes between “the priests [*hiereis*] and the holy men [*hosioi*]”³¹⁹ and, again, between “the oracle-interpreter [*prophetes*] Nicander and those holy men [*hosioi*] that were present.”³²⁰ Because Plutarch elsewhere refers to “Nicander, the priest [*hiereus*],”³²¹ he seems to use the terms *prophetes* and *hiereus* interchangeably in order to describe the same temple official while the term *hosios* denotes a separate entity.

Hiereis (or *prophetai*) perform certain duties. They sprinkle sacrificial victims with water, and, if the signs are auspicious, slaughter them. They preside over consultations and attend the Pythia.³²² Plutarch refers to the duties he himself performs as *hiereus* as “sacrificing, marching in processions, and dancing in choruses.”³²³

Plutarch does not explicitly state how the *hiereis* are chosen and how long they serve. Perhaps they are Euripides’ “Delphian noblemen chosen by lot.”³²⁴ There seems to be more than one *hiereus* serving at any time as Plutarch makes reference to “Euthydemus, my colleague in priesthood.”³²⁵ Delphic inscriptions “from the beginning of the 2nd century B.C.” also record the appointment of two *hiereis*.³²⁶ Plutarch himself served as a priest of Delphi for the last 30 years of his life.³²⁷ Perhaps all *hiereis* were chosen on merit, were appointed by lot, and served for life.

³¹⁹ Plut. *De def. or.* 437a, transl. Babbitt.

³²⁰ Plut. *De def. or.* 438b, transl. Babbitt.

³²¹ Plut. *De E apud Delphos* 386c, transl. Babbitt.

³²² Plut. *De def. or.* 437a, 438a-b, transl.

³²³ Plut. *An seni respublica gerenda sit* 792f, transl. Fowler.

³²⁴ Eur. *Ion* 416, transl. Kovacs.

³²⁵ Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 700e, transl. Minar, Sandbach & Helmbold.

³²⁶ Parke 1940: 87.

³²⁷ Hammond & Scullard 1970: 848.

Plutarch has more to say about the *hosioi*: “They call the victim that is sacrificed Consecrator whenever an Holy One [*hosios*] is appointed. There are five Holy Ones [*hosioi*], who hold office for life; they do a great many things with the co-operation of the oracle-interpreters [*prophetai*] and with them take part in the holy rites, since they are thought to have descended from Deucalion,”³²⁸ and “the people of Delphi believe that the remains of Dionysus rest with them close beside the oracle; and the Holy Ones [*Hosioi*] offer a secret sacrifice in the shrine of Apollo whenever the devotees of Dionysus waked the God of the Mystic Basket.”³²⁹ In summary, the five *hosioi* are descendants of Deucalion and are appointed, also for life. They work closely with the *hiereis*. They have some role to play in the worship of Dionysus at Delphi, which is no trivial matter since Plutarch refers to the god as “Dionysus, whose share in Delphi is no less than that of Apollo.”³³⁰

Such a Delphic priesthood, comprising members who are all chosen on merit and/or social standing and serve for life, would offer experienced, stable membership capable of exercising considerable, capable, and consistent long-term control over temple policies. However, it is important to note that whether this control extended to the actual production and/or delivery of the oracles themselves is never addressed by ancient sources.

³²⁸ Plut. *Quaest. Graec.* 292d, transl. Babbitt.

³²⁹ Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 365a, transl. Babbitt. Hopkinson interprets the Mystic Basket as referring to a “scoop-shaped basket used for winnowing, carried especially in Dionysiac processions as symbol of fertility” (Callim. *Cer.* 127, transl. Hopkinson 1984: 42).

³³⁰ Plut. *De E apud Delphos* 388e, transl. Babbitt.

Nevertheless, ancient accounts do record four occasions on which the Delphic priesthood apparently failed to protect the Pythia from being compelled by enquirers to participate, under less than auspicious circumstances, in forced consultations. The first two reports are possibly fictitious but nevertheless illustrative of the priesthood's passivity.

The first forced consultation occurred after the Phocians seized Delphi in 356 BCE.

When Philomelus had control of the oracle he directed the Pythia to make her prophecies from the tripod in the ancestral fashion. But when she replied that such was not the ancestral fashion, he threatened her harshly and compelled her to mount the tripod. Then when she frankly declared, referring to the superior power of the man who was resorting to violence: 'It is in your power to do as you please,' he gladly accepted her utterance and declared that he had the oracle which suited him.³³¹

The second offender was Alexander the Great.

And now, wishing to consult the god concerning the expedition against Asia, he went to Delphi; and since he chanced to come on one of the inauspicious days, when it is not lawful to deliver oracles, in the first place he sent a summons to the prophetess. And when she refused to perform her office and cited the law in her excuse, he went up himself and tried to drag her to the temple, whereupon, as if overcome by his ardour, she said: 'Thou art invincible, my son!' On hearing this, Alexander said he desired no further prophecy, but had from her the oracle which he wanted.³³²

The third inauspicious consultation is the one discussed earlier involving Appius Claudius. Rather than repeat Lucan's somewhat torrid version, here is 1st century BCE-1st century CE historian Valerius Maximus' more sober account of the same event: "Appius wished to explore the outcome of the mighty upheaval [between Caesar and Pompey] and by dint of his authority (he was governor of Achaia) compelled the priestess of the

³³¹ Diod. Sic. 16.27.1, transl. Sherman.

³³² Plut. *Alex.* 14.4, transl. Perrin.

Delphic cauldron to descend into the innermost recess of the sacred cavern.”³³³ The Pythia in fact foretells Appius Claudius’ demise, but he misinterprets her prophecy.

The fourth incident is the fatal one described above by Plutarch in which “the priests, in their eagerness to please, went far beyond their wonted usage” and which resulted in the death of the Pythia, who had participated “unwillingly...and halfheartedly.”³³⁴

One has to wonder what, if anything, the members of the Delphic priesthood were doing on these occasions. Were they simply trying to please or placate valued clients, or were they too afraid of offending eminent dignitaries to protect the person of the Pythia, even in her capacity as Apollo’s mouthpiece? Perhaps there lurked the possibility of real danger that they could “lose their lives at the hands of wicked men while ministering to a god.”³³⁵ Parke and Wormell calculate that ancient Delphi possessed probably only 1,000 male citizens at any time.³³⁶ Reality and expediency may account for why the Delphic priesthood was compelled to choose the path of least resistance and allow the Pythia to bear the brunt and manhandling in its stead.

Plutarch contributes a further comment worthy of mention because it so closely replicates the latter part of Ion’s words to the “Delphian servants of Apollo,” when he commands them to “go to the silvery streams of Castalia; and when you have bathed in the pure water, return to the temple. Keep pious silence and guard the goodness of your lips, so

³³³ Val. Max. 1.8.10, transl. Shackleton Bailey.

³³⁴ Plut. *De def. or.* 438a-b, transl. Babbitt.

³³⁵ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 407e, transl. Babbitt.

³³⁶ Parke 1967a: 63.

that to those who wish to consult the god you may utter words of good omen.”³³⁷ However, Plutarch apparently aims his version at both priesthood and enquirers: “[W]e give instructions to anyone who comes down to the oracle here to think holy thoughts and to speak words of good omen.”³³⁸ The first part of Ion’s quote above, concerning bathing in Castalia, is also echoed by Heliodorus, a 3rd century novelist, when one of his characters, before consulting the Delphic Oracle, refers to “Castilia, where I performed ablutions. Then I hurried to the temple...for the priestess to be inspired was at hand.”³³⁹ In addition, the *Epigrammatum Anthologia Palatina* includes an oracle, perhaps incorrectly attributed to the Pythia, the relevant part of which Parke and Wormell translate as “come to the sanctuary...when you have touched the spring of the nymphs.”³⁴⁰

Chain of Communication

As in the earlier era, the Pythia’s delivery of oracles is oral and directed to the enquirers. Similarly, none of the later ancient sources ever claim that the Delphic priesthood is responsible for the composition, delivery, or interpretation of Delphic oracles.

However, Plutarch does account for both the verse format and ambiguity of Delphic oracles. The issue of whether oracles are issued in verse form does need to be addressed because whether a Pythia as described by Plutarch is capable of versification is relevant to the role she performs. Plutarch’s view is a simple one. Apollo “supplies the origin of

³³⁷ Eur. *Ion* 94-99, transl. Kovacs.

³³⁸ Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 378d, transl. Babbitt.

³³⁹ Hld. 2, transl. Hadas.

³⁴⁰ *Anth. Pal.* 14,71; Parke 1939: 391; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 383.

the incitement, and then the prophetic priestesses are moved each in accordance with her natural faculties.”³⁴¹ After all, “prophetic inspiration...makes use of the abilities that it finds ready at hand, and moves each of them that receive it according to the nature of each.”³⁴² In other words, each Pythia versifies according to her individual ability. Plutarch elaborates: “the voice is not that of a god, nor the utterance of it, nor the diction, nor the metre, but all these are the woman’s.”³⁴³ Plutarch’s last claim also implies that the usual delivery mode of the oracles is oral. Plutarch concedes that verse oracles may have been more common in the past when “that era produced personal temperaments and natures which had an easy fluency and a bent towards composing poetry, and to them were given also zest and eagerness and readiness of mind abundantly, thus creating an alertness which needed but a slight initial stimulus from without and a prompting of the imagination.”³⁴⁴ However, he observes that even “the oracles of ancient times...gave their responses at one time in verse and at another time without versification.”³⁴⁵

Plutarch adds one further sensible observation. In his own time, when “the interrogations are on slight and commonplace matters” rather than on grand matters of state, prose is a more appropriate vehicle than (usually epic hexameter) verse for the Pythia’s replies. Plutarch somewhat apologetically excuses and explains these predominantly prose responses to the simple enquiries of his time as follows:

[T]he interrogations are on slight and commonplace matters, like the hypothetical questions in school: if one ought to marry, or to start on a voyage, or to make a loan; and the most important consultations on the part of States concern the yield

³⁴¹ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 397b-c, transl. Babbitt.

³⁴² Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 406b, transl. Babbitt.

³⁴³ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 397c, transl. Babbitt.

³⁴⁴ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 405e, transl. Babbitt.

³⁴⁵ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 404a-b, transl. Babbitt.

from crops, the increase of herds, and public health—to clothe such things in verse, to devise circumlocutions, and to foist strange words upon inquiries that call for a simple short answer is the thing done by an ambitious pedant embellishing an oracle to enhance his repute. But the prophetic priestess has herself also nobility of character, and whenever she descends into that place and finds herself in the presence of the god, she cares more for fulfilling her function than for that kind of repute or for men’s praise or blame.³⁴⁶

Plutarch also seems to admit the possibility that professional poets may have provided enquirers with written versification of their oracles, presumably in exchange for a fee: “Moreover, there was the oft-repeated tale that certain men with a gift for poetry were wont to sit about close by the shrine waiting to catch the words spoken, and then weaving about them a fabric of extempore hexameters of other verses or rhythms as ‘containers,’ so to speak, for the oracles.”³⁴⁷

A century earlier, the geographer Strabo believed that the temple itself supplied these professional poets: “[T]he Pythian priestess [*Pythia*]...utters oracles in both verse and prose, though the latter too are put into verse by poets who are in the service of the temple.”³⁴⁸

Plutarch also offers a twofold explanation for the notorious ambiguity of, in particular, early Delphic oracles. First, it is the duty of the enquirer to interpret the oracle correctly: “[T]he Lord whose prophetic shrine is at Delphi neither tells nor conceals, but indicates.”³⁴⁹ Second, Apollo has an obligation to protect his temple servants:

³⁴⁶ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 408c-d, transl. Babbitt.

³⁴⁷ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 407b, transl. Babbitt.

³⁴⁸ Strab. 9.3.5, transl. Jones.

³⁴⁹ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 404e, transl. Babbitt.

[T]here were times when there was a need of *double entendre*, indirect statement, and vagueness for the people of ancient days...and it was not to the advantage of those concerned with the oracle to vex and provoke these men by unfriendliness through their hearing many of the things that they did not wish to hear...But inasmuch as the god employs mortal men to assist him and declare his will, whom it is his duty to care for and protect, so that they shall not lose their lives at the hands of wicked men while ministering to a god, he is not willing to keep the truth unrevealed, but he caused the manifestation of it to be deflected, like a ray of light, in the medium of poetry, where it submits to many reflections and undergoes subdivisions, and thus he did away with its repellent harshness.³⁵⁰

In summary, the chain of communication of oracles is from Pythia directly to enquirer, who bears the responsibility to interpret the oracle correctly. Additionally, some enquirers may choose to pay a professional poet for a versified version of their oracle.

Adyton

The site of the consultation remains relevant to evaluation of the mantic procedure, in particular of the feasibility of operation of the chain of communication. Where Herodotus speaks of the *megaron* in which the consultation takes place, Plutarch uses *oikos* to refer to the room in which enquirers are seated during consultations.³⁵¹ Plutarch makes the following claim:

I think, then, that the exhalation is not in the same state all the time, but that it has recurrent periods of weakness and strength. Of the proof on which I depend I have as witnesses many foreigners and all the officials and servants at the shrine. It is a fact that the room [*oikos*] in which they seat those who would consult the god is filled, not frequently or with any regularity, but as it may chance from time to time, with a delightful fragrance coming on a current of air which bears it toward the worshippers, as if its source were in the holy of holies [*adyton*]; and it is like the odour which the most exquisite and costly perfumes send forth.³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 407c-e, transl. Babbitt.

³⁵¹ Plut. *De def. or.* 437c, transl. Babbitt.

³⁵² Plut. *De def. or.* 437c, transl. Babbitt.

Plutarch seems to indicate that the *oikos* and *adyton* are not one and the same, but rather that the *adyton* is part of the *oikos*. They are physically connected because enquirers in the *oikos* sometimes catch the pleasant scent of the breath, vapor, or exhalation wafting from the earth through the chasm in the floor of the *adyton* where the Pythia sits on the tripod. It is puzzling that the vapor does not cause the priesthood and enquirers themselves to prophesy.³⁵³ Perhaps the vapor loses concentration as it disperses from the *adyton* through to the connected *oikos*,³⁵⁴ or, possibly, the priesthood and enquirers are not receptive, as is the Pythia, to inspiration.

Enquirers in Plutarch's *oikos* are able to hear the Pythia:

[A]t her first responses it was at once plain from the harshness of her voice that she was not responding properly; she was like a labouring ship and was filled with a mighty and baleful spirit. Finally she became hysterical and with a frightful shriek rushed towards the exit and threw herself down, with the result that not only the members of the deputation fled, but also the oracle-interpreter Nicander and those holy men that were present.³⁵⁵

However, there is no indication that the occupants of the *oikos* can see the Pythia. Her rush towards the exit is expressed in auditory rather than explicitly visual terms.³⁵⁶

Plutarch's use of a form of the verb *katabainein* to describe the Pythia's entry to the *adyton*, the seat of the oracle, is significant as the verb means to step, go, or come down.³⁵⁷ This seems to imply that the *oikos*, including the *adyton*, is situated at a level lower than the temple floor, or, at the very least, that the *adyton* is at a lower level than

³⁵³ Oppé 1904: 221.

³⁵⁴ Littleton 1986: 82.

³⁵⁵ Plut. *De def. or.* 438b, transl. Babbitt.

³⁵⁶ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 29; Flacelière 1965: 46.

³⁵⁷ Holland 1933: 210; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 28.

the temple. Pausanias has this to say about the interior of the *adyton*: “Into the innermost part of the temple there pass but few, but there is dedicated in it another image of Apollo, made of gold.”³⁵⁸ Unfortunately, as mentioned at the end of the previous chapter of this dissertation, archeological evidence is unable to confirm the validity of these literary clues.

To summarize, as for early ancient sources, post-4th century BCE ancient sources present the role of the Pythia as one in which she is the sole speaker of Apollo’s oracles directly to enquirers without intermediaries. The Delphic priesthood continues to perform the preliminary sacrifice on behalf of the day’s enquirers, to guide enquirers through their individual pre-consultation rituals, to preside over the mantic session, and to attend the Pythia as she prophesies from the tripod. All ancient authors depict the Pythia as sole speaker of the oracles to enquirers and the Delphic priesthood as performing ancillary and supportive roles.

³⁵⁸ Paus. 10.24.5, transl. Jones.

Chapter 5:

Pre-1978 CE Scholastic Views of the Pythia's Role

The year 1978 was chosen as a division between early 20th century and later modern scholarly interpretations of the Pythia's role in the Delphic Oracle, because 1978 is the year that separates the 39-year-long influence of Parke's *The History of the Delphic Oracle* from the paradigm shift in modern scholarly views that occurs after the 1978 release of Fontenrose's work of the same title. This year represents the demarcation between Parke and Wormell's conferral of the Pythia's role onto the Delphic priesthood and Fontenrose's insistence on a return to the ancient sources' accounts of the Pythia as the speaker of the oracles to enquirers. However, as will become apparent, scholarly views on various issues do not always conveniently and consistently stay on their side of this assigned chronological division. The examination of modern scholarly views in this chapter continues to essentially follow the order of the issues as discussed in earlier chapters: the Pythia, her role, the source of her inspiration, the Delphic priesthood and its role in the Delphic Oracle, the chain of communication between participants during a Delphic mantic session, the question of verse oracles, and the *adyton* and its effect on the chain of communication during a mantic consultation.

Pythia

Unfortunately, several early 20th century scholars chose to perpetuate, and implicitly present as the norm, the depiction of the Pythia as found in Lucan's *Civil War* and in

Plutarch's account of an inauspicious and fatal consultation as discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. As has been argued, these two descriptions are literary and unusual portrayals respectively, and their adoption as the rule has proved remarkably resistant to eradication. Already in 1904, Oppé recognized that Plutarch's "anecdote which is introduced as an exception is quoted by scholars as if it embodied the rule."³⁵⁹ Three early scholarly views of the Pythia suffice to illustrate this point, and also to indicate the important interpretative role attributed to the Delphic priesthood.

In 1907, Farnell describes the Pythia in the following terms:

[T]he belief in the divine afflatus, by whatever means it was instilled, could produce a very powerful neurotic effect upon a susceptible temperament...usually the female is more responsive than the male...to certain influences of religious mesmerism...What was essential to Delphic divination, then, was the frenzy of the Pythoness and the sounds which she uttered in this state...were interpreted by the [*hosioi*] and the 'prophet.'³⁶⁰

In 1918, Dempsey claims that the Pythia,

filled with the divine *afflatus*, burst forth into wild prophetic utterance. These frenzied, incoherent cries were, however, taken down and interpreted...by the [*prophetes*]...It has been observed at all times and in all countries that women are especially prone to orgiastic religious seizure.³⁶¹

In 1919, Poulson contributes a depiction that, in its description of the Pythia's foaming mouth in particular, echoes Lucan's poetic fabrication: "The Pythia's confused utterance, which might degenerate into a wild shriek while she foamed at the mouth, was

³⁵⁹ Oppé 1904: 231.

³⁶⁰ Farnell 1907:189.

³⁶¹ Dempsey 1918: 54-55.

interpreted and put into an intelligible form by the ‘prophets,’ i.e. the priests of Apollo.”³⁶²

The notion of a frenzied Pythia is not derived from Lucan and Plutarch’s accounts alone. Maurizio also blames Rohde (1925) for associating the concept of possession, such as that of the Pythia in Apollo’s service, with the behavior of an orgiastic, “raging Maenad” attending Dionysus rather than with the more restrained and rational Apolline prophetic model and thus for helping to perpetuate the persistent misperception of a Pythia in the throes of “seemingly uncontrolled and uncontrollable rapture.”³⁶³

The modern perception of how an inspired Pythia behaves may also be linked to the semantic fields covered by the English phonetic derivatives of the Greek word *entheos*. The Greek word means filled, inspired, and/or possessed by the god and is used to describe a person receiving and manifesting divine inspiration. An enthused Pythia was the god’s spokesperson, mouthpiece, and vehicle of expression. Unfortunately, dictionary equivalents of the modern English verb, adjective, and noun (enthuse, enthusiastic, and enthusiasm) derived from *entheos* seem to suggest vocal and physical behavior that is somewhat uncontrolled, even frenzied, for example, “gush,” “self-deluded,” and “ardent zeal.”³⁶⁴ If the Pythia was indeed frenzied, such a Pythia, so incoherent and out of control, would, of course, indeed of necessity, have required the services of sensible male attendants and interpreters to assist in the chain of communication during mantic sessions, as the three descriptions quoted earlier explicitly claim. This view also serves to

³⁶² Poulson 1919: 24.

³⁶³ Rohde 1925: 291; Maurizio 1995: 69.

³⁶⁴ Fowler & Fowler 1964: 405.

explain “the apparent paradox that a female should occupy a position of importance in the decidedly political world of Delphi.”³⁶⁵

A few early 20th century scholars speculate about the effect that the Pythia’s supposed frenzy might possibly have exercised on her ability to function as Apollo’s mouthpiece. By calculating the ratio of shin length of humans and gods to the height of tripods as depicted in ancient artistic representations, Roux (1976), as cited by De Boer (2007), determines that the Pythia’s tripod was as high as a modern barstool.³⁶⁶ The artists depict no stable support for the Pythia’s feet, which are left “dangling in the air.”³⁶⁷ Latte (1940) is puzzled as to how a Pythia in the throes of frenzy as described above could possibly have remained perched on the tripod while prophesying.³⁶⁸ Whittaker (1965) joins Latte in rejecting a frenzied Pythia on the grounds that “all the classical monuments represent the Pythia in a state of calm.”³⁶⁹ This is certainly true of the calm Pythia depicted on the famous Vulci vase-painting, c. 440-30 BCE.

Parke (1939) and Wormell (1956) tend to perpetuate the portrait of an incoherent Pythia in need of an interpreter when they comment on “the Pythia’s gabble” and refer to “the Pythia when babbling irrationally”³⁷⁰ in spite of the fact that such portrayals are not found in any ancient source other than the accounts in Lucan and in Plutarch referred to above. Parke and Wormell also make the following claim regarding the reasoning behind the

³⁶⁵ Maurizio 1995: 70.

³⁶⁶ De Boer 2007: 86-87

³⁶⁷ Flacelière 1965: 44.

³⁶⁸ Latte 1940: 12.

³⁶⁹ Whittaker 1965: 24.

³⁷⁰ Parke 1939: 37; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 39, 40.

priesthood's testing of the sacrificial goat by pouring libations over it: "The underlying theory evidently was that the goat should tremble, as the Pythia trembled in her ecstasy, and that both these conditions were the work of the god."³⁷¹ Their theory does not reflect either of Plutarch's explanations, which were that the goat's trembling indicated Apollo's presence in the temple and therefore, by implication, an auspicious occasion for consultation³⁷² or, possibly, that the goat must indicate its consent to its own sacrifice: "[E]ven now people are very careful not to kill the animal till a drink-offering is poured over him and he shakes his head in assent."³⁷³ In contrast, Parke and Wormell's Pythia, who supposedly trembles in ecstasy while prophesying, bears a faint and unfortunate resemblance to the fantasies of early anti-pagan Christian authors such as Origen and John Chryostom.³⁷⁴

While a few early scholars even go so far as to suggest that the Pythia may in fact have been chosen for her ability to exhibit particular personality and behavioral traits such as "hysterical affectations"³⁷⁵ and "signs of emotional instability and a tendency to abnormal behaviour,"³⁷⁶ Dempsey believes that she was, in reality, more likely to have been chosen for possessing a "well-balanced temperament" when not prophesying.³⁷⁷ This issue of how the Pythia was possibly chosen, in addition to the personality and behavioral qualities mentioned above, is discussed again later in this chapter in connection with versification of the oracles.

³⁷¹ Parke 1939: 21; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 21.

³⁷² Plut. *De def. or.* 437a

³⁷³ Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 729f, transl. Fowler.

³⁷⁴ Sissa 1990: 22-23. Apolline inspiration was depicted as demonic possession "by way of her genitals."

³⁷⁵ Poulson 1919: 24.

³⁷⁶ Parke 1939: 36; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 38.

³⁷⁷ Dempsey 1918: 56.

Many early 20th century scholars accept Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch's depiction of a Pythia of at least fifty or more years of age, who, when not prophesying from the tripod, was an uneducated, ordinary, respectable, free-born Delphian peasant.³⁷⁸ However, as Whittaker points out, inspired possession "cannot make a silly mind into a great mind. This is a point worth bearing in mind if the Pythia was really an uneducated woman not specially selected for her mental powers, and it reinforces the conclusions about the part played by the priests."³⁷⁹ The implication is that an uneducated Pythia could not have produced adequate oracles without the intervention of an able member of the Delphic priesthood, a view that Whittaker embraces later in this chapter, along with a number of other scholars of this era.

As regards the ancient reports of cases of subornation, successful and attempted, of the Pythia by enquirers as described in earlier chapters of this dissertation, Dodds (1951) and Flacelière (1965) admit that this ancient evidence concerning the bribery of the Pythia—not of the priesthood—does seem to indicate that she was the one who spoke, and was therefore free to speak the oracles directly to the enquirer.³⁸⁰ However, Poulson maintains that allowing the Pythia to take the blame in cases of detected bribery was merely a ploy on the part of the priesthood to spare itself or the Delphic Oracle the accusations of corruption.³⁸¹

³⁷⁸ Diod. Sic. 16.26.6; Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 405c-d; Farnell 1907: 187, 189; Dempsey 1918: 52, 68, 147; Poulson 1919: 23; Parke 1939: 32; Dodds 1951: 72; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 35; Flacelière 1965: 42.

³⁷⁹ Whittaker 1965: 30.

³⁸⁰ Dodds 1951: 74; Flacelière 1965: 51-52.

³⁸¹ Poulson 1919: 27.

As far as the validity of the chasm-and-vapor theory as a possible source of Pythian inspiration is concerned, Dempsey believes that the chasm was indeed a reality and “that earthquakes, which...were so prevalent at Delphi, have long since obliterated all traces of the cleft.”³⁸² Flacelière, too, is prepared to concede that it “is conceivable that earthquakes and landslides, which occurred at Delphi as frequently in antiquity as in our own times, may have so modified the sub-soil that the hypothetical fissure has been blocked.”³⁸³ Therefore, Dempsey and Flacelière both appear to support Cicero and Plutarch’s speculations as outlined in the previous chapter of this dissertation.³⁸⁴

In contrast, Oppé dismisses the chasm-and-vapor theory and, ironically, supports his rejection with the claim that “the question of the chasm and its vapours falls so definitely into the sphere of geology.”³⁸⁵ The significance and relevance of this chasm-and-vapor theory are addressed, and the irony of Oppé’s referral of its claim to geologists is revealed, in the next chapter of this dissertation. In addition, Dodds dismisses the chasm-and-vapor theory as “a Hellenistic invention.”³⁸⁶ Parke and Wormell, in turn, reject, as does Whittaker, the chasm-and-vapor theory on the grounds that the French excavations reveal “that there could never have been any deep subterranean cleft in the rock beneath the sanctuary.”³⁸⁷

³⁸² Dempsey 1918: 59.

³⁸³ Flacelière 1965: 48.

³⁸⁴ Cic. *Div.* 1.19.38; Plut. *De def. or.* 434c.

³⁸⁵ Oppé 1904: 232.

³⁸⁶ Dodds 1951: 73.

³⁸⁷ Parke 1939: 20; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 21; Whittaker 1965: 23.

Dodds provides this era's final comment on possible sources of Pythian inspiration when he reports that Lucian's claim for chewing laurel as a source of inspiration has been duly investigated and rejected: "Professor Oesterreich once chewed a large quantity of laurel leaves in the interests of science, and was disappointed to find himself no more inspired than usual."³⁸⁸

The final picture of the Pythia as presented above is predominantly that of an uneducated woman who prophesied in a frenzied and incoherent manner. One can understand the concern that early 20th century scholars must have felt at the notion that the power and prestige of the Delphic Oracle could have been entrusted to a mere woman and could have depended on her somewhat unpredictable performance. In spite of the lack of ancient supporting evidence, it is hardly surprising that modern scholars are inclined to assign the priesthood's judicious and authoritative assistance to guide such a Pythia's performance so as to ensure that the Delphic oracles generated and maintained the Delphic Oracle's fabled fame and wealth.

Delphic Priesthood

In order to understand early 20th century scholarly views concerning the structure, function, and role of the Delphic priesthood, Parke's contribution to this particular issue needs to be recognized. In 1939, Herbert William Parke published his book *The History of the Delphic Oracle*, which, in 1956, essentially became the first volume of Parke and

³⁸⁸ Lucian, *Bis Acc.* 1; Dodds 1951: 73.

Wormell's now two-volume work, *The Delphic Oracle*.³⁸⁹ The influence of these two works should not be underestimated. For almost four decades (39 years to be precise), they were duly consulted by all serious students of the Delphic Oracle. Their formidable scholarly authority continues to be held in deserved respect. In Fontenrose's review of the earlier 1939 *The History of the Delphic Oracle*, after acknowledging the work to be "the first complete history of the Delphic Oracle," Fontenrose (1942) continues as follows: "It is full of sound judgments...and we can see how much the history of the oracle was the history of Greece. We learn from it something of what the Delphic oracle meant to an ancient Greek, how it affected every phase of his life."³⁹⁰ Stubbs (1942) describes the work as "primarily one not of controversy but of information; and as a book of reference and a summary of all that is known,"³⁹¹ and Lord (1942) calls it "a very welcome book" and additionally "a most significant and welcome contribution," which "fills a very long-felt want" and displays Parke's "eminently sound scholarship."³⁹² Starr (1957) describes the two-volume 1956 edition as "judicious" and "well-organized,"³⁹³ and Lloyd-Jones (1976) lauds Parke as "the leading modern authority on the [Delphic] oracle."³⁹⁴

Because the comments cited below pertain, for the most part, to the first volume of the 1956 work, which is essentially Parke's original 1939 *The History of the Delphic Oracle*, and because Donald Ernest Wilson Wormell, Parke's colleague at Trinity College, Dublin, primarily contributed the catalog of oracles that comprises the second volume,

³⁸⁹ Starr 1957: 45.

³⁹⁰ Fontenrose 1942: 472, 476.

³⁹¹ Stubbs 1942: 90.

³⁹² Lord 1942: 540-542.

³⁹³ Starr 1957: 45.

³⁹⁴ Lloyd-Jones 1976: 62.

most of the views discussed below should probably, by rights, be attributed to Parke alone.³⁹⁵ Parke was understandably a product of his time, an era in which women were not admitted to Trinity College until 1904, were not admitted to the University of Oxford until 1920, were not granted degrees at the University of Cambridge until 1921, and only attained full suffrage in the United Kingdom in 1928 and in France in 1944. As a classical scholar, Parke must also have been well aware of the ancient Greek gender bias that dictated the status and roles assigned to women in ancient Greece. This status can be summed up in a surviving fragment attributed to the female chorus in Euripides' *Danae*: "[E]verywhere we women are in second place, always at a distance from men."³⁹⁶

It must, therefore, have seemed logical for Parke, and his contemporary fellow classical scholars, all also possibly still somewhat influenced by the prevailing view of a frenzied and incoherent Pythia, to assume for the members of the male Delphic priesthood a far more central and active role, not only in the Delphic Oracle but, in particular, during the Delphic mantic procedure itself, than ancient sources ever, in fact, explicitly attribute to the Delphic priesthood. However, in the face of Parke and Wormell's claim (in reference to the issue of a lot-oracle at Delphi) of "how much the outlook of scholars on the subject of the Pythia's procedure needs to be revised or at least cleared of dogmatism,"³⁹⁷ it is somewhat ironical that the authors themselves demonstrate dogmatism (as in "positive unsupported assertions"³⁹⁸) when they introduce roles for the Delphic priesthood that contradict all the ancient accounts.

³⁹⁵ Starr 1957: 45.

³⁹⁶ Eur. Fr. 319, transl. Collard & Cropp.

³⁹⁷ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 19.

³⁹⁸ Fowler & Fowler 1964: 362.

With regard to the structure of the priesthood, most early 20th century scholars accept Plutarch's depiction of a Delphic priesthood composed of two bodies of officials: *hiereis* or *prophetai* (priests), and *hosioi* (holy ones). However, Farnell believes that *hiereis* and *hosioi* are the same entity.³⁹⁹ In contrast, Parke maintains that, in addition to *hiereis* and *hosioi*, the priesthood included a *prophetes*, and furthermore that this term *prophetes* referred specifically and exclusively to the chief *hiereus*, who, during a consultation, actually delivered or officially conveyed the oracle to the enquirer.⁴⁰⁰ Parke's theory is in contrast to Plutarch's account, in which the terms *prophetes* and *hiereus* appear to refer interchangeably to the same official.⁴⁰¹ Parke's creation of this clear distinction between *prophetes* and *hiereis* enables him to now assign to this *prophetes* his own significant role in the chain of communication, one previously ascribed to the Pythia by ancient sources. Finally, Parke contends that Euripides' mention of "the Delphian noblemen chosen by lot" refers only to the *hiereis* or *prophetai* whereas the *hosioi*, as descendants of Deucalion, were "not appointed by lot, but simply filled the vacancies by right of hereditary succession."⁴⁰²

Setting aside the above issues pertaining to the structure of the priesthood, early 20th century scholars also claim for the Delphic priesthood a central and powerful role both in the institution of Delphic Oracle and during Delphic oracular consultations, Where Halliday (1913) concedes only the possibility that the priesthood was "the real power

³⁹⁹ Farnell 1907: 185.

⁴⁰⁰ Parke 1940: 88; 1967a: 31, 82-83.

⁴⁰¹ Plut. *De def. or.* 438b; *De E apud Delphos* 386c.

⁴⁰² Eur. *Ion* 416, transl. Kovacs; Parke 1940: 86, 88.

behind the tripod,” Farnell, Dempsey, and Poulson frankly assign an interpretative or editorial (or even authorial, see discussion of the chain of communication below) role to the Delphic priesthood, as do Parke and Wormell when they claim that the “Pythia is...but the human vehicle of [Apollo’s] utterance, which is then interpreted by Apollo’s priest who was regularly described as ‘the prophet.’”⁴⁰³ Although Flacelière acknowledges that with “regard to intuitive, inspired divination the female spirit seems to have been more receptive to divine influence and better suited to serve as *medium*,” he also believes that Delphic inspired divination required the offices of “the Apolline priesthood which henceforward took charge of its manifestations,” resulting, essentially, in “a priestess controlled by the priests and *prophetes*.”⁴⁰⁴ Whittaker explicitly proposes that the members of the Delphic priesthood acted as puppet-masters of the Pythia and, as such, stage-managed and controlled her.⁴⁰⁵

Dempsey, Cary (1965), and Lloyd-Jones attribute the Delphic Oracle’s success to the prudence, good sense, and sagacity of the priesthood.⁴⁰⁶ Here is Cary’s summary of what he believes comprised a typical mantic session;

[T]he Pythia broke into incoherent utterance. This was the voice of the god which the priests professed to interpret. The Pythia’s delirious gabble was recast by them into epic hexameters or (in later days) into simple prose, and was invested with any meaning which they saw fit to impart to it. In effect, the Pythia’s frenzy was by-play, the responses were originated by the priests. Here, then, we have found the chief makers of Apollo’s oracle.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰³ Farnell 1907: 189; Halliday 1913: 64; Dempsey 1918: 55; Poulson 1919: 24; Parke 1939: 17; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 13.

⁴⁰⁴ Flacelière 1965: 27, 37.

⁴⁰⁵ Whittaker 1965: 24.

⁴⁰⁶ Dempsey 1918: 74-75; Cary 1965: 624, 627; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 67-68.

⁴⁰⁷ Cary 1965: 626-627.

Dempsey, Poulson, and Whittaker also propose that the priesthood's vast knowledge base relied on the machinations of a veritable intelligence bureau, a notion that Lloyd-Jones does not share.⁴⁰⁸ Dodds also rejects the need for "an army of private inquiry agents" because he is able to accept the possibility that the Pythia served as Apollo's medium.⁴⁰⁹ Lord suggests that Delphi's favorable situation on a network of trade routes conveying cosmopolitan merchants and travelers to and through Delphi ensured that the priesthood remained well and widely informed about current affairs.⁴¹⁰ Finally, although Poulson acknowledges the existence of the trade roads, Cary believes that Delphi "did not thereby acquire any commercial importance, for these roads were not great avenues of trade."⁴¹¹

Disregarding the individual scholarly discrepancies outlined above, the picture of the priesthood and its roles that emerges from these early 20th century commentaries is one that is not portrayed in ancient sources. Ancient Greeks, who believed in Apollo, had no problem with accepting the Pythia as speaking to enquirers on Apollo's behalf, but classical scholars who believe in neither Apollo nor spirit possession ease their discomfort with a undisguised and sweeping departure from the ancient sources. Therefore, the portrayal of a priesthood who stage-managed the Pythia and controlled the consultative process is evident in almost all early 20th century treatments of the Delphic Oracle.

⁴⁰⁸ Dempsey 1918: 102-103; Poulson 1919: 26; Whittaker 1965: 28, 44; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 65.

⁴⁰⁹ Dodds 1936: 376.

⁴¹⁰ Lord 1942: 541-542.

⁴¹¹ Poulson 1919: 43-44; Cary 1965: 624.

Chain of Communication

In the face of limited explicit information from ancient sources, what follows must be considered the end-product of educated, but not explicitly disclosed, speculation on the part of early 20th century scholars.

A particularly contentious issue is the links in the chain of communication that operated during any Delphic divinatory consultation or mantic procedure. On the issue of who put the enquiry to the Pythia, every ancient source depicts the enquirer speaking, putting his question, directly to the Pythia. Nevertheless, several early 20th century scholars believe that, some time before the consultation proper, the enquirer himself may well have discussed his question, and even suggested the answer to his own query, during pre-consultation contact with members of the Delphic priesthood.⁴¹² These scholars contend that the priesthood received—verbally or in writing—the questions from the enquirer, with the resultant consequence that it was the priesthood, and not the enquirer, who then put the enquirer’s questions to the Pythia, a procedure not evident in, nor attested to by, ancient sources.⁴¹³ For example, Parke and Wormell claim that “the Prophet or chief priest asked the enquirer’s question, which he had already received in a verbal or written form.”⁴¹⁴ In fact, many early 20th century scholars explicitly assert that the enquirer submitted his query in writing in advance to the Delphic priesthood even though ancient sources make mention of possibly only one Thessalian and two Athenian written

⁴¹² Parke 1939: 48; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 50; Starr 1957: 45; Whittaker 1965: 24, 27, 28, 33; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 62-63.

⁴¹³ Whittaker 1965: 24, 26; Parke 1967a: 84; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 67.

⁴¹⁴ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 33.

enquiries from which the Pythia was requested to make a blind selection, and which should, therefore, probably be considered as exceptions to (or even possibly as lot oracles) rather than as evidence of the normal oracular procedure.⁴¹⁵

Many early 20th century scholars also support the view that the priesthood played a significant role in the composition of the final wording of the oracle that was presented to the enquirer. In fact, Amandry (1950), as cited by Maurizio (1993), is joined by Parke, Wormell, and Cary in going so far as to envisage the priesthood as originating, making, and supplying, in effect composing, the oracles themselves in reply to the enquiries.⁴¹⁶ Whittaker compares the *prophetai* favorably to “practised psychologists” in the manner in which he believes they contrived to satisfy each enquirer’s informational needs.⁴¹⁷

With reference to the official who actually conveyed Apollo’s response to the enquirer, Parke, Wormell, Whittaker, and Lloyd-Jones assert that it was the *prophetes* who received the Pythia’s answer to the enquirer’s question and, in turn, presented it to the enquirer—even though this utterly negates the ancient depiction of the Pythia in her role as Apollo’s mouthpiece speaking directly to enquirers.⁴¹⁸ In 1940, even though Parke explicitly acknowledges that the “conventional phrases in most authors from Pindar and Herodotus until the late periods describe the responses as uttered by the Pythia herself” and that “the Delphic authorities never *officially* [my italics] admitted that the prophet

⁴¹⁵ Plut. *De frat. amor.* 492b; Paus. 10.10.1; Oppé 1904: 225; Farnell 1907: 189; Whittaker 1965: 26; Parke 1967a: 84; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 67.

⁴¹⁶ Parke 1939: 30-31; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 34; Cary 1965: 627; Parke 1967a: 84; Maurizio 1993: 32.

⁴¹⁷ Whittaker 1965: 27.

⁴¹⁸ Parke 1939: 23, 24, 31; Parke 1940: 85; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 23, 25, 34; Whittaker 1965: 27; Parke 1967a: 31, 84; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 67.

modified the form of the Pythia's prophecy," he nevertheless claims that the *prophetes'* "business was *evidently* [my italics] to deliver the response to the inquirer" and that "the usual mention of the Pythia as delivering the prophecy *must* [my italics] not be taken to exclude the mediation of the prophet. We *should* [my italics] picture him as speaking the response directly to the enquirer."⁴¹⁹ Why we must and should share Parke's beliefs is never explicitly stated. Perhaps Parke is using his prescriptive auxiliary verbs to build and support his hypothesis. Perhaps the concept of entrusting the power and prestige of the Delphic Oracle to an experienced, capable Delphic priesthood must seem more credible to modern scholars than entrusting it to the questionable person and performance of a woman, whose unpredictability must surely label her a potential loose cannon or wild card in modern parlance, with the capability of damaging the reputation and prestige of the Delphic Oracle. However, it is noteworthy that Parke himself offers no explicit support or explanation for his own complete departure from the ancient depiction. Parke's plainly stated viewpoint seems to assume, apparently correctly, the consent and support of his fellow contemporary scholars. After all, Parke is only reflecting and expressing his era's prevailing view of how the Delphic Oracle operated. Nevertheless, it is remarkable, even extraordinary, that 39 years pass before any modern scholar challenges Parke's departure from the ancient sources and advocates a return to the ancient accounts.

In order to circumvent the undeniable ancient accounts as stated above, Amandry, as cited in Maurizio (1993), devises and argues a theory in which the priesthood supplies the

⁴¹⁹ Parke 1940: 85.

Pythia with pre-composed replies, which she duly delivers verbally to the enquirer.⁴²⁰

Amandry's proposal thus manages to allow the Pythia to indeed speak the oracles while it simultaneously denies her both the actual authorship and authority.

In 1956, Parke and Wormell, who believe that the priesthood controlled every step of the consultative process, and who are repeating Parke's 1939 arguments, are again forced to acknowledge that the ancient evidence supports the Pythia's delivery of the oracles in as much as the ancient authors "speak of the god as prophesying or of the Pythia as uttering his oracles."⁴²¹ However, they nevertheless claim that "the prophet would reduce [the Pythia's answer] to some form."⁴²² They even insist, once again using prescriptive (or possibly hypothesis-building) auxiliary verb forms, that this "poetic or prose form *must* [my italics] have been supplied by the prophet and his priestly or civic assessors in the sanctuary"⁴²³ and that "the words of the Pythia...*had to* [my italics] be announced to the enquirer officially by a prophet."⁴²⁴

By 1985, Parke—referring, in fact, to the Oracle at Didyma, but he could just as well be speaking of the Delphic Oracle—ironically recommends not addressing the issue of how oracles were composed: "It is better not to attempt to discuss the insoluble question how far the oracular responses were founded on actual utterances of the *prophetis*, and how far they were the composition of the *prophetes* and his staff, or again whether they were

⁴²⁰ Maurizio 1993: 32.

⁴²¹ Parke 1939: 23; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 24.

⁴²² Parke 1939: 30; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 33.

⁴²³ Parke 1939: 31; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 34.

⁴²⁴ Parke 1939: 24; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 25.

prepared to some extent in advance of the actual time of the trance.”⁴²⁵ Perhaps, by 1985, Parke had read some of the later (post-1978) commentaries, which are included in the next chapter of this dissertation, concerning the chain of communication of the Delphic Oracles.

Since the majority of scholars of this early 20th century era support the view that the Delphic priesthood was ultimately responsible for the wording of the oracle itself, it follows that they would also assign to the priesthood the responsibility to set an oracle in verse form before presenting it to the enquirer. Therefore, Robbins (1916), Parke, Cary, and Lloyd-Jones all claim that the priesthood was not only the interpreter and editor of the Pythia’s utterances, but also the author of the (predominantly hexameter) verse versions of the oracles.⁴²⁶ Robbins states assertively that “it is *well known* [my italics] that the priests of the temple interpreted and put into verse the unintelligible mutterings of the Pythia and that often their cunning led them to employ enigmatic or ambiguous terms.”⁴²⁷ It may be well agreed upon by early 20th century commentators, but it is not well—in fact, it is not ever—explicitly attested to by ancient sources. Parke reveals that his own opinion of the matter is influenced by the situation at the Apolline Oracle at Claros where the Clarian authorities “made no secret of the fact that they actually appointed an official versifier to assist the prophet to put his responses into proper shape;” Parke seems to regret that the “Delphic authorities were never so candid.”⁴²⁸ Parke also interprets Pausanias’ statements “that Phemonoe was the first prophetess [*promantis*] of the god,

⁴²⁵ Parke 1985: 218.

⁴²⁶ Robbins 1916: 291; Parke 1945: 66; Cary 1965: 626; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 67.

⁴²⁷ Robbins 1916: 291.

⁴²⁸ Parke 1940: 86.

and first sang in hexameter verse,” but that a Hyperborean, Olen “was the first to prophesy and the first to chant the hexameter oracles” as evidence that the prophet (Olen’s successor), not the Pythia (Phemonoe’s successor), was the one who invented and supplied the verse.⁴²⁹

With further reference to the issue of verse oracles, Parke and Wormell suggest that versification may have possibly been restricted to oracles for eminent enquirers only.⁴³⁰ Following the lead of Strabo and Plutarch, who mention the presence of poets near or in the *adyton*, Parke, Dodds, and McLeod (1961) also speculate that, if the *prophetes* was not himself the poet, perhaps professional poets may have rendered their services during or after the mantic session.⁴³¹

Parke analyzes the relative significance of hexameter, iambic and elegiac verse forms and their use in Delphic oracles. In essence, Parke suggests “that the Pythia’s responses...were normally framed in hexameters, never in elegiacs [unless literary fictions], but occasionally in iambs...on occasions when the Pythia had to convey a refusal in verse to the enquirer’s request with often some degree of contempt.”⁴³² It is certainly somewhat difficult to believe that the Pythia, a supposedly simple, uneducated peasant woman, even when naturally endowed with poetic ability as Plutarch supposes some were, could be capable of both composing the verse form appropriate to each enquirer’s situation and delivering the correct verse form *ex tempore*. Therefore,

⁴²⁹ Paus. 10.5.7, transl. Jones; Parke 1945: 66.

⁴³⁰ Parke 1940: 89; Parke & Wormell 1956a: viii.

⁴³¹ Strab. 9.3.5; Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 407b; Parke 1940: 85; Dodds 1951: 93; McLeod 1961: 320.

⁴³² Parke 1945: 63, 64.

understandably, Flacelière insists on the impossibility of an uneducated Pythia ever being capable of producing verse.⁴³³ Similarly, because McLeod contends that “the bardic art bespeaks long apprenticeship, whereas the Pythia was a poor peasant woman,” he believes that, when the *prophetai/hiereis* were proposed for selection by lot, “one requisite was a predisposition to oral poetry.”⁴³⁴ Certainly, when Parke claims that hexameter verse is not difficult to improvise, he is proposing the “*Prophetes*,” not the Pythia, as composer.⁴³⁵ In contrast, when Roux, as cited by Maurizio (1993), describes the oracles’ hexameters as simple, banal and stereotypical, he is able to explicitly support the Pythia as the composer of such poor versification.⁴³⁶

Incidentally, it is interesting that modern scholars are not noticeably perturbed by a similar conundrum presented by Tacitus and pertaining to the mantic procedure of the Apolline Clarian Oracle: “[A] male priest...hears the number and names of the consultants, but no more, then...—though ignorant generally of writing and of metre—delivers his response in set verses dealing with the subject each inquirer has in mind.”⁴³⁷ In fact, the Clarian male prophet apparently did not even hear or know the enquirer’s question, yet he uttered Apollo’s responses, in verse. Perhaps the general lack of modern response (apart from Parke’s previously mentioned theory that an official versifier may have assisted the Clarian prophet) can be attributed to the fact that the Clarian prophet was an ignorant, uneducated man rather than an ignorant, uneducated woman.

⁴³³ Flacelière 1965: 52.

⁴³⁴ McCleod 1961: 320.

⁴³⁵ Parke 1967a: 84.

⁴³⁶ Maurizio 1993:34-35.

⁴³⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 2.54, transl. Jackson.

The question of whether the Pythia possessed the ability to versify also hints at the fundamental issue concerning how a Pythia was chosen, besides the personality and behavioral qualities mentioned earlier in this chapter. Although Plutarch points out that some Pythias were more adept at versification than others, he does not claim that they were chosen for this ability. The reality is that there is little indication in ancient sources as to how a Pythia was chosen. Dodds speaks for all scholars with an interest in the workings of the Delphic Oracle: “One would like to be told how she was chosen in the first instance, and how prepared for her high office; but practically all we know with certainty is that the Pythia of Plutarch’s day was the daughter of a poor farmer, a woman of honest upbringing and respectable life, but with little education or experience of the world.”⁴³⁸ Roux, as cited by Sissa (1990), suggests that “the Pythia was the most celebrated [of all the ministers of the Delphic cult], and that is why we know so little about her: the Greeks knew her too well.”⁴³⁹ Perhaps it is possible that certain Delphian families contributed more Pythias, and possibly more gifted versifiers, than others. However, again, there is no suggestion in any ancient (or modern for that matter) source of hereditary prophetic predisposition playing a part in the choice of a potential Pythia. Parke and Wormell offer only the following: “How a Pythia was selected is never mentioned, but no doubt the position was gradually acquired by service to Apollo...If so, one must suppose there was a whole guild of consecrated women of mature years, who served in the temple, and who would provide a natural recruiting ground for the post of Pythia.”⁴⁴⁰ However, Parke and Wormell also note that “inscriptions show that by the 3rd century A.D. the post [of Pythia] had become associated with the priestly families.” For

⁴³⁸ Dodds 1951: 72.

⁴³⁹ Sissa 1990: 20.

⁴⁴⁰ Parke 1939: 33; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 35-36.

example, one memorial inscription mentions “the daughter of a Hosius and granddaughter of a Priest and a Pythia.”⁴⁴¹

One final note on the Delphic oracles themselves concerns the fact that there is no ancient mention (and little consequent modern comment) concerning the issue of whether Delphi kept records of Delphic oracles equivalent to the scribes’ records of consultations at Claros or the written oracles stored in the *chresmographeion* at Didyma.⁴⁴² What we know of the content of Delphic oracles comes primarily from ancient literary sources.⁴⁴³

Here follows a summary (unsupported by ancient accounts) of all the possible roles that various early modern scholars (but no ancient authors) assign to the priesthood during the chain of communication: the priesthood receives the enquirer’s question, composes an appropriate response for the Pythia to utter from the tripod, puts the enquirer’s question to the Pythia, conveys her response to the enquirer, and versifies and interprets her response as needed. The only role not denied the Pythia, acting in her capacity as Apollo’s mouthpiece, is the utterance of the oracles.

Adyton

Much of what early modern scholars suggest about the *megaron*, *adyton*, and their occupants must be viewed as speculative because, as previously mentioned, the “disturbed condition of the remains at the west end of the temple makes any detailed

⁴⁴¹ Parke 1939: 34; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 36.

⁴⁴² Johnston 2008: 77, 85.

⁴⁴³ Parke 1939: v; Parke & Wormell 1956b: vii.

reconstruction of the building most uncertain.”⁴⁴⁴ Nevertheless, assuming that the Delphic mantic consultation took place in the *adyton* in the *megaron*, in the southwestern corner, and at a lower level than the rest, of Apollo’s temple, Parke and Wormell tentatively speculate that it “would be impossible to exclude completely the possibility of some recess below the floor level of the temple,”⁴⁴⁵ and further that the “lowest level possible beneath the floor of the temple would be 2 metres, which would just allow for the possibility that there was a small basement room in which the Pythia could have stood upright.”⁴⁴⁶ The furthest or innermost, and possibly lowest, portion, the *adyton*, was where the Pythia prophesied, and only she entered this part of the *megaron*.⁴⁴⁷ The *megaron*, including the *adyton*, comprised a relatively, even surprisingly, small room, a space a mere nine feet by sixteen feet.⁴⁴⁸

The *adyton* contained the tripod that the Pythia mounted in order to prophesy, a golden statue of Apollo, the *omphalos* (a stone representing the center or navel of the world), the tomb of Dionysus, and Apollo’s sacred laurel (either a tree or possibly representative branches), which the Pythia perhaps grasped and shook while prophesying.⁴⁴⁹ The *adyton* appears to have been somewhat crowded.

Several persons were present in the *megaron* during a consultation. Of course, the Pythia (in the *adyton* itself) was present together with the enquirer (or enquirers if the petitioner

⁴⁴⁴ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 21.

⁴⁴⁵ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 21.

⁴⁴⁶ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 28.

⁴⁴⁷ Holland 1933: 201; Flacelière 1965: 44-45.

⁴⁴⁸ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 29.

⁴⁴⁹ Oppé 1904: 223; Parke 1939: 30; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 29; Flacelière 1965: 44.

was an official delegation of ambassadors from a city-state), members of the Delphic priesthood, and possibly the consultant's *proxenus*, or local sponsor or representative.⁴⁵⁰ The *megaron* seems to have been as crowded as the *adyton* that comprised part of it. The *megaron*'s relatively small, nine-by-sixteen feet, dimensions now seem almost impossibly tiny.

Dodds, Parke, and Wormell share the belief, implied by Plutarch's account of a fatal consultation, that the Pythia was clearly audible to everyone present in the *megaron*.⁴⁵¹ This is an important admission because, if everyone, including the enquirer, present at a consultation was able to hear Pythia's words, it would be unlikely that the priesthood could have later reported an altered or completely different response without revealing itself, and by implication the Delphic Oracle, as blatantly fraudulent.⁴⁵² Lloyd-Jones claims that the Pythia's "reply was shouted."⁴⁵³ Why he believes the Pythia needed to shout in order to be heard in a space a mere nine-by-sixteen feet is puzzling.

As mentioned in a previous chapter of this dissertation, the instances when the Pythia spontaneously addressed enquirers such as Lycurgus and Eetion seem to imply that she could see them from her seat on the tripod as they entered and that it then follows that they must have been able to see her, too.⁴⁵⁴ However, as Parke and Wormell, who favor the priesthood as controller of the Delphic consultation, so succinctly and cynically point out, this "would not have been very difficult for the priesthood to contrive, if they had

⁴⁵⁰ Parke 1939: 30; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 32.

⁴⁵¹ Dodds 1951: 74; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 28, 29.

⁴⁵² Parke 1940: 85; Dodds 1951: 74; Parke 1967a: 151.

⁴⁵³ Lloyd-Jones 1976: 67.

⁴⁵⁴ Hdt. 1.65, 5.92.

really applied themselves to the problem.”⁴⁵⁵ Several modern scholars propose that a veil, a curtain, or a wall (with a door) between the *adyton* proper and *megaron*, and/or a lower level for the *adyton* proper, may all, in fact, have served to obscure the view of the Pythia from the other occupants of the *megaron* proper.⁴⁵⁶ Finally, to muddy the waters even further, Oppé suggests that the word *adyton* “means no more than the interior of the temple.”⁴⁵⁷

The most glaring feature of this early 20th century era’s coverage of the Pythia’s role in the Delphic Oracle is the sidelining of the Pythia in favor of the showcasing of the Delphic priesthood, placed front and center of every step in the chain of communication during every Delphic consultation. That this modern depiction endured unchallenged for 39 years is astounding. A tentative explication of this astonishing and sustained departure from all ancient accounts is attempted in the conclusion of this dissertation. However, the views of post-1978 scholars must be explored first because, as mentioned in the introductions to this dissertation and to this chapter, 1978 was the year of publication for Fontenrose’s *The Delphic Oracle*, which heralded a new period in modern scholarly opinions concerning the role of the Pythia in the Delphic Oracle.

⁴⁵⁵ Parke 1939: 32; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 34.

⁴⁵⁶ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 29; Flacelière 1965: 47; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 66.

⁴⁵⁷ Oppé 1904: 223.

Chapter 6:

Late 20th Century Scholastic Views of the Pythia's Role

In 1925, Joseph Edward Fontenrose earned an undergraduate degree in political science at the University of California, Berkeley. In the same year, after attending a course on Greek religion, he changed his postgraduate field of study to the subject of Greek religion. Like Parke, Fontenrose was a product of his time, but on another continent. Women were admitted to Berkeley in 1870, and women in California were granted the vote in 1911, nine years before the United States constitution was amended to grant all American women the right to vote.

In 1934, Fontenrose began writing a book about the Delphic Oracle, and his consequent *The Delphic Oracle* was eventually published in 1978. Brenk remarks on “the long time it took to complete the book.”⁴⁵⁸ (Incidentally, it took Fontenrose even longer to write his book on Didyma: 1933-1988.) Forrest (1982) praises Fontenrose’s work: “The accounts that he gives of the nature and transmission of oracular responses and especially of mantic procedure are clear, thorough, and sensible, among the best we have, and the general air of skepticism that he breathes over them nothing if not healthy.”⁴⁵⁹ However, Forrest ultimately expresses a preference for “Parke’s moderation” rather than “Fontenrose’s austerity” because those “a little less cautious find that Parke ‘works.’ Fontenrose does not.”⁴⁶⁰ Perhaps Forrest’s reservation may be best illustrated by comparing Stubbs’s description of Parke’s work as “primarily one not of controversy but

⁴⁵⁸ Brenk 1980: 700.

⁴⁵⁹ Forrest 1982b: 428.

⁴⁶⁰ Forrest 1982b: 429.

of information” with Robertson’s (1982) observations that, while “much current doctrine about the Delphic oracle does indeed deserve to be challenged and supplanted,” Fontenrose’s attempt to do so fails due to his “frontal attack on every article of ‘Delphic belief’” and his “zeal for tilting at windmills.”⁴⁶¹ Fontenrose certainly applied his unsparingly stringent rationality to the determination of the historicity and authenticity of the Delphic oracles. His iconoclastic *The Delphic Oracle* left classical scholars desperately clutching a mere 103 “genuine” oracles (of the more than 600 original oracles).⁴⁶²

For the purposes of this dissertation, Fontenrose’s most valuable contribution is his unwavering insistence on a return to the roles of Pythia and Delphic priesthood as depicted in ancient accounts. Fontenrose does not permit ancient sources to be ignored, discarded, or contradicted without the provision of essential evidence for consideration. One is allowed to speculate, but one is not allowed to make a claim without supplying evidence or at least a supporting argument. Fontenrose could be describing himself when he praises Amandry because “his judgments are always sensible and his conclusions always possible. He shows himself clearheaded, skeptical of traditional assumptions, to which he prefers the evidence presented by the sources and by archeology.”⁴⁶³ Here is Fontenrose at his, unusually restrained, best: “I have encountered a kind of Delphic piety: there are persons who want to believe in the Delphic Oracle as conventionally presented in modern literature (but not in ancient literature, as we shall see).”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ Stubbs 1942: 90; Robertson 1982: 361, 363.

⁴⁶² Dietrich 1980: 235; Mikalson 1980: 180; Bynum 1983: 309.

⁴⁶³ Fontenrose 1952: 448.

⁴⁶⁴ Fontenrose 1978: xiv.

As will become apparent, not all post-1978 scholars agree with Fontenrose's stance on all issues concerning the relative roles of the Pythia and the Delphic priesthood. Certainly, Maurizio (1993) follows Fontenrose's lead in the return to the ancient sources' account of the Delphic mantic session, but for reasons (primarily comparison with cross-cultural phenomena pertaining to spirit possession) that differ somewhat from Fontenrose's arguments, and Bowden (2005) sees merits in Fontenrose's views, but subject to Bowden's own analytical and carefully reasoned evaluation.

Pythia

Modern scholars of this post-1978 era, from both classical and other academic disciplines, hold and voice opinions about the Pythia and her role in the Delphic Oracle. Many of them support the ancient sources' accounts and, therefore, Fontenrose's argument that the Pythia was responsible for uttering the Delphic oracles to enquirers in response to their questions.

With reference to the person of the Pythia, Parker (1985) and Bowden continue the early 20th century tradition of agreement with Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch's depiction of the Pythia as an ordinary, respectable, uneducated, free-born Delphian peasant over the age of fifty.⁴⁶⁵ However, Bowden suspects that the Pythia must "have required some kind of training" in order to fulfill her position as Apollo's mouthpiece.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁵ Diod. Sic. 16.26.6; Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 405c-d; Parker 1985: 300; Bowden 2005: 16, 28.

⁴⁶⁶ Bowden 2005: 16.

Clark (1983), an anthropologist studying a 20th century Greek rural community, reports that a “man’s status peaked in middle age” whereas “[t]raditionally in old age a woman reached the peak of her status and autonomy,” and Cohen (1989) believes that, although one “cannot, of course, simply assume cultural identity over time,” Mediterranean communities tend to display “persistence of cultural patterns (ideological and behavioural) defining the parameters of permissible and impermissible sexual roles and conduct.”⁴⁶⁷ Therefore, Clark and Cohen’s combined views may well support the ancient portrait of an unusually autonomous Pythia of at least 50 years of age—a considerable age by ancient standards where the median age at death for women in Classical Athens is calculated to have been 34.6 years.⁴⁶⁸ Furthermore, Diodorus Siculus had stated that “an elderly woman of fifty should declare the oracles and that she should be dressed in the costume of a virgin”⁴⁶⁹ This suggests an unusual, bizarre, even grotesque, physical appearance for the Pythia. Maurizio also points out that a “cross-cultural perspective shows that women have often been the agents of possession.”⁴⁷⁰ In addition, comparison of the Pythia with cross-cultural studies of other examples of spirit possession reveals that many of the unusual features of the Pythia and her performance can be explained as randomizing devices serving to “insure that divination is an ‘objective’ system”⁴⁷¹ and thus confirming the Pythia’s authenticity and authority as Apollo’s mouthpiece.⁴⁷² On occasions, ancient sources even describe the Pythia as addressing enquirers in an

⁴⁶⁷ Clark 1983: 121; Cohen 1989: 5.

⁴⁶⁸ Blundell 1995: 112.

⁴⁶⁹ Diod. Sic. 16.26.6, transl. Sherman.

⁴⁷⁰ Maurizio 1993: 45.

⁴⁷¹ Maurizio 1995: 81.

⁴⁷² Maurizio 1993: 64; Papalexandrou 2005: 207.

assertive, brusque, dismissive, and/or critical manner.⁴⁷³ This unusual female behavior also indicates, and serves to enhance, her authority as the mouthpiece of Apollo and her authenticity as inspired diviner of the god's will, for a Greek woman in antiquity would not ordinarily have behaved in such an openly assertive manner.⁴⁷⁴ Maurizio and Papalexandrou (2005) believe that all the abovementioned factors (the Pythia's gender, age, somewhat bizarre virginal attire, and unusual assertiveness), combined with her verbal ambiguity and versifying abilities, can all be explained as randomizing devices that enhance the credibility of the Pythia, the consultation, the oracles, and the Delphic Oracle because these devices "indicate that the Pythia's possession was real and that her utterances were Apollo's."⁴⁷⁵

To the issue of how the Pythia may have been chosen as discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, Littleton (1986) adds his belief that the Pythia may have been selected for her ability to exhibit particular unusual behavioral traits such as a "susceptibility to possession."⁴⁷⁶ Again, cross-cultural studies of prophetic speech and behavior may offer useful insights into the interpretation of the manifestations of Pythian possession. Wilson (1979), writing about ancient Israelite prophecy, documents that inspired prophets display characteristic and stereotypical speech and behavior that are both different from their everyday, normal speech and behavior and that are recognized by their contemporary audience as being the manifestation of prophetic inspiration.⁴⁷⁷

Plutarch seems to distinguish between the Pythia's everyday and prophetic behavior

⁴⁷³ Hdt. 4.157; Paus. 5.21.5.

⁴⁷⁴ Parker 1985: 300-301; Maurizio 1993: 46; Papalexandrou 2005: 207-208.

⁴⁷⁵ Maurizio 1995: 81-83, 86; Papalexandrou 2005: 207-208.

⁴⁷⁶ Littleton 1986: 83.

⁴⁷⁷ Wilson 1979: 327-329, 331, 333.

when he describes her as regaining “calm and tranquillity once she has left her tripod and its exhalations.”⁴⁷⁸ Therefore, one can conclude that the Pythia could reasonably have exhibited recognizable prophetic behavior (verbal ambiguity, versification, and assertiveness) without necessarily being reduced to the state of verbal incoherence and wild frenzy suggested by some early 20th century scholars. In fact, Maurizio points out that Plutarch’s colleague Nicander, who witnessed the fatal, forced consultation discussed in Chapter 4, obviously did not consider “inarticulate shrieking and tossing” to be normal behavior for a prophetically inspired Pythia.⁴⁷⁹

With reference to the ancient reports of possible Pythian subornation, many later modern scholars confirm their earlier colleagues’ concession that the bribery of the Pythia—not of the priesthood—may be considered evidence that she was the one who spoke, and was therefore free to speak, the oracles directly to the enquirer.⁴⁸⁰ This admission serves to support her as the autonomous speaker of Apollo’s oracles.

Writing in 2007, Connelly makes the following claim:

We stand at a transitional moment in Delphic studies, when many long-held assumptions regarding the ancient sources for the Pythia are under review. The revisionist approach comes from both the scientific and the literary/historical spheres and calls into question many broadly held beliefs resulting from modern skepticism about the veracity of the ancient source material.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁸ Plut. *Amatorius* 759b, transl. Minar, Sandbach & Helmbold.

⁴⁷⁹ Plut. *De def. or.* 438a-b; Maurizio 1995: 74.

⁴⁸⁰ Fontenrose 1978: 224; Price 1985: 142; Maurizio 1993: 62; 1995: 72; 2001: 38; Compton 1994: 222-223; Bowden 2005: 28; Papalexandrou 2005: 205-206.

⁴⁸¹ Connelly 2007: 72.

Connelly refers firstly to the 1996 resurrection and transformation by geologists of the ancient sources' chasm-and-vapor theory of inspiration. Fontenrose and Price (1985), like Parke, Wormell, and Whitaker before them, reject the chasm-and-vapor theory as the source of the Pythia's inspiration on the grounds that archeology demonstrates that there is no chasm.⁴⁸² However, from 1996 through 2008, modern scientists confirm, and advance our knowledge about, the source of the Pythia's inspiration as described by ancient sources. Since 1996, geological studies advocate a gaseous-vent theory (release of gas through fissured rock) to replace the ancient chasm-and-vapor theory (vapors rising out of a cleft in the earth). The findings of the French archeologists are, therefore, quite correct. There is no cleft in the floor of the *adyton*. However, what is directly below the *adyton* is the intersection of two geological faults: the roughly west-east Delphi fault and the north-south Kerna fault.⁴⁸³ Seismotectonic activity (as possibly occurred, for example, during and after the earthquakes of 730 and 373 BCE) caused movement, friction and heating of the rock faces along the fault lines. This friction and heating caused fracturing and fissuring of bituminous (petroleum-bearing) limestone rocks, increasing their permeability and releasing light gases, possibly dissolved in rising water, to the earth's surface in the *adyton*.⁴⁸⁴ The inspiration-providing gas is thought to have been ethylene, which smells sweetish and produces a state of mild euphoria when inhaled in low doses.⁴⁸⁵ Modern geologists, therefore, also appear to confirm those earlier theories of Cicero, Plutarch, Dempsey, and Flacelière: "Seismic waves associated with an earthquake...virtually closed a fissure(s) below the temple [and] caused local collapse of

⁴⁸² Fontenrose 1978: 202-203; Price 1985: 140.

⁴⁸³ De Boer, Hale & Chanton 2001: 708.

⁴⁸⁴ Higgins & Higgins 1996: 80-81; De Boer & Hale 2000: 399; Piccardi 2000: 651; De Boer, Hale & Chanton 2001: 708-709; Etioppe et al 2006: 821; Piccardi et al 2008: 5.

⁴⁸⁵ De Boer & Hale 2000: 408; De Boer, Hale & Chanton 2001: 709-710.

the temple floor.”⁴⁸⁶ The irony of Oppé supporting his rejection of the chasm-and-vapor theory with the claim that “the question of the chasm and its vapours falls so definitely into the sphere of geology”⁴⁸⁷ is now revealed. It is geology itself that, rather than refuting the theory of the source of Pythian inspiration emanating from the earth, appears to support it.

The second issue that Connelly, writing in 2007, refers to is Maurizio’s 1993 (and subsequent) and Bowden’s 2005 support of Fontenrose’s 1978 refutation of the long-held modern assumption “that ancient authors exaggerated, or wholly invented, the role of the priestess as the primary agent of oracular pronouncements at Delphi.”⁴⁸⁸ Fontenrose, Maurizio, and Bowden all support the ancient portrayal of a Pythia who consistently spoke calmly, clearly, and directly to the enquirers.⁴⁸⁹ Bowden acknowledges both the Pythia’s ability “to speak freely” with “no restriction on what she might say” and her consequent unusual autonomy.⁴⁹⁰ A sampling of their respective viewpoints includes the following claims: “[T]he Pythia spoke directly and coherently to the consultants with a simple, clear response,”⁴⁹¹ “spirit possession enabled and authorized a Delphian woman to deliver her prophetic utterances orally and intelligibly to those who visited Delphi,”⁴⁹² and “the petitioner would ask his question, and the Pythia would reply directly to him,

⁴⁸⁶ De Boer & Hale 2000: 411.

⁴⁸⁷ Oppé 1904: 232.

⁴⁸⁸ Connelly: 2007: 72.

⁴⁸⁹ Fontenrose 1978: 10, 212; Maurizio 1995: 69, 72, 85, 86; Bowden 2005: 16, 19, 21.

⁴⁹⁰ Bowden 2005: 25, 38.

⁴⁹¹ Fontenrose 1978: 228.

⁴⁹² Maurizio 1995: 86.

speaking clearly and straightforwardly.”⁴⁹³ Robertson (1987), too, insists that “it is always the Pythia, no one else, who speaks for Apollo.”⁴⁹⁴

This reassertion of the Pythia’s role in the Delphic Oracle offers a depiction that once again resembles that presented in ancient sources. Bowden summarizes this “central simplicity” of “the procedure at the centre of the consultation process” as “a man asked a woman a question, and the woman answered.”⁴⁹⁵

Delphic Priesthood

It may be expected from the above view of an empowered Pythia that the role proposed below for the Delphic priesthood would be one of corresponding support, rather than total control, of the oracular consultative process. However, as the following discussions of both the Delphic priesthood and the chain of communication show, some post-1978 modern scholars are reluctant to abandon the views of early 20th century colleagues even though these views are not explicitly attested to by ancient sources.

Scholarship since 1978 offers some new interpretations regarding the structure and role of the Delphic priesthood. Fontenrose maintains, as did Flacelière in the early 20th century era, that there were two *hierais*, which he supports with evidence from inscriptions found on walls and monuments of Apollo’s sanctuary that record

⁴⁹³ Bowden 2005: 21.

⁴⁹⁴ Robertson 1987: 5.

⁴⁹⁵ Bowden 2005: 33.

manumissions that took place in Apollo's temple.⁴⁹⁶ Hopkins (1978) concludes, based on these same inscriptions, that the Delphic priests' term of office, at least in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, lasted on average only ten years.⁴⁹⁷ In addition to the (at least) one *prophetes* who attended all mantic sessions, Fontenrose suggests that at least three *hosioi* were also always present.⁴⁹⁸

Fontenrose inclines to Parke's view of the *prophetes* as the chief presiding *hiereus* during any consultation, but, where Parke described this official as actually speaking, delivering or officially conveying the oracle to the enquirer, Fontenrose, while conceding this possibility, tends to propose a more limited role of overseer, attendant, and administrator for the presiding *prophetes*.⁴⁹⁹ Forrest (1982) and Littleton (1986), on the other hand, incline to the early 20th century view of a more frankly interpretative, editorial, or even authorial role for the priesthood.⁵⁰⁰ Likewise, Evans (1982) and Padel (1993) also perpetuate the earlier portrayal of a puppet Pythia, stage-managed and controlled by members of the Delphic priesthood.⁵⁰¹

In contrast, Compton (1994) points out that the *prophetes* "is not shown as taking part in the consultation at any point. Thus, this official seems to be merely a presiding Delphic priest in Herodotus...Herodotus gives us no evidence that the presiding male Delphic

⁴⁹⁶ Fontenrose 1978: 218; Hopkins 1978:133.

⁴⁹⁷ Hopkins 1978: 151.

⁴⁹⁸ Fontenrose 1978: 219.

⁴⁹⁹ Parke 1940: 85; Fontenrose 1978: 218.

⁵⁰⁰ Forrest 1982a: 307; Littleton 1986: 84, 89.

⁵⁰¹ Evans 1982: 27; Padel 1993: 8.

priest played any great part in the mantic session.”⁵⁰² Price believes, echoing Plutarch’s description of his own priestly duties, that the “function of priests was principally ritual” as they “preside over sacrifices,” act as “central figures in most festivals,” and are “prominent in processions.”⁵⁰³ Again, when Flower (2008) argues that a “priest’s prime responsibility as *hiereus* was to manage offerings, sacrifices, and the sanctuary itself and all its property, all of which were *hiera* (sacred),” he appears to echo Euripides and his Hermes’ description of Ion as “the steward and trusted chamberlain of all the god’s possessions.”⁵⁰⁴ Lloyd-Jones, perched on the cusp between the modern eras, and in spite of the fact that, for the most part in the previous chapter of this dissertation, he advocates a major priestly role in mediation between Pythia and enquirers, nevertheless summarizes and defends the role of members of the Delphic priesthood as follows: “Their aim was to help Apollo to fulfill his promise to give advice to those who sought it, and in doing so to maintain the splendor of the sanctuary and to keep out of trouble.”⁵⁰⁵ However, an experienced, long-serving priesthood, such as that at Delphi, nevertheless possessed the potential to exert considerable influence and power. After all, the “efficacious performance of the oracle depended on a sound administration which provided the Pythia, the priesthood, the ritual enactments, the management of material resources, and the ‘public relations’ with the outside world.”⁵⁰⁶

Finally, while Robertson and Morgan (1990) join early 20th century scholars in remarking on Delphi’s accessible site on a network of important trade routes, no post-1978 scholar

⁵⁰² Compton 1994: 222.

⁵⁰³ Plut. *An seni respublica gerenda sit.* 792f; Price 1999: 68.

⁵⁰⁴ Eur. *Ion* 54-55, transl. Kovacs; Flower 2008: 58.

⁵⁰⁵ Lloyd-Jones 1976: 65.

⁵⁰⁶ Papalexandrou 2005: 206.

goes so far as to promote the earlier era's suggestion of the existence of a priestly intelligence agency.⁵⁰⁷

To summarize the above discussion of the structure and duties of the priesthood, although post-1978 scholars concede that the Pythia was the speaker of the oracles, they are nevertheless somewhat divided on whether the priesthood played a correspondingly limited administrative role or, in fact, participated actively in the oracular consultation itself (see below).

Chain of Communication

As in the previous chapter, in the light of the limited explicit information on the topic provided by the ancient sources, what follows must be considered the product of educated speculation of classical scholars since 1978.

With regard to which member of the Delphic oracular personnel first heard the enquirer's question, Parker believes, and Fontenrose and Bowden are prepared to entertain the possibility, that, as proposed by early 20th century scholars, before the consultation took place, the enquirer may well have discussed his question, and even suggested the answer to his own query, during pre-consultation contact with members of the Delphic priesthood.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁷ Robertson 1982: 358; Morgan 1990:116.

⁵⁰⁸ Fontenrose 1978: 224; Parker 1985: 301; Bowden 2005: 21.

In contrast, Maurizio sets the following limits on her view of the Delphic priesthood's role in mantic enquiries: "In addition to formulating the clients' questions, before the consultation, perhaps by converting them, where appropriate, into the form 'is it better for us to...?', after the consultation they may have tried to help the consultant *interpret* the Pythia's words. They did not reshape the words. They did not convert them into verses."⁵⁰⁹ Moreover, she dismisses the early 20th century scholarly contention that the enquirer's question, verbal or written, was always submitted to the priesthood before the consultation with the Pythia took place.⁵¹⁰ Fontenrose also continually insists that it was always the enquirer who put his own question directly and verbally to the Pythia herself.⁵¹¹

In summary, therefore, the majority view of post-1978 scholarship appears to be that, although the priesthood may have been the first to learn and possibly reshape the enquirer's question, the enquirer himself spoke its final form to the Pythia.

The next logical link in the chain of communication concerns the identity of the speaker of the oracles to the enquirer. There is certainly strong post-1978 scholarly support for the Pythia answering the enquirer directly and clearly.⁵¹² Fontenrose reveals two reasons for his ability to support the Pythia as the speaker of the responses. First, he believes she was fully capable of performing this role because he maintains that the questions were merely straightforward requests for choices between alternatives or for simple sanctions

⁵⁰⁹ Maurizio 1995: 86.

⁵¹⁰ Maurizio 1993: 29-30.

⁵¹¹ Fontenrose 1978: 217.

⁵¹² Fontenrose 1978: 6, 10, 197, 212; Compton 1994: 221, 223; Bowden 2005: 21.

of predetermined (by enquirer) decisions.⁵¹³ Secondly, he supports the Pythia as the one who replied directly and verbally to enquirers because this depiction conforms to the testimony of all ancient sources.⁵¹⁴ This last argument is endorsed by several other post-1978 scholars: Dewald (1981), Robertson, Maurizio, and Bowden.⁵¹⁵ Assuming that the Pythia uttered the oracles, one must consider whether she was capable of composing the oracles she uttered. Fontenrose and Maurizio certainly both believe that she was indeed fully capable of composing her own oracular utterances.⁵¹⁶ However, Littleton follows early 20th century scholarship in asserting that, even when the Pythia uttered the oracle, the *prophetes* intervened by receiving the Pythia's answer to the enquirer's question and, in turn, presenting its final form to the enquirer.⁵¹⁷

Concerning the form of the oracles themselves, several post-1978 scholars concede that the Pythia's spoken oracles may have been recorded in writing, possibly by the enquirer himself,⁵¹⁸ by the *prophetes*,⁵¹⁹ or by some other interested person after the event.⁵²⁰ Certainly, the previously mentioned presence of poets at consultations and/or bards in the temple precinct seems to imply the possible production of professionally composed and written answers. However, this theory may be an extrapolation derived from factors known to have operated at other ancient oracles of Apollo, such as the thespiod and secretaries at Claros and/or the *chresmographieon* at Didyma.⁵²¹ Maurizio believes that

⁵¹³ Fontenrose 1978: 223.

⁵¹⁴ Fontenrose 1978: 204, 213, 217.

⁵¹⁵ Dewald 1981: 121; Robertson 1987: 5; Maurizio 1993: 34; 1995: 69; 2001: 39; Bowden 2005: 19.

⁵¹⁶ Fontenrose 1978: 216; Maurizio 2001: 39.

⁵¹⁷ Littleton 1986: 84.

⁵¹⁸ Bowden 2005: 21.

⁵¹⁹ Price 1985: 134.

⁵²⁰ Maurizio 2001: 39.

⁵²¹ Flacelière 1965: 29, 51.

“oracles were accepted (or rejected), interpreted (and during this process re-worded), remembered and recited by a community of believers,” and that this oral transmission of most oracles preceded their recording in ancient documentary sources at a later date, which, therefore, would have preserved a later, but nevertheless accepted and respected, reception of the Pythia’s original verbal utterance.⁵²²

With regard to the issue of verse oracles, several post-1978 scholars concede that there existed an ancient expectation that the Delphic oracles should be delivered in verse worthy of the elevation and grandeur of Apollo’s Delphic Oracle.⁵²³ Morrison (1981) sides with early 20th century scholarship in claiming that the priesthood was the author of the (predominantly hexameter) verse versions of the Pythia’s utterances.⁵²⁴ Although Bowden admits the improbability of an uneducated Pythia’s producing verse, Compton and Fontenrose nevertheless suggest that she was perhaps capable of doing so.⁵²⁵ Compton states that, when prophesying, the “Pythia usually spoke in hexameter.”⁵²⁶

Fontenrose seems to follow Plutarch’s lead when he proposes that “some Pythias who had skill at manipulating verse formulae” would “spontaneously compose hexameters” while “less confident Pythias confined themselves to prose.”⁵²⁷ Flower points out that “the Pythia’s dactylic hexameters are fairly simple,” and that “[m]any of these hexameter

⁵²² Maurizio 1997: 313-4.

⁵²³ Fontenrose 1978: 99; Brenk 1980: 704; Maurizio 1993: 90; Bowden 2005: 38.

⁵²⁴ Morrison 1981: 99.

⁵²⁵ Fontenrose 1978: 223-224; Compton 1994: 222; Bowden 2005: 33.

⁵²⁶ Compton 1994: 222.

⁵²⁷ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 397b, 404-406b; Fontenrose 1978: 223.

oracles contain epic formulas that are also found in Homer and Hesiod.”⁵²⁸ Therefore, he believes that “[a]ny Pythia who had been exposed to epic hexameter could have composed the oracles,” and he also contends that “it is possible that the Pythia was a well-educated, and perhaps upper-class woman during the archaic and classical periods” and that, therefore, Plutarch’s depiction of a simple, uneducated Pythia “was probably not true of classical Greece.”⁵²⁹

Incidentally, Fontenrose, unlike Parke and Wormell before him, believes that “all trimeter responses are suspect,”⁵³⁰ and Morgan agrees with Plutarch that “ambiguity may have served as a protective device, to deflect criticism.”⁵³¹ Maurizio, in turn, is able to accept the Pythia as versifier because she attributes the Pythia’s poetic ability to her altered state of consciousness caused by spirit possession.⁵³² As mentioned earlier, this unusual poetic ability of the Pythia serves, therefore, as a randomizing device that confirms her authenticity and authority as Apollo’s mouthpiece.⁵³³ Thus, Maurizio obviously and absolutely rejects the priesthood as versifier.⁵³⁴ Finally, both Fontenrose and Maurizio concede ancient claims that, if neither the Pythia nor the *prophetes* provided the verse, perhaps professional poets may have attended consultations or waited outside the temple in order to supply this service.⁵³⁵

⁵²⁸ Flower 2008: 220.

⁵²⁹ Flower 2008: 50, 221, 230.

⁵³⁰ Fontenrose 1978:188.

⁵³¹ Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 407c-e; Morgan 1990: 156-157.

⁵³² Maurizio 1995: 79.

⁵³³ Maurizio 1993: 64.

⁵³⁴ Maurizio 1993: 65.

⁵³⁵ Fontenrose 1978: 215; Maurizio 1997: 313.

To sum up, while several scholars of this post-1978 era hold fast to the ancient accounts of a Pythia who spoke the oracles directly to the enquirer, others seem to concur with early 20th century views both with regard to the priesthood's active contribution to the sequence of events that preceded and followed the Pythia's utterance of oracles and with reference to the Pythia's possible versifying abilities. Therefore, in spite of the lack of explicit evidence in ancient sources, there are those post-1978 scholars who adhere to their early 20th century colleagues' views that the priesthood may well have received the enquirer's question, put it to the Pythia, received her response, announced it to the enquirer, and also possibly interpreted and versified the responses as required.

Adyton

The post-1978 era makes few contributions to the existing picture of the *megaron* and *adyton*. The presence of a second statue of Apollo is added to the *adyton*.⁵³⁶ Price confirms the considerable number of people crowded into the nearer or outermost, and possibly highest, portion of the *megaron* and that the Pythia was clearly audible to everyone present.⁵³⁷

Fontenrose, Mikalson (1980), and Price are uncertain whether the Pythia could have been seen by everyone present.⁵³⁸ Morrison thinks not and points out that the famous Vulci vase-painting, c. 440-30 BCE, seems to indicate a physical column or division between

⁵³⁶ Price 1985:135.

⁵³⁷ Price 1985; 137, 142.

⁵³⁸ Fontenrose 1978: 226; Mikalson 1980: 179; Price 1985: 135-136.

the figures of Aegeus as enquirer and Themis as Pythia.⁵³⁹ However, Bowden argues that the feet of both figures overlap the front of the column, which, therefore, does not, in fact, represent a physical barrier between them.⁵⁴⁰ Fontenrose and Evans also remark on the instances when the Pythia spontaneously addressed enquirers such as Lycurgus and Eetion by name and the implication that she could, therefore, see them from her seat on the tripod as they entered and that they must then have been able to see her, too.⁵⁴¹

The most remarkable feature of Fontenrose's contribution to how at least some post-1978 scholars view the role of the Pythia in the Delphic Oracle is his insistence on a reversion to the facts as offered by ancient sources and his corresponding support for an essentially autonomous or self-empowered (if limited) role for the Pythia as the one who hears the enquirers' questions and speaks the oracles directly to enquirers during a Delphic consultation. However, scholarship since Fontenrose's book also reveals the persistence and resilience of certain of the early 20th century views of an oracular consultation, in particular the role of the priesthood in the chain of communication before, during, and after the mantic session. Perhaps some fundamental perception of reality or necessity underlies this enduring modern concept of members of the Delphic priesthood being responsible for carefully scripting, choreographing and controlling the Pythia's performance during a Delphic consultation. After all, the priesthood's duties must conceivably have entailed fulfilling some of the functions of present-day quality and damage-control officials in order to protect and perpetuate the reputation and prestige of the Delphic Oracle. Possible explanations for the persistent perpetuation of this expanded

⁵³⁹ Morrison 1981: 99-100.

⁵⁴⁰ Bowden 2005: 27.

⁵⁴¹ Fontenrose 1978: 226; Evans 1982: 24.

role for the priesthood and a corresponding diminution in the Pythia's role, coupled with the lack of scholarly explanation or evidence to support the claims, are explored in the conclusion of this dissertation.

Conclusion

There are several factors that may explain the departure of early 20th century scholarship from ancient accounts of the Delphic mantic procedure, and the shift in scholarly opinion since 1978 that resulted in the return of (at least some scholars of) this era to the ancient version of events. This conclusion briefly considers those factors which are, in my view, most pertinent. First, the different writing styles of Parke and Fontenrose, the most influential scholars on the topic, express, support and promote their respective views on how a Delphic mantic session was conducted. Secondly, the fact that no single ancient source provides a complete account of a Delphic consultation encouraged many modern scholars to construct their own view of the oracular event, but often (especially during the early 20th century) without the explanation and/or evidence to support their view. Thirdly, the effects of the combined gender bias of ancient Greeks, ancient authors, and modern scholars ought to be taken into account or at least acknowledged when the role of a female Pythia is the subject of discussion. Finally, the almost unbridgeable gulf between “the desperately alien quality of much of ancient Greek religious belief and practice”⁵⁴² and their modern counterparts, together with the influence of rationalism, pragmatism, and positivism on modern conceptions of religious belief, further confounds the acceptance of ancient divination in general, and of Apollo’s prophesying through the person of the Pythia in particular. These factors will now each be briefly addressed.

⁵⁴² Finley 1985: xiii.

Parke and Fontenrose: Changes in Language Use

Parke and Fontenrose, for all their differences in views and presentations of the role of the Pythia in the Delphic Oracle, were exact contemporaries. Both were born in 1903 CE and died in 1986 CE. However, as regards the control of the production and delivery of the Delphic oracles, in simplistic terms, Parke (assured of contemporary consensus) is pro-priesthood, and Fontenrose (assured of ancient support) is pro-Pythia. In their respective versions of *The Delphic Oracle*, Parke and Fontenrose's individual writing styles contribute to their works' profound and enduring influence on 20th and 21st century interpretations of the workings of the Delphic Oracle.

Since 1939, when Parke first claimed roles for the Delphic priesthood that ancient sources did not, he has tended to make use of certain auxiliary verbs that, while they may serve to build and underpin his hypothesis, also manage to simultaneously suggest the notion of necessity. For example, he states that this “poetic or prose form *must* [my italics] have been supplied by the prophet and his priestly or civic assessors in the sanctuary” and that “the words of the Pythia...*had to* [my italics] be announced to the enquirer officially by a prophet.”⁵⁴³ In spite of his conviction that the priesthood controlled every step of the consultative process, Parke is nevertheless forced to acknowledge that the ancient evidence supports the Pythia's delivery of the oracles.⁵⁴⁴ Parke is apparently prepared to accept the Pythia as the one who delivers (i.e. speaks or utters) the oracles provided the *prophetes* is the one who delivers (i.e. gives or conveys)

⁵⁴³ Parke 1939: 24, 31; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 25, 34.

⁵⁴⁴ Parke 1940: 85.

her utterance to the enquirer. Without support of ancient evidence, Parke nevertheless confers this role of mediator between Pythia and enquirer on the *prophetes*. The Pythia, Apollo's mouthpiece, can speak the oracles. She just cannot speak them directly to enquirers. Parke reserves this particular role in the oracular chain of communication for the priesthood. Ironically, when Parke rejects Holland's theory that the Pythia may have inhaled hemp fumes, this is done on the grounds that "it finds no confirmation in the ancient authorities."⁵⁴⁵ Nonetheless, contrary to all ancient evidence, Parke supports the Delphic priesthood as conveyor of the oracles to the enquirers.

In contrast to Parke above, when Fontenrose in 1987 presents his view of the Delphic Oracle and the Pythia's role in the Oracle, he speaks very factually and emphatically while presenting explicit evidence for his views. However, in his 1988 work on the Didymaeon Oracle, when the evidence is less clear and less certain, Fontenrose is careful to convey his uncertainty by always clearly announcing when he embarks on speculation. The phrases which he employs when heralding possibilities and suppositions rather than facts supported by evidence utilize a variety of grammatical forms that themselves imply possibility, probability, and/or speculation: "probably," "we may suppose," "if that is true," "I would suggest," "if so," "it is reasonable to suppose," "it seems unlikely," "it may be that," "one would surmise," and the like.⁵⁴⁶

To the credit of Parke, it should be noted that a change in his authorial style is already observable in his 1967 study, *The Oracles of Zeus*. The study's dust jacket blurb notes

⁵⁴⁵ Holland 1933: 214; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 30.

⁵⁴⁶ Fontenrose 1988: 60-61, 80, 82, 84-85.

that “Parke examines in detail the chief problems...while clearly distinguishing between what is certain, what is probable, and what is merely speculative.” Nevertheless, in his 1967 study, *Greek Oracles*, he continues to claim that “though the god’s mouthpiece was a woman—the *Pythia*—the oracle was officially conveyed to the enquirers by a man, the *Prophetes*.”⁵⁴⁷ By the time his *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor* is published in 1985, he frequently utilizes expressions conveying possibility: “it was probably,” “it is most likely,” the implication is that...but not necessarily,” “this description is largely based on hypothesis,” and the like.⁵⁴⁸ Such expressions obviously alert readers to when they are entering the realm of possibility and are invited to evaluate the arguments or evidence offered. Readers are, therefore, also encouraged to formulate their own opinions because the authors’ method of presentation is one of suggestion rather than fact or prescription.

In summary, Parke’s early style conveyed the impression (in particular, to those unfamiliar with the ancient evidence) that the *Pythia* played a subsidiary role during a Delphic mantic consultation whereas Fontenrose’s more circumspect, but not uncritical, style encouraged a return to a version of events that accorded with the ancient evidence.

Delphi and Its Oracle: Speculation

The Delphic mantic consultation does not appear to have been treated as a religious mystery about which discussion was forbidden. However, as the previous chapters of this dissertation indicate, no single ancient account provides a complete, detailed description

⁵⁴⁷ Parke 1967a: 31.

⁵⁴⁸ Parke 1985: 42, 107, 186, 219.

of a Delphic consultation.⁵⁴⁹ At any time during the Delphic Oracle's existence, there must have been a substantial number of people with knowledge of how a Delphic consultation was conducted and who were able and willing to share the details with their acquaintances.⁵⁵⁰ Perhaps the ancient Greeks knew so well how a consultation was conducted that they felt little need to supply a recorded description for their equally knowledgeable contemporaries.⁵⁵¹ Perhaps no ancient Greek ever envisaged an age in which no living person would have firsthand, or even reliable secondhand, knowledge about exactly how a Delphic consultation was conducted.⁵⁵² Alternatively, the consultative process could have been held obscure deliberately. As Papalexandrou proposes, "the Delphic authorities consciously avoided the propagation of any relevant accounts, thus considerably enhancing the mystique of the oracle."⁵⁵³

It is, therefore, understandable that this incomplete ancient depiction of the Delphic mantic procedure would encourage modern scholars to speculate about the entire consultative process, including the nature and extent of the Pythia's role. The many gaps in ancient sources quite naturally invite exploration. What is disappointing, however, is the frequent omission of the explicit reasoning that presumably underlies many early modern scholars' assertions. What follows below suggests one possible version of their omitted reasoning process.

⁵⁴⁹ Holland 1933: 201; Parke 1939: 18; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 17; Flacelière 1965: 43-44; Whittaker 1965: 22.

⁵⁵⁰ Parke 1939: 18; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 17; Flacelière 1965: 43-44.

⁵⁵¹ Parke 1939: 18; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 17; Whittaker 1965: 22; Parke 1967a: 80.

⁵⁵² Parke 1967a: 42, 80; Roux, G. (1976). *Delphes: Son Oracle et ses Dieux*. (Paris: Belles Lettres) qtd in Sissa 1990: 20.

⁵⁵³ Papalexandrou 2005: 206.

As an enquirer journeyed towards Delphi, he possibly met and conversed with fellow travelers making their own way towards Delphi. On arrival, the enquirer presumably met with his local representative (*proxenus*) in Delphi, found accommodation, ate in public places, visited the gymnasium, and mingled and conversed with locals and fellow enquirers. He (or his *proxenus*) almost certainly also established contact with members of the temple staff in order to initiate a consultation with the Pythia. Precedence and lot determined the order of Delphic consultations.⁵⁵⁴ Consequently, “if the press of business was great, those at the end had to postpone their consultation for a month.”⁵⁵⁵ It should also be noted that, in the Delphic Oracle’s heyday, assuming the Pythia(s) managed to hear and answer the questions of two enquirers per hour for 12 hours on the seventh day of each of the nine warmest months of the year,⁵⁵⁶ as few as 216 mantic consultations could conceivably have taken place each year. Inscriptional evidence of a possible lot oracle at Delphi has led several modern scholars to speculate that at least some enquirers may have availed themselves of cleromancy when access to inspired divination was not a feasible option.⁵⁵⁷

By the time an enquirer’s oracular consultation took place, it is not unreasonable to assume that a number of people, including members of the Delphic priesthood, who surely had occasion to also converse with the Pythia, had a fairly accurate notion not only as to the content of the enquirer’s (as yet not officially stated) question but also as to his hoped-for (but still officially secret) answer. For example, Robertson, in his discussion of

⁵⁵⁴ Aesch. *Eum.* 32; Eur. *Ion.* 908; Hdt. 1.54.

⁵⁵⁵ Parke 1943: 22.

⁵⁵⁶ Plut. *Quaest. Graec.* 292e-f; Plut. *De def. or.* 414b; Parke 1939: 18, 28; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 17, 30.

⁵⁵⁷ Parke & Wormell 1956a: 18-19; Fontenrose 1978: 220-223; Johnston 2008: 52-55.

the meaning of the famous “wooden wall” oracle, speculates that the “authorities at Delphi could not have failed to know beforehand what the Athenian consultants were going to ask,” and that “doubtless she [the Pythia] was ready for most of the official inquiries that we hear of in Herodotus.”⁵⁵⁸ In other words, it is possible that the Pythia was just as well informed about and prepared for many other mantic consultations, too.

Sustained, deliberate charlatanry is not to be imputed here. However, it is possible and surely permissible to imagine that service to Apollo’s temple, the institution that sustained the entire Delphic community, entailed a great number of interpersonal, even informal, encounters between various members of the temple staff, in the course of which casual conversation about scheduled enquirers, their questions, and possible outcomes of consultation occurred as a natural consequence of this frequent social contact between colleagues. Perhaps priestly priming of the Pythia in order to produce the most desirable and prudent response may have occurred. However, no express ancient evidence exists to support this contention. In fact, in the only two ancient accounts that clearly mention influence brought to bear on the Pythia, the agents are identified only as eminent Delphians, not explicitly as members of the Delphic priesthood: “Cobon son of Aristophantus, a man of very great power at Delphi,” who “over-persuaded Perialla, the prophetess” and “was banished from Delphi;” and “Timon son of Androbulus, as notable a man as any Delphian,” who advised the Athenians to employ supplication to obtain a second, more favorable, oracle (the “wooden wall” oracle) from the Pythia Aristonice.⁵⁵⁹ However, Dempsey must have had some of the above considerations in mind when he

⁵⁵⁸ Robertson 1987: 6.

⁵⁵⁹ Hdt. 6.66, 7.141-142, transl. Godley.

states that “[o]wing to the relations between the ‘prophet’ and the Pythia there was always the possibility of fraud.”⁵⁶⁰ Perhaps instead of the word “fraud,” one can substitute terms such as collaboration, coagency, and/or mutuality of Pythia and priesthood, the extension of normal relationships between people who encountered and conversed with one another on a daily basis and who all lived in the same community and worked for the same institution that sustained their community. Delphi existed because its inhabitants were in one way or another involved in the sanctuary, variously described by scholars as “a people of hotel-keepers,”⁵⁶¹ “a people set apart,”⁵⁶² “a city of Apollo’s servants,”⁵⁶³ and “a community of sanctuary servers.”⁵⁶⁴ Surely it would have been in the best interests of every member of this extended Delphic community to promote, protect, and preserve the reputation and prestige of the Delphic Oracle. As stated at the end of Chapter 6 of this dissertation, logically, rationally, it is difficult to believe that the Delphic priesthood would have placed the Oracle’s reputation, and the livelihood it ensured, in jeopardy by *not* closely monitoring the content and delivery of its oracles.

It is noteworthy that early 20th century scholars whose works were consulted for this research do not support their stated contradictions of ancient sources with explicit revelation of the reasoning process that underlies their views. Perhaps to do so would have seemed as needless as preaching to a converted choir of whose agreement one is already tacitly assured.

⁵⁶⁰ Dempsey 1918: 67.

⁵⁶¹ Poulson 1919: 35.

⁵⁶² Parke 1939: 125; Parke & Wormall 1956a: 107.

⁵⁶³ Parke 1939: 127; Parke & Wormall 1956a: 109.

⁵⁶⁴ Morgan 1990: 135.

Gender Bias: Ancient and Modern

Another possible factor contributing to the diversity and evolution of modern depictions of the Pythia's role may lie in the recognition of, and subsequent attempt to correct, the influence of possible gender bias in academic studies, including the field of classical scholarship. The evolution in, and consequent diversity of, scholarly opinion during the previous century can be at least partly attributed to 20th century concern with gender issues and to cross-cultural studies published on the topic of gender bias. Anthropology, ethnology, and sociology represent scholarly fields of study that acknowledge the ever-present reality of gender bias in both local participants and in field scholars themselves.⁵⁶⁵ Even experienced anthropologists are not necessarily immune to the influence of gender bias.⁵⁶⁶ Therefore, in anthropological field studies, gender bias and gender expectations of both the researched and the researchers are recognized and taken into consideration so that their effects can be countered wherever possible.⁵⁶⁷

Maurizio is exemplary in this regard when she defends her own depiction of the Pythia's role (as outlined in the previous chapter of this dissertation) with the following argument: "I should state that in the absence of more detailed information about a divinatory session at Delphi, my reconstruction might be said to be purely speculative as are all others. I believe, however, that it relies more on deduction from comparative anthropology than on

⁵⁶⁵ Clark 1983: 117.

⁵⁶⁶ Flower 2008: 11.

⁵⁶⁷ Clark 1983: 118.

silent assumptions or prejudices and that it is more consistent with ancient evidence.”⁵⁶⁸

While some classical scholars are similarly comfortable with applying comparative evidence from other fields, classical scholarship, in addition to its own possible gender bias, must also recognize and contend with the gender bias of the subjects of its particular field of study, the ancient Greeks themselves.

Classical scholarship is thus obliged to simultaneously acknowledge and accommodate the reality of gender bias and related agenda associated with the male authorship of its ancient, and modern, sources.⁵⁶⁹ In the face of ancient Greek gender bias, it is all the more unexpected, even astounding, that the ancient sources depict the Pythia as uttering the Delphic oracles directly to enquirers. However, Papalexandrou relates this phenomenon to the Pythia’s function “as a randomizing device,” the unusual nature of which serves to enhance the authenticity of her prophecies and, subsequently, the prestige of the Delphic Oracle itself.⁵⁷⁰

Referring specifically to the issue of gender bias of modern commentators, Gould and Clark warn that the topic is a sensitive and controversial one because it touches the core personal and emotional beliefs and experiences of individual scholars.⁵⁷¹ The author of this dissertation acknowledges the possibility that her gender may, in part, have influenced the choice and presentation of the topic of this dissertation.

⁵⁶⁸ Maurizio 1995: 79.

⁵⁶⁹ Pomeroy 1991: xv; Katz 1995: 30; Maurizio 1995: 85; Pomeroy 1995: xv; Clark 1996: 1.

⁵⁷⁰ Papalexandrou 2005: 207.

⁵⁷¹ Gould 1980: 42; Clark 1996: 1.

Ancient Greeks, ancient authors, and modern scholars all contribute to the potential minefield of possible gender bias and its influence on the depiction of the relative roles of a female Pythia and a male priesthood which lie at the heart of the operation of the most famous Greek oracle in the ancient world. Ancient Greek gender bias influenced the status and roles assigned to women in ancient Greece. Only male ancient Greeks were able to consult the Delphic Oracle.⁵⁷² Only male extant ancient Greek authors recorded the workings of the Delphic Oracle. Nevertheless, surprisingly, ancient sources depict the Pythia as uttering the Delphic oracles directly to male enquirers. This dissertation was able to cite the work of only male early 20th century classical scholars on the topic. In contrast, the contributions of post-1978 female scholars are many. Certainly, some post-1978 scholars appear to demonstrate greater awareness of gendered perspectives and more regard for ancient evidence than their earlier colleagues, facilitating a return to the ancient depiction of events during a Delphic oracular consultation.

Perhaps the gap between pre- and post-1978 scholastic interpretations of the Pythia's role is to some extent dependent on the academic and societal context in which the scholars themselves learn, work, and live. When the backgrounds of Parke and Fontenrose are compared, it seems feasible to imagine that Fontenrose—situated in a university which admitted women almost three-and-a-half decades before Parke's did, and living in a state which granted its women suffrage seventeen years before Parke's country did—would be more inclined to concede women (and the Pythia) roles and autonomy than Parke would

⁵⁷² Plut. *De E apud Delphos* 385c-d.

be. Furthermore, the above assumption could conceivably be extended to account for the evolution in other 20th century scholars' views of gender issues.

Religion: Ancient and Modern

For ancient Greeks, religion appears to have been a respectful expression of tradition and ritual.⁵⁷³ Because religious practice underpinned the socio-political foundation of the society in which they lived, they took care to pay due respect to religious tradition, even if only to avoid the potentially calamitous consequences of impiety for themselves, their families, and their communities.⁵⁷⁴ In essence, respectful religious observance was expected and delivered.

However, Flower cautions that “[b]elief was as important an aspect of religion to the ancient Greeks as it is to the adherents of monotheistic religions today—it is just that the Greeks believed in different things.”⁵⁷⁵ For example, the ancient Greeks believed that communication with the gods could be accomplished through divination.⁵⁷⁶ Therefore, “the Greeks had a great, and convinced, belief in prophecy and the inspiration which belonged to it.”⁵⁷⁷ Greeks consulted the Delphic Oracle because they believed that the god Apollo spoke through the person of the Pythia.⁵⁷⁸ Even occasional accounts of

⁵⁷³ Halliday 1913: 6; Parke 1939: 22; Parke & Wormell 1956a: 22; Whittaker 1965: 28; Parke 1977: 18, 191.

⁵⁷⁴ Bowden 2005: 158.

⁵⁷⁵ Flower 2008: 10.

⁵⁷⁶ Flower 2008: 8.

⁵⁷⁷ Knight 1970: 70.

⁵⁷⁸ Starr 1957: 46.

corruption, bribery and subornation did not deter Greeks from consulting the Delphic Oracle in good faith.⁵⁷⁹ When people want and need to believe, they (manage to) do so.

The above represents a view completely alien to our modern age in which outward religious observance is usually assumed to represent an expression of the inner personal faith of religious practitioners. Modern scholars wrestle with a fundamental and understandable difficulty in, even impossibility of, comprehending—or perhaps rather believing in—Greek religious beliefs and practices.⁵⁸⁰ After all, no modern scholar consulted for this dissertation (even those who may profess a personal religious belief) admits to a belief in Apollo, or in the Olympian pantheon.

In addition, since the Enlightenment, religious belief must contend with modern attitudes towards religion influenced by, among others, rationalism, empiricism, and/or positivism. Essentially, religious phenomena, like all other phenomena, are subjected to rational objective examination, and, if not proven to be veritable, may be considered to hold no validity and may, therefore, be discarded.

There are further inherent difficulties in attempting to reconcile ancient Greek religious practices, such as divination, with either modern personal religious fervor or rationalism. Modern scholars struggle with envisioning how and why ancient Greeks were able to accept and/or believe in oracles.⁵⁸¹ In an appeal to the rationalist mindset, Flower calls for tolerance of ancient divination on the grounds that, at the very least, divination represents

⁵⁷⁹ Dodds 1951: 74; Forrest 1982a: 307.

⁵⁸⁰ Finley 1985: xiii.

⁵⁸¹ Oppé 1904: 214.

a rational attempt to evaluate and interpret oracles and observable material phenomena in order to assist with decision-making.⁵⁸² However, modern classical scholars, who admire the ancient Greeks as “men of genius,”⁵⁸³ are naturally reluctant to impute to them a sincere belief in divination and, therefore, in the Delphic Oracle.⁵⁸⁴ In addition, if the Greeks were as intelligent as some modern scholars believe or want to believe they were, they could surely have managed to solve their own problems without needing to consult an oracle to do it for them.⁵⁸⁵ Maurizio contends that Parke’s views on the Pythia’s role are clearly founded on his fundamental assumption that the Delphic Oracle “could not have predicted the future.”⁵⁸⁶ His rational explanations for all aspects pertaining to the Delphic Oracle’s consultative process certainly appear to support Maurizio’s claim. In Horsfall’s somewhat critical 1990 review of Parke’s *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (published posthumously in 1988), he labels Parke’s approach to his subject matter as “soft positivism.”⁵⁸⁷ Furthermore, Maurizio maintains that modern “positivism governed by common sense and plausibility [is] still the cornerstone of interpreting Delphic tales.”⁵⁸⁸

Myers is speaking from a pre-positivist era when in 1880 he calls for “the need of sympathy and insight” and “the need of this difficult self-identification with the remote past.”⁵⁸⁹ Scholars of the later 20th century appear to be more sensitive than their counterparts of an earlier era about the problems involved in dealing objectively with

⁵⁸² Flower 2008: 6, 14.

⁵⁸³ Forrest 1982a: 306.

⁵⁸⁴ Forrest 1982a: 306; Bowden 2005: 32.

⁵⁸⁵ Price 1985: 146.

⁵⁸⁶ Maurizio 1997: 309.

⁵⁸⁷ Horsfall 1990: 174.

⁵⁸⁸ Maurizio 1997: 330.

⁵⁸⁹ Myers 1880: 428, 429.

ancient religious belief. Maurizio, for instance, expresses an awareness of the modern dilemma concerning the Pythia as Apollo's mouthpiece: "Such inspired mimicry appears incomprehensible to the non-believing distant observer to whom Apollo no longer speaks. Scholars hear nothing at Delphi and, steadfast in their faith in positivism, claim Apollo said nothing."⁵⁹⁰ Unfortunately, it is difficult, if not impossible, for modern scholars to avoid applying their own beliefs to their judgment of the Delphic Oracle and its operation.⁵⁹¹ Achieving and admitting awareness that there is such a danger may be the best we can hope for.

It is only the unbeliever who agonizes and seeks proof. The believer simply accepts. The Greeks accepted because they believed. We question and speculate because we do not believe. We cannot contemplate without comment and attempted explanation that which we are unable to comprehend. We cannot make a leap of faith back into the remote past. Inevitably, this limitation colors our view of what really happened during a mantic consultation at Delphi. With the best will in the world, the most we can hope for is the sensitivity necessary to achieve a temporary and tenuous toehold in the past.

Final Thoughts on Portrayals of the Pythia's Role

Several factors contribute to the diversity of and evolution in modern interpretations of the role of the Pythia in the Delphic Oracle. Two very different and respected classical scholars and authors, Parke and Fontenrose, present divergent views of the Pythia's role.

⁵⁹⁰ Maurizio 1995: 69.

⁵⁹¹ Price 1985: 132.

Many modern scholars offer their conclusions without always explicitly supporting them. Gender bias may well lurk in ancient Greeks and their sources and in the hearts and writings of modern scholars. Greek religious beliefs and practices bear little recognizable resemblance to modern equivalents. These seem to be the main factors that contribute to the diversity of modern classical scholarship pertaining to the Delphic Oracle and the Pythia.

Actually, the real mystery surrounding the Delphic Oracle (and admittedly one quite outside of the scope of this dissertation but worth stating) is “why [and how] did the oracle rise to great fame and keep that fame despite its open mistakes at times?”⁵⁹² Whittaker expresses the matter as follows: “I have yet to see a satisfactory explanation...of why the Greeks went on believing in the Delphic oracle for so many centuries.”⁵⁹³ Perhaps Whittaker himself provides the only possible answer: “It became commonplace that Delphi was never wrong because men wished to believe this.”⁵⁹⁴ Unlike the ancient Greeks, modern scholars do not seem to share this wish.

Almost everything pertaining to the Delphic mantic procedure, and in particular to the relative roles of the Pythia and priesthood in the chain of communication during a mantic session, is open to conjecture. Lloyd-Jones, probably quite rightly, asserts that “it is unlikely that general agreement on all controversial issues will ever be attained.”⁵⁹⁵ Robertson, writing about the meaning of the “wooden wall” oracle, best expresses the

⁵⁹² Starr 1957: 46.

⁵⁹³ Whittaker 1965: 21.

⁵⁹⁴ Whittaker 1965: 29.

⁵⁹⁵ Lloyd-Jones 1976: 65.

frustration that some modern scholars feel: “Herodotus tells us plainly everything we need to know...Yet every detail of this account and of the general notion of Delphi that we derive from Herodotus has been doubted or circumvented by modern commentators.”⁵⁹⁶ However, Maurizio warns that “[t]o remove the Pythia from the centre of this religious drama and deny her agency is to render the spectacle of consulting Apollo incomprehensible.”⁵⁹⁷

Most scholars since Fontenrose’s groundbreaking work would at least agree that ancient sources consistently present the Pythia as uttering Apollo’s oracles directly to enquirers. In fact, Parke himself admits this even as he contradicts it.⁵⁹⁸ At the end of the day, this appears to be the only remaining irrefutable certainty: the ancient sources depict enquirers who put their questions directly to the Pythia, and a Pythia who uttered the Delphic oracles directly to the enquirers without intermediation. If a modern scholar chooses to deviate from the above depiction, the onus is on that scholar to append the supporting argument and evidence, if available, for the proposed viewpoint, which may require a clear admission of bias (gender, religious, or other) where appropriate. Such an admission of bias should preclude subsequent accusation of the admitted bias, but not necessarily criticism of its conclusions.

Modern scholars are trained and duty-bound, not only to assess the accuracy of ancient sources, but also to subject points of view, both ancient and modern, to critical enquiry. On the other hand, ancient sources are, quite simply, more contemporary with the period

⁵⁹⁶ Robertson 1987: 4.

⁵⁹⁷ Maurizio 1995: 86.

⁵⁹⁸ Parke 1940: 85.

of operation of the Delphic Oracle than modern scholars are. Therefore, ancient sources cannot be lightly dismissed in favor of modern theories that contradict all ancient accounts. The modern scholars consulted for this dissertation draw from the vantage point of their knowledge of concomitant ancient Greek historical, political, social, cultural, religious, and philosophical perspectives in order to reach their conclusions. They state their individual divergent views emphatically, which is of course permissible, but they do not always also provide the explicit argument or evidence necessary to support their opinions and to facilitate comprehension and evaluation of the views expressed.

Admittedly, scholarship is not an inviolate, immutable entity. It constantly evolves and advances. Speculation is surely permissible, but on certain conditions: if the speculators explicitly state that an expressed view is unsupported by ancient evidence, and supply their reasons for a conjecture, and/or append evidence supporting their views. Therefore, if speculators do contradict or dismiss ancient accounts, they ought to also provide explicit explanation or evidence for their proposed theories. Scholars have a duty to expose bias wherever it exists and exerts influence on scholarly assumptions. Moreover, scholars should acknowledge their own points of departure as admission precludes (or at least mitigates or is preferable to) accusation. Even though admission of bias does not validate an argument, it does facilitate comprehension and evaluation, and perhaps even acceptance, of a viewpoint which may otherwise appear puzzling, inexplicable, or even offensive.

This dissertation pleads for an announcement of opinion to be accompanied by a supporting statement of argument and/or evidence wherever possible. Evaluation of divergent viewpoints may then become possible.

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