

## §6 DELPHI: CONSULTANTS OF THE ORACLE

Delphi was the most important of the oracular centres of the Greek world, and the place *par excellence* to which pilgrims came from all over Greece (and outside of it) in order to bring their enquiries before the god Apollo.<sup>1</sup> Here the Pythia gave her prophecies to the anxious pilgrims; her replies would determine their course of action. They came with questions concerning the political affairs of their states, matters of magnitude such as war and peace, and alliances and enmities; but at the same time, Delphi was also the place to which Greeks in general brought their problems: those of childlessness and bad harvests, and questions of marriages and loans.<sup>2</sup> The nature of the experience which the pilgrims encountered has been obscured by over reliance on the testimony of ancient writers who had not visited the site, and by a tendency amongst scholars to accept an attractive fantasy rather than the staid certainty of actual facts about the cult:<sup>3</sup> while some details will always remain matters for dispute, it is clear that a trip to Delphi did not entail an encounter in a subterranean cavern with a frenzied priestess. Delphi was a site which combined the oracular with the festive. The Pythian festival included musical and athletic contests, held to honour the god, and, like the oracle, attracted pilgrims on a Panhellenic scale. Another festival, the Soteria, was inaugurated in the third century to celebrate the repulse of the Gauls from Greece.<sup>4</sup>

A visit to Delphi did not necessarily mean for pilgrims a consultation of the oracle or participation in the Pythian festival. Some of those who went to Delphi may have done so simply to see and admire, and of course consultants of the oracle would have been accompanied by others: slaves, family or friends. In Euripides' *Ion*, the slaves of Kreousa merely look around in tourist fashion and wonder at the marvellous buildings, and while they are admiring the works of Delphi they ask Ion, the temple attendant, whether it is permitted for them to go into the temple of Apollo. They were told that if they had provided the *pelanos*, literally a sacred cake, they could go as far

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive bibliography on the Delphic oracle, see Burkert *Homo Necans* 117 (to 1972), to which add Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 196 with n. 1, 445-50. Particularly useful is Amandry *Mantique*, who collects many of the testimonia for the oracle, 241-60; his testimonia numbers (A) will be cited for the more inaccessible sources; for example: Eudocia *Violarium* 265, 778 (A94-95). Note also Parke *History of the Delphic Oracle*, an earlier version of Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1 & 2.

<sup>2</sup> See below, esp. nn. 137-38, with text.

<sup>3</sup> For general information about the Pythia, see Amandry *Mantique* 115-18; Parke, Wormell 1.34-36; cf. below n. 10, with text.

<sup>4</sup> See Nachtergaeel *Galates* 209-382, 351-519; ch. 1 nn. 98, 105, 123 with text.

as the altar, but that if they wished to go inside the temple itself, they needed to sacrifice a beast.<sup>5</sup> After further conversation, Ion says to them that they are welcome to look at everything which is open to the public. So in the late fifth century there was enough, in addition to the temple, to provide items of interest to the sight-seer. This is hardly surprising, as Delphi was the site of many foreign treasure houses, and in addition had received many dedications. Several centuries later, in Plutarch's dialogue concerned with the decline in oracles, one character, Philinos, escorts a foreign visitor around Delphi until well into the evening, though Philinos admits that the pace of the tour was unhurried. He shows him statues and votive offerings, the Korykion cave and the Lykoreia, all of which formed part of the sights which this foreign visitor was keen to see.<sup>6</sup> In Plutarch's day, and perhaps much earlier, there were guides with a fixed itinerary,<sup>7</sup> which included inscriptions (presumably mainly those on the statue bases), statues, treasures and other miscellaneous items of interest,<sup>8</sup> though on some points the knowledge of the guides was somewhat limited.<sup>9</sup>

The *communis opinio* amongst scholars regarding the Pythian priestess and the workings of the Delphic oracle has remained strongly influenced by the accounts of ancient authors who had not visited the oracle, and, in general, these traditional views are still popular.<sup>10</sup> Several considerations, however, lead the reader to challenge the time-honoured belief that the Pythia was possessed and inarticulate, having her words interpreted by priests, who recast them for the enquirer. Plutarch's "The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse" and "Concerning the Obsolescence of Oracles" explicitly state that the Pythia delivered her oracles in an articulate manner to the worshipper. That the Pythia was conscious and lucid during the giving of oracles is also made clear by the number of occasions on which she was bribed to deliver a particular oracle, and that it was she who therefore delivered the requested oracle in its final form. There are other points, too, which convincingly strengthen the argument that the Pythia, while she was prophesying, was doing so consciously and articulately, despite her state of communion with the god.

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<sup>5</sup> Eur. *Ion*. 226-29, cf. 230-33. For a plan of the sanctuary at Delphi, see fig. 6.4.

<sup>6</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 394e-f.

<sup>7</sup> Guides: οἱ περιηγηταί (Plut. *Mor.* 395a); note Paus. 10.28.7: οἱ Δελφῶν ἐξηγηταί.

<sup>8</sup> Items of interest: Plut. *Mor.* 395a-c, 397e, 399e-f, 400d-f, 401c-e.

<sup>9</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 400d-e. For a plan of the sanctuary, see fig. 6.4.

<sup>10</sup> Strabo 9.3.5 (419); Diod. 16.26.1-6; Lucan *Civil War* 5.165-97. For the traditional picture of the possessed Delphic priestess: Lloyd-Jones *GR* 23 (1976) 60-73; cf. Amandry *Mantique* 19-24; Oppé *JHS* 24 (1904) 214-40; Whittaker *HR* 58 (1965) 22-23; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 196-212.

One of the chief features of this oracular procedure was that the priestess sat on the tripod in the temple while delivering her oracles.<sup>11</sup> The tripod consisted of three legs with a bowl, and it is possible that it contained sacred lots which may have been used in divination.<sup>12</sup> The priestess is seen sitting on the tripod in artistic representations, as is the god Apollo; both, when seated on the tripod, are depicted in art as serene.<sup>13</sup> As their legs are shown as stretched out in front of them, the tripod had to be at least three feet or so off the ground, an inappropriate position for ecstatic rantings.<sup>14</sup> Clearly the priestess in sitting on the tripod was taking the place of the god Apollo; she was the god's representative, and through the medium of her voice he let his opinion be known. A tripod was a means by which sacrifices could be made to the gods: as such it could itself serve as signifying sacrifice and thus become a fit object for dedication to the god. There are large numbers of dedications of tripods from the archaic period and by the classical period the tripod was established as Apollo's prophetic mechanism. The tripod is an unusual throne, but it became essential to the prophetic procedure and as a consequence became Apollo's particular cult object.

That the tripod was closely connected with Delphian Apollo by the classical period is clearly attested by fifth century literature.<sup>15</sup> There is also a mythical reference

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<sup>11</sup> Eur. *Ion* 91; see also for the tripod (this list does not pretend to be exhaustive): Eur. *Orest.* 164, 329, 956, *Ion* 366, 414, 463, 1320 23, *Elect.* 980, *Iph. Taur.* 1254; Ar. *Wealth* 9, *Knights* 1016 & Schol.; Xen. *Apol.* 12; Diod. 16.26.5; Lucr. 1.739; Strabo 9.3.5 (419); Plut. *Mor.* 385c, 435a, 759b; Poll. *Onom.* 10.81 (A68); Imbl. *Myst.* 3.11; Suda s.v. Πυθώ; Schol. Eur. *Or.* 165; Dio Chrys. 72.12; John Chrys. *Hom.* 29 in *Ep.* 1 *Cor.* 260b (A78); Paul. ex Fest. s.v. Aperta; Max. Tyr. 8.1b (quoted by Amandry 136 n. 3); cf. Pl. *Laws* 719c. See Amandry *Mantique* 140-48; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.24-26; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 225.

<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, the evidence is late: Nonnus *Narrationes ad Greg. Naz. In Julian. imp. invect.* (Westermann *Mythographoi* 67, p. 384) (A82); Eudocia *Violarium* 265, 778 (A94-95); Suda s.v. Πυθώ; see also Amandry *Mantique* 29-32; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.25 with 42 n. 27. The tripod, according to other late authorities, could be shaken: Luc. *Bis Acc.* 1 (referring in general to the various oracular sites of Apollo); Men. *Rhet.* 321. How much credence is to be attached to this evidence is uncertain. It is possible that the Pythia shook the tripod in order to mix the lots within it, Amandry *Mantique* 36. It was thought that the tripod contained the remains of the Python: Serv. *Verg. Aen.* 3.360 (cf. 3.92); Hygin. *Fabul.* 140.5 (the Latin term being *cortina*); Ovid *Met.* 15.635; *Verg. Aen.* 3.92, 6.347; or the bones of Dionysos: Call. fr. 643 (Pfeiffer); Clem. *Prot.* 2.15. See Amandry 143-44; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 219 n. 33; Burkert *Homo Necans* 123 with n. 38. A block from the temple floor has been found with three holes which are taken as indicating the place where the tripod stood: Holland *AJA* 37 (1933) 208.

<sup>13</sup> See figs. 6.1, 6.2: the Vulci kylix, of the fifth century, dates to the same time as the "Lenaean" vases, which depict the Bacchantes in ecstasy: if the Pythia was also frenzied, there is no reason why she should not have been shown as such (cf. Latte *HTR* 33 (1940) 12 n. 3; referring to the Vulci krater). The artistic evidence is discussed further below, esp. nn. 147-49, with text.

<sup>14</sup> Latte *HTR* 33 (1940) 12.

<sup>15</sup> See the references to Euripides and Aristophanes in n. 11 above.

to Herakles and the tripod in which the Pythia refused to allow him to consult her on one particular occasion, whereupon he carried off the tripod in order to found his own oracle.<sup>16</sup> The east pediment of the Siphnian treasury at Delphi, dated to the sixth century, depicts the struggle between Herakles and Apollo, indicating that the tripod clearly had an early association with the Apolline oracle. The tripod is probably not merely representative of oracular power, nor a mere manifestation of it, but rather was an intrinsic part of the oracular procedure. When the pilgrim enquirers came to the temple and saw the Pythia seated on the tripod, they could believe that they were in the presence of the god and his oracular prowess as demonstrated by his priestess.

The laurel was another cult attribute, and in one representation Apollo sitting on the tripod has a huge branch over one shoulder; in another the Pythia, more practically, holds a small cutting in her fingers.<sup>17</sup> The laurel was important as the first oracular mechanism of Apollo: Pythian Apollo is said, in the *Homeric Hymn* dedicated to him, to “speak from the laurel tree”.<sup>18</sup> The first temple of Apollo was supposed to have been made of laurel.<sup>19</sup> With the establishment, however, of the temple and tripod as oracular mechanisms it seems that the role of the laurel was restricted to that of a sacred *accoutrement*. It is even possible that the Homeric reference is aetiological in nature, to explain the employment of the leaf in ritual, for the laurel, held by Apollo or the Pythia, was apparently shaken when the oracle was given.<sup>20</sup> From the fifth century on there seems to have been a belief that chewing laurel could effect a state of readiness for inspiration from the god,<sup>21</sup> but only late evidence, of the second century of our era, attributes to the laurel the inspired state of the Pythia.<sup>22</sup> Biologically, the chemical constituents of the laurel are non-inspirational: it does not induce ecstasy.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 2.181, *Response* 445.

<sup>17</sup> See figs. 6.1-6.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Hymn Pyth. Ap.* 393-96; Callim. *Hymn Del.* 94. Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.3 suggest that this can be taken literally: that the laurel tree communicated the prophecies of Apollo, and that the god's attendants interpreted “his utterances”; see also Amandry *Mantique* 64, 131.

<sup>19</sup> Paus. 10.5.9. Paus. 10.5.5 states that Earth, the first possessor of the oracle, appointed Daphnis (“Laurel”), one of the nymphs of the mountain Parnassos, as the first *promantis*, prophet, of the oracle. The laurel was a cult attribute of Apollo elsewhere, Paus. 9.10.4 (Thebes).

<sup>20</sup> Ar. *Wealth* 213, with Schol.; cf. Amandry *Mantique* 129; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.42 n. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Soph. fr. 897 (Pearson); Theophr. *Char.* 16.2; Lykoph. *Alex.* 6 (with Tzetzes Schol. to same, quoted Amandry 129 n. 1); Tib. 2.5.63-64; Ovid. *Pont.* 2.5.67; Juv. 7.19; see Amandry *Mantique* 129; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.26.

<sup>22</sup> Luc. *Bis Acc.* 1, *Hes.* 8; Eus. *Praep. Ev.* 5.28.9 (quoted by Amandry *Mantique* 129 n. 1).

<sup>23</sup> On the laurel at Delphi, cf. Amandry *Mantique* 126-34; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.26. The ancient laurel was probably *prunus laurocerasus*, which does contain a small amount of prussic acid, but not nearly enough to induce ecstatic possession: Parke, Wormell 1.27 with 42 n. 36; Whittaker *HTR* 58 (1965) 23; cf. Amandry *Mantique* 129.

It seems that the Pythia bathed in the Kastalian spring,<sup>24</sup> and drank from it as well.<sup>25</sup> Plutarch states that there was a stream of water below the temple; the water was used for libations and lustrations,<sup>26</sup> but he does not mention that the water inspired prophecy. On the other hand, Pausanias records the popular belief that the waters of the Kassotis spring at Delphi went under the earth, reappearing at oracular centres, and were responsible for inducing women to prophesy;<sup>27</sup> other sources record that the priestess drank the waters of the Kassotis prior to prophesying.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that the priestess did drink water before the mantic session, perhaps as a purificatory rite, and the statements that the drink inspired the Pythia might be embellishments on the truth. While the Kastalian spring could be seen as having purificatory functions, the Kassotis need not necessarily have had an inspirational role.

Recent interpretations regarding the nature of Delphic inspiration have yet to make their way into popular accounts. Despite the critical analysis of recent scholarship, which has led to an accurate description of the practices of the Delphic oracle, the fantastic versions of late Roman writers, which are more exciting than the reality, still have currency. In the latest edition of the well-known “Blue Guide: Greece”, one can read the following: “After purifying herself in the Kastalian fountain and drinking of the water of the Kassotis, and munching a laurel leaf, she took her seat upon the tripod, which was placed over the chasm in the adyton. Intoxicated by the

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<sup>24</sup> Schol. Eur. *Phoen.* 224; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 224 with n. 37 cites Ps. Kallisthenes 36.

<sup>25</sup> Eus. *Praep. Ev.* 5.28.9 (quoted by Amandry *Mantique* 129 n. 1); cf. Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11. Luc. *Hes.* 8 mentions the Kastalian spring as important to the mantic procedure, but not whether it was bathed in or its waters drunk; cf. Claud. *Carm. Min.* 3. Heliod. *Aeth.* 2.26: an enquirer purified himself at the Kastalian spring before proceeding to the temple to consult the Pythia; cf. ch. 4 n. 110, with text; ch. 8 nn. 46-48, with text, on purificatory procedures.

<sup>26</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 402c.

<sup>27</sup> Paus. 10.24.7. He thus attributes the Pythia’s inspiration to the water rather to any other form of inspiration such as a chasm sending forth vapours or a *pneuma*, Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 202; cf. Farnell *Cults* 4.188. The Kassotis spring was behind the temple of Apollo, the Kastalian down the hill from the sanctuary, in the direction of the gymnasium. Fontenrose’s suggestion, *Delphic Oracle* 224, that the waters of the Kassotis were piped or carried into the adyton is perhaps possible, but relies on the evidence of Lucian and other late sources (see above nn. 24-25, below n. 28) that the Pythia drank the water before mounting the tripod. Archaeological evidence for the Kassotis being piped into the *manteion* is lacking and thus what Pausanias records as a popular belief can probably be discounted, Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.27, with 42 n. 40.

<sup>28</sup> Luc. *Bis Acc.* 1 & *Herm.* 60 state that the Pythia drank from the “holy well”, which is usually taken as a reference to the Kassotis (*Herm.* 60 states that the Pythia becomes inspired to give oracles as soon as she drinks: the “holy well” must therefore be in the *manteion*); cf. Greg. Naz. *In Jul. Imp.* 2.32 (A77). Note that for this and also for the drinking of the water, the sources are non-classical, and water may not have played any role in the mantic procedure. Cf. Flacelière *Greek Oracles* 42-43; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 224.

exhalations of the chasm, she uttered incoherent sounds, which were interpreted in hexameter verse by a poet in waiting. The interpretation, which was always obscure and frequently equivocal, was handed over to the enquirer, who not seldom returned more mystified than he had come...”<sup>29</sup>

It is sometimes stated that the Delphic priests recast the words of the Pythia which she had delivered in response to her enquirers’ requests. This presupposes that the prophetic priestess was in a state of inspiration which left her inarticulate and incomprehensible, and that the priests needed to interpret the utterance and present it to the enquirers. This procedure is sometimes coupled with the physical separation of priestess from these pilgrims. Lloyd-Jones wrote, for example, that the reply of the Pythia to the question posed was “...shouted, and no doubt incoherent; the prophetes [one of the temple officials] had to make sense of it, and render it in hexameter verse...”<sup>30</sup> Such modern interpretations strongly contradict the clear testimony of Plutarch, who was a priest of the oracle. In the dialogue “The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse”, there is a discussion about the fact that the incumbents of the office of the Pythia in his time did not give their oracles in verse, and, in fact, many ancient oracles were given in prose, with oracles in hexameter verse the exception, rather than the rule.<sup>31</sup> Many of the ancient Pythias produced hexameters, but of a poor nature, with their oracles full of metrical and verbal errors and uninspired diction.<sup>32</sup>

It is clear from contemporary descriptions that the oracles were spoken by the Pythia in the form in which the enquirers received them.<sup>33</sup> Plutarch’s character Sarapion argues that it is not right to expect the Pythia to speak in “purer tones” than she does.<sup>34</sup> This in itself, making the priestess responsible for the form of the oracles, is strong evidence for indicating that the Pythia did produce the oracles herself. In addition, in an attempt to explain how it is that the god Apollo, the “leader of the Muses”, who ought to take an interest in such things, and surpass Homer and Hesiod in poetical skill, allows such clumsily wrought oracles,<sup>35</sup> Theon proffers the following explanation: even if the oracular verses are inferior to Homeric hexameters, and while

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<sup>29</sup> Barber *Blue Guide: Greece* 445.

<sup>30</sup> GR 23 (1976) 67, a general article is correct on several other details of Delphic procedure. That the Pythia spoke her responses directly, see Amandry *Mantique* 120-21; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 212-24.

<sup>31</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 397d, 403e.

<sup>32</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 396c-d, 396e-f, 397c-d.

<sup>33</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 396f: τοῦς ὑπὸ τῆς Πυθίας ἐκφερομένοις.

<sup>34</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 397a.

<sup>35</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 396c-d.

it is not necessary to believe that the god himself has composed them, nevertheless the god provides the requisite inspiration.<sup>36</sup>

The quality of the oracles therefore, depended on the incumbent of the office.<sup>37</sup> The god supposedly provided the substance of the response and each Pythia was inspired to the extent of her natural ability in delivering it. The voice of the inspired Pythia did not belong to the god, nor did the utterance, nor the style, nor the metre; rather all these things emanated from the woman with Apollo providing the visions and knowledge of the future.<sup>38</sup> This meant that the Pythia, if she were skilled in the composition of Homeric hexameters, could produce reasonable verse, while defective ability in this area would explain badly contrived hexameters or the use of prose. Herakleitos the philosopher, as quoted by another speaker in Plutarch's dialogue, is worth noting: the sibyl, with mouth possessed, utters her prophecies, which convey the god's words through a thousand years.<sup>39</sup> The Pythia was the intermediary between man and god, and he spoke through her; there was no need for a further stage involving priests. While the oracles of the Pythia were noted on occasion for being ambiguous, nowhere is she described as inarticulate.

Strabo provides information along the same lines, that the Pythia, on her tripod, uttered oracles in both prose and verse, but he also notes that there were poets who were employed in the temple who recast the prose oracles into verse.<sup>40</sup> His statement is accepted by some modern authors, in the face of the clear testimony of Plutarch.<sup>41</sup> One of the characters in the dialogue concerned with the oracles of Delphi, Theon, states that there was a story that in the past poets would listen to the words of the Pythia and recast them into verse. Theon blames these men for rendering the oracles, which they heard being given by the Pythia, into a tragic diction and grandiose

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<sup>36</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 397b. On the poor quality of some Greek verse, with reference to Plutarch's comments on the quality of verse at Delphi, see Todd *CQ* 33 (1939) 163-65.

<sup>37</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 397b.

<sup>38</sup> The god does provide the origin of the emotion, τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς κινήσεως, and each Pythia is inspired to the extent of her natural ability (Plut. *Mor.* 397b): οὐ γὰρ ἔστι θεοῦ <γ> ἢ γῆρυς οὐδ' ὁ φθόγγος οὐδ' ἢ λέξις οὐδὲ τὸ μέτρον ἀλλὰ τῆς γυναικός (397c). The god provides the visions, and gives her knowledge of the future (397c).

<sup>39</sup> Herakl. fr. 92 (Robinson) (Plut. *Mor.* 397a). What Theopompos, the fourth century historian, had to say on the subject is also of importance: he strongly attacked those who did not believe that the Pythia did not give oracles in verse in his own day. Theon, however, in Plutarch's *Moralia*, noted that Theopompos' collection of the verse oracles of his own time was meagre, thus proving, Theon argues, that the Pythia did give out prose oracles in Theopompos' time. The point to note here is that the Pythia in the classical period gave out the oracles, not someone else (*Mor.* 403e-f).

<sup>40</sup> Strabo 9.3.5 (419).

<sup>41</sup> Lloyd-Jones *GR* 23 (1976) 67; cf. Todd *CQ* 33 (1939) 164 n. 3; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 213-15 on Plut. *Mor.* 407b.

expression, and does not associate these individuals with the temple personnel (the *prophetes* or *hosioi*); they must be identified as “free-lance poets”, unconnected with the temple, and employed to recast the words of the Pythia at the request of individual enquirers.<sup>42</sup> There are other reasons why Strabo’s statement ought to be rejected. It is clear that Strabo himself had not visited Delphi, for he notes that “they say” that the source of divine inspiration was a chasm with a narrow mouth over which the tripod was placed;<sup>43</sup> not only is this an explanation of the prophetic power which must be rejected, but he is relying on a source other than personal knowledge of Pythian prophecy. The presence of poets such as these does seem to be negated by the evidence of Plutarch, who wrote less than a century after Strabo, and makes it clear that there were many oracles in existence which were in prose form, and which had certainly not been recast into hexameters.<sup>44</sup> This statement by Strabo is similar to that of Aristeides, that there were poets at Didyma who were responsible for the casting of the oracles into verse; Strabo might well have transposed this detail from Didyma to Delphi without independent evidence that this was indeed the case. Several ancient sources mention the *prophetes*, but the duties of this official, other than as an attendant to the Pythia during the mantic session, are not clear.<sup>45</sup>

Pausanias, too, in relating the story of the origin of the oracle, makes it quite clear that the words of each oracle were uttered directly and articulately by the priestess. When Earth and Poseidon shared the sanctuary, the Earth prophesied herself, while Poseidon prophesied through Prykon.<sup>46</sup> Later, Phemonoe was the first prophetess of Apollo, and also the first to sing in hexameters.<sup>47</sup> Therefore the earliest (divine) owners of the oracle, like the mortal Pythias who were to follow, prophesied with their own mouth. There was also another story, however, that a woman called Boio in a hymn which she wrote for Delphi had narrated that it was a man named Olen and northern people who had established the oracle, and that it was he who had first prophesied and sung hexameters in the name of the god. Pausanias states that this is the only record of a male prophet; all the other accounts record only females.<sup>48</sup> These legends, recording the situation as it was in mythical times, do not surprise Pausanias, and seem to be consistent with the practice of his time. In fact it accords with what

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<sup>42</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 407b; cf. Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 213-15.

<sup>43</sup> Strabo 9.3.5 (419).

<sup>44</sup> See n. 31 above; cf. Plut. *Mor.* 397d.

<sup>45</sup> Hdt. 8.36.2, 8.37.1; Plut. *Mor.* 292d, 438b; Ael. *Nat. An.* 10.26; Eur. *Ion* 369, 413. For the *prophetes* and other temple attendants, see Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 218-19.

<sup>46</sup> Paus. 10.5.6; cf. Aeschyl. *Eum.* 1-19; Latte *HTR* 33 (1940) 9-18.

<sup>47</sup> Paus. 10.5.7.

<sup>48</sup> Paus. 10.5.7-8.



Plutarch states, that there were priestesses who were capable of prophesying in hexameters, though the more usual form was prose.

A further consideration is one of a hypothetical nature. If the god spoke through a priestess, and then the priests interpreted her words, with the client screened off from the actual process, it is unlikely that the oracle would have achieved such notable success. The trust placed in the oracle stemmed from enquirers actually seeing the Pythia and listening to her words, which they themselves could interpret, if ambiguous. It is the priestess who both delivered the oracle and was responsible for the form it took.<sup>49</sup>

Another misconception about the Pythia was that she was inspired by vapours that made their way into the temple by means of an underground chasm. There is a complete lack of archaeological evidence for a chasm under the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and thus the theory that a *pneuma* inspired the priestess must be dismissed.<sup>50</sup> While vapours seem to be a well established part of the mantic procedure, these would not be difficult to explain as arising from part of the ritual practices. Items such as laurel leaves, barley grains and incense were burned during the mantic session and could have comprised the vapours referred to by the sources.<sup>51</sup> The lengths to which scholars go in this regard can be seen in the suggestion that although there is no archaeological evidence for a chasm, there might have been some small crack in the floor through which a “slight draft of air might sometimes be felt...”<sup>52</sup>

The idea that there was a chasm beneath the temple is first mentioned by Diodoros, who was presumably drawing on an existing tradition. He writes that in the remote past goats discovered the oracle, and that is why the Delphians prefer to

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<sup>49</sup> That the Pythia was responsible for delivering the oracles can also be seen in the fact that she could refuse an oracle to murderers while still under pollution: Ael. *Var. Hist.* 3.44; and Gal. *Protr.* 9.23; cf. Plut. *Mor.* 560d (see Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 2.3-4, *Response* 4; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 287, *Response* Q 58; both with further references; cf. Parke, Wormell *CQ* 43 (1949) 138), referring to Kallontes, for whom the Pythia refused to prophesy when he first consulted her, for he had killed Arkhilokhos, sacred to the Muses; but after praying, supplicating and pleading his cause, the Pythia gave him an oracle.

<sup>50</sup> Oppé *JHS* 24 (1904) 214-40; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 197-203; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.21-22; Burkert *Homo Necans* 122 (referring to a Stoic *pneuma* theory). Geologically, the limestone rock which predominates in the area could not emit gases: Bousquet *BCH* 64-65 (1940-41) 228; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 203 with nn. 11-12.

<sup>51</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 385c, 397a; Lykoph. *Alex.* 6 & Tzetz. with Schol. on same, and Luc. *Bis Acc.* 1 both refer to the chewing of laurel and not its burning. The fire in the temple: Paus. 10.24.4; Plut. *Mor.* 385c, *Num.* 9.11-12, 15, *Arist.* 20.4. Fire at Delphi had a sacred character: after the battle of Plataea, all fire was extinguished and rekindled from the public hearth at Delphi: Plut. *Arist.* 20.4.

<sup>52</sup> Farnell *Cults* 4.181; note also Holland *AJA* 37 (1933) 201-04. Flacelière *Greek Oracles* 48 suggests that earthquakes have destroyed the chasm, but such earthquakes should have left their mark on the temple; cf. above n. 50; for a hypothetical reconstruction of the Delphic adyton, see fig. 6.3.

sacrifice goats when consulting it.<sup>53</sup> This immediately suggests the possibility that what follows is an aetiological account to explain the sacrificing of goats and the use of the tripod: according to Diodoros, here was a chasm where the temple now stands. Goats grazed here before the area was inhabited, and any goat that came to the chasm and looked into it jumped about in an amazing fashion, quite contrary to their normal behaviour. The goatherd observed this; he looked into the chasm, and reacted like the goats, but having the faculty of human speech was able to prophesy. The power of the chasm became known, and it became a public health hazard, as many who peered into it, coming under its influence, threw themselves in. Consequently the locals decided to entrust the responsibility of prophesying to one woman, and to ensure that she did not also disappear into the chasm, provided her with a tripod on which she might sit over it in safety.<sup>54</sup>

Even allowing for the fact that ancient authors accepted this incredible story, it is extraordinary that any modern scholar could be so credulous as to believe it, as the archaeological evidence contradicts Diodoros' account. Classical authors do not mention the chasm or vapour,<sup>55</sup> and the source of the Pythia's inspiration must be sought elsewhere. While the archaeological evidence is clear and there was no chasm, Plutarch often refers to *pneumata*, *dynameis*, *anathymiaseis*, and *atmoi* as being the

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<sup>53</sup> Diod. 16.26.1. For the sacrifice of a goat prior to consultation, note the Nikandros incident, discussed below n. 83, with text.

<sup>54</sup> Diod. 16.26.1-5. Paus. 10.5.7, cf. 10.5.12, states that he has heard that shepherds tending their flocks came upon the oracle (*mantion*) and were inspired by the vapour (*atmos*) and gave prophecies from Apollo. See also for this story: Plut. *Mor.* 433c, 435d; Schol. Eur. *Orest.* 165; Them. *Or.* 4.53a. Plut. *Mor.* 433c states that the most learned of the Delphians still preserve the name of the shepherd (Koretas), but he himself (*Mor.* 435d) considers it to be a myth or a fabrication. Diodoros' story thus seems to have been a common explanation of the oracle's origin and priestess' possession, and no credence should be given to it. The story that there was a chasm under the temple is found in several other authors: Apollod. 1.4.1; Dio Cass. 63.14.2; Iambl. *Myst.* 3.11; [Long.] 13.2; [Luc.] *Ner.* 10; Schol. Eur. *Or.* 165; Just. 24.6.9; Palaeph. 49 is cited by Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.41 n. 6; Palaiphos *Inc red.* 50 at Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 50. Other authors mention a cave, perhaps influenced by the fact that the priestess was described as descending into the oracle (in the case of Roman authors by confusion with the Sibyl): Lykoph. *Alex.* 208; Livy 1.56.10; Lucan *Civil War* 6.425; Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 2.95.208; Serv. *Verg. Aen.* 3.92; Stat. *Theb.* 3.613; Val. Max. 1.8.10; Claud. *Ruf.* 2.14; cf. Cic. *Div.* 1.36.79 with Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.41 n. 6). Oppé *JHS* 24 (1904) 216 and Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.41 n. 6 correctly point out that Aeschyl. *Libation Bearers* 808, 954, sometimes cited as evidence for a cave, cannot bear such an interpretation. On Diodoros' account, see Oppé *JHS* 24 (1904) 218; Amandry *Mantique* 50-53; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.20-22; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 200.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.24.

inducers of the Pythia's mantic possession, but these are clearly theoretical concepts, and actual vapours were not responsible for inducing the Pythia to prophesy.<sup>56</sup>

The occasions when a particular priestess was accused of having been bribed must almost certainly indicate that it was she who was responsible for the actual responses, and that her words were those which were heard by the listeners. It was the priestess who was held directly responsible for succumbing to bribery, and it is unlikely that this was a case of what is presently called "damage control" on the part of the priestly authorities at Delphi, that is, the Pythia was not in these cases used as some sort of scapegoat by the authorities of the oracle. Rather, that the priestess was held responsible, and the priests were allocated no blame whatsoever, must be an indication that the priestess alone could have been responsible for such manipulation. There are several attested cases in which the Pythia was accused of being bribed by those with a vested interest in receiving an oracle with a particular slant. These cases involved Kleomenes and the Alkmaeonidai, both in the sixth century, and Pleistoanax in the following century.

Kleomenes' deposition of his fellow king Demaratos involved the services of the Pythian priestess, following his invasion of Attica and subsequent disagreements between the two Spartan kings. Kleomenes had invaded Attica, and successfully deposed the Peisistratidai in 510, whereupon factional strife had subsequently broken out between two rival aristocratic leaders, Isagoras and Kleisthenes. Eventually, the former appealed to his friend Kleomenes for aid, and an ultimatum came from the Spartans that the "accursed" be driven out. Kleisthenes therefore fled from Attica, and Kleomenes invaded, and expelled, as accursed, seven hundred Athenian families whose names had been given to him by Isagoras. Kleomenes, however, met with opposition when he tried to disband "the council", and, after being besieged on the acropolis, was thrown out of Athens. He then began to collect an army from throughout the Peloponnese, with the secret intention of seeking revenge on the Athenians and setting up Isagoras in power. The army marched with him as far as Eleusis, and caused some damage. The Athenians came out to oppose him, and battle was just about to be joined when the Corinthians in the army, thinking that they were acting wrongly in the matter, withdrew. Demaratos, though Herodotos states that he had no previous disagreement with Kleomenes, also withdrew.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 197-200, elaborating on Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.23-24 (note the discussion of Plut. *Mor.* 437c). See also the useful discussion of Will *BCH* 66 (1942) 161-75; cf. Amandry *Mantique* 216-25; Dodds *Greeks and the Irrational* 73. Cf. Farnell *Cults* 4.181, referring to Oppé *JHS* 24 (1904) 214-40.

<sup>57</sup> Hdt. 5.74.1-75.3.

The second dispute between the two kings involved Aegina, which submitted to Darius at the time of the First Persian War. The Athenians complained to Sparta, and Kleomenes went to Aegina to arrest those responsible, but was opposed by the chief spokesman there, one Krios, who argued that Kleomenes was acting on his own initiative, and that he had been bribed by their old enemies, the Athenians, to interfere. If he was there with the backing of the Spartans, he would have brought his fellow king, Demaratos, with him. Back in Sparta, Demaratos was speaking against him,<sup>58</sup> and Kleomenes, returning, decided that he had to be deposed so that his opposition would be removed. He brought up an old tale that Demaratos was not in fact the son of the previous king of the line, Ariston. The case was argued at Sparta, and then it was decided to refer the matter to the Delphic oracle. It was Kleomenes who was mainly responsible for this move, according to Herodotos. At Delphi, Kleomenes won the support of an individual named Kobon, influential at Delphi, who persuaded the Pythian priestess, Periallos, when questioned by the Spartans sent on this matter, to reply that Demaratos was not the son of Ariston.<sup>59</sup> In subsequent years, the whole affair came to light, and Kobon fled and Periallos was deprived of her office.<sup>60</sup> This occurred after the deposition of Kleomenes, and it is unclear whether the discovery of the priestess' duplicity had to do with Spartan pressure, but the point is that the priestess was definitely considered responsible for the response given to the Spartans and its falsification.

The Alkmeonidai provide another case in point. In exile under the Peisistratid tyranny they intrigued with the Pythia that she instruct any Spartans coming to consult the oracle that they must free Athens from "the tyrants".<sup>61</sup> Herodotos writes in one passage that it was rumoured that the Pythia was bribed, while in another he states that the Spartans decided to restore Hippias to power because they discovered that the Alkmeonidai had bribed the priestess.<sup>62</sup> What is clear is that if bribery did take place, it was the Pythia who was bribed, not the priesthood. More importantly, the god was not involved; human agency was at fault.

In the Peloponnesian War, after the deaths of Brasidas and Kleon, the Spartan king Pleistoanax and Nicias negotiated a peace settlement, known as the Peace of

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<sup>58</sup> Hdt. 6.48.1-51.

<sup>59</sup> Hdt. 6.66.1-3. For referral to Delphi: David *RIDA* 32 (1984) 136-37; Parke *CQ* 39 (1945) 108-09.

<sup>60</sup> Hdt. 6.66.3; for this incident see Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.161-62; Hodkinson *Chiron* 13 (1983) 273-74.

<sup>61</sup> Hdt. 5.63.1; see Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.145-47 on the Alkmeonidai and Delphi.

<sup>62</sup> Hdt. 5.66.1: Κλεισθένης τε ἀνὴρ Ἀλκμεωνίδης, ὅς περ δὴ λόγον ἔχει τῆν Πυθίην ἀναπεῖσαι; 5.63.1; 5.90.1.

Nikias.<sup>63</sup> Pleistoanax was particularly keen to come to terms.<sup>64</sup> During the “First Peloponnesian War” he had been entrusted with the invasion of Attica, and the Spartans had laid waste the countryside to the boundaries of Eleusis and Thria, before returning home.<sup>65</sup> Pleistoanax was subsequently sentenced to exile, accused of having been bribed to retreat from Attica, and as a result built his house half in the precinct of the temple of Zeus at Sparta, thus avoiding the sentence of exile. The Spartans had received him back as their king after several oracles from the priestess of Delphi that they ought to do so. Pleistoanax, however, had enemies, and any misfortunes Sparta suffered from when on were put down by them to his “illegal” restoration. These enemies argued that Pleistoanax and his brother Aristokles had bribed the priestess, so that whenever Spartan delegations came to Delphi she commanded them to “bring home the seed of the demigod son of Zeus”.<sup>66</sup> Thus Pleistoanax the king, Thucydides informs, desired peace in 425, for then Sparta would be spared misfortunes, and his own position would be more secure.<sup>67</sup> The historian passes no judgement on the alleged bribery, and whether it actually occurred is a matter for speculation, as nothing was proved against the priestess. What is significant is that it is the priestess who is stated to have been bribed, and that she gave out the oracle that Pleistoanax must be restored. The doubt which this places on the contemporary credibility of the oracle must remain a matter for debate.<sup>68</sup> Similar unproven accusations had also been levelled against the Alkmeonidai, and may have been a standard charge, in cases of political enmity.

Another story attests to the possibility of bribing the oracle. The land of the people of Herakleia on the Pontus was being ravished by famine, and so they consulted the Delphic oracle. Herakleides, a prominent philosopher, bribed the theoroi, as well as the Pythian priestess, to reply that if Herakleides were crowned with a golden crown, and was honoured as a hero after death, the famine would cease. He was duly crowned in the theatre, but was struck with apoplexy, and the theoroi

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<sup>63</sup> Thuc. 5.16.1-19.2.

<sup>64</sup> Thuc. 5.17.1.

<sup>65</sup> Thuc. 1.114.2.

<sup>66</sup> Thuc. 5.16.2; see Philippides *Anc. World* 11 (1985) 33-41. Gomme *Hist. Comm. Thuc.* 3.663 states that *peisai* need not necessarily mean “...a bribe with money, but clearly a dishonest act...”; however, in this context, the Pythia must surely have been induced by the prospect of financial gain.

<sup>67</sup> Thuc. 5.16.1-2, cf. 5.17.1; see Parker *Spartan Religion* 152-54; Hodkinson *Chiron* 13 (1983) 274-75.

<sup>68</sup> For the chronology of the affair, see Gomme *Hist. Comm. Thuc.* 3.663-64, where it is calculated that Pleistoanax was exiled in or after the summer of 445, being recalled in late summer 427 at the earliest (rejecting Busolt’s arguments, as cited by Gomme); see also Parke *CQ* 39 (1945) 109-10; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.195-96.

were put to death for their part in the deception. Simultaneously, the Pythia at Delphi, many hundreds of miles away, going into the adyton, was bitten by a snake and died.<sup>69</sup> The story is almost certainly apocryphal, but is interesting in that it not only records the bribery of a Pythia and also of the theoroi entrusted with the oracle, but indicates a belief in divine retribution if the Pythia was guilty of falsifying oracles. There is no way of knowing how widespread such a belief may have been, but Strabo at least was able to write that the oracle at Delphi was considered to be the most truthful of all.<sup>70</sup>

These accounts of cases of supposed bribery of the Pythia presume that the Pythia was conscious as she spoke an oracle.<sup>71</sup> Stories of chasms, vapours, and hysterical priestesses can all be rejected. These cases in the classical period in which the priestess was bribed seem to attest to an independence of action on her behalf, but perhaps this was not always the case. Many of the answers given by the priestess strongly suggest that she had specific knowledge about the enquirers' affairs on which to base her answers. Perhaps this knowledge came from the priests, who could have gleaned the requisite information from the visitor beforehand. The notion, however, that they had a communal pool of knowledge about Hellenic affairs should be rejected. It is extremely improbable that the priests directed, for example, the whole colonisation movement from Delphi on the basis of information which they had picked up from pilgrims coming to Delphi. It is, however, probable that in many cases the priests elicited from the consultants themselves the answer which they wanted to hear, and passed the information on to the priestess. Two examples in particular, both from Euripides, have been noted in this connection.<sup>72</sup> In the *Ion*, Ion carefully elicits information from Kreousa about why her husband, Xouthos, has come to Delphi and the purpose of his visit, and when Neoptolemos visited Delphi he was asked about his reasons for coming.<sup>73</sup> It seems very likely that the temple personnel and the Pythia would be informed in advance of any probable request and of the answer for which the consultant was hoping. Furthermore, each consultant had to have a *proxenos*, to

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<sup>69</sup> FHG Hermippos F 48 (Diog. Laert. 5.91); Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.407, 2.169-70, *Response* 419; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 341, *Response* Q223. Both believe the story to be apocryphal, and cite as an additional source, probably deriving from Hermippos, *Acad. Philos. Index Herc.* ed. Mekler, S. 1902 (Parke, Wormell as p. 24, col. 19 & p. 26, col. 10; Fontenrose as p. 25, col. 9).

<sup>70</sup> Strabo 9.3.6 (419).

<sup>71</sup> Aristides reports that the priestesses at Dodona did not remember what they had said (*Orat.* 45.11); as noted by Dodds *Greeks and the Irrational* 72, with 90 n. 55, he is clearly less certain about Delphi (*Orat.* 45.10). There is no evidence that the Pythia was unaware of what she was saying.

<sup>72</sup> Whittaker *HTR* 58 (1965) 24-25.

<sup>73</sup> Eur. *Ion*. 258, 334-35, 413-16, *Ancr.* 1104-05. Both of these incidents, however, may be part of the dramatic structure of the plays.

whom a great deal about the purpose of the pilgrimage would surely have been revealed. Deliberate collection of such data could be considered to discredit the divine inspiration of the oracle, though it would surely have been expedient under the circumstances; however, the priests presumably believed that in so doing they were acting in the interests of the god.<sup>74</sup>

Some of the answers to pilgrims would obviously have been easy to formulate. When Delphi was consulted by the Spartans as to whether or not to go to war against the Athenians, they had already decided in the Spartan assembly to do so, and accordingly it was an easy task for the Pythia to confirm this decision. In the case of colonists, presumably most consultants already knew their destination but simply wanted confirmation that this had divine approbation. Questions about plagues, famines and other natural phenomena were easily dealt with, and set religious rituals designed to placate the gods involved would have been prescribed. More difficult for the oracle would have been questions about child-bearing. To give an affirmative answer might seem risky, and an unfulfilled promise could bring the oracle into disrepute, but the oracle was at least on one occasion successful in this area, promising children who were duly born.<sup>75</sup>

The Delphic oracle could not be consulted at any time, and there were special days set aside for the purpose, on which alone it was permitted to consult the oracle. Ordinary pilgrims would have had no choice but to await these, and may have planned their arrival at Delphi to coincide with these days, though for those coming long distances any sort of forward planning may have been difficult. Presumably, however, the knowledge of days for consultation was fairly widespread throughout the Hellenic world. Traditionally, consultations took place in the month of Bysios.<sup>76</sup> In this month men asked questions of the oracle and received their answers, but they could do so only on one day, the seventh, the birthday of the god Apollo, which was the sole day for consultations. Plutarch states that “recently”, presumably by classical times, the consultations had been extended from once a year to once a month, and this is confirmed by his dialogue about the oracles at Delphi, in which one of the characters refers to the god entering a mortal body once a month.<sup>77</sup> However, the temporal value

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<sup>74</sup> Among African oracles, the practice of eliciting information and the answer which the enquirer desires has been demonstrated: Whittaker *HTR* 58 (1965) 27; compare prophecy in Tibet: Arnott *GR* 36 (1989) 152-57.

<sup>75</sup> *FD* 3.1.560 (the consultant had had several miscarriages; eleven months after the consultation she had a successful birth, and another three years later; cf. ch. 4 n. 130; below n. 138, with text); Eur. *Ion.* 303; cf. ch. 8, esp. nn. 103, 136, 150-51, with text.

<sup>76</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 292e.

<sup>77</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 398a.

to be assigned to “recently” is the subject of debate,<sup>78</sup> while it is possible that the oracle was closed for the three winter months, while Apollo visited the Hyperboreans.<sup>79</sup> It is unlikely that the consultations which employed the lot oracle took place on a different day from direct, verbal prophecy, with the priestess being responsible for both. In any case, the ancient evidence is quite explicit: the priestess was available only on certain days for consultation.<sup>80</sup> However, there might be so many consultants that more than one Pythia would need to be employed.<sup>81</sup>

Alexander III (the Great) of Macedon was no ordinary enquirer, however, and he did not feel that he had to exercise the customary patience of those who arrived when the oracle was not holding consultations. He came to Delphi to consult the Pythia on a day marked as inauspicious, but when the priestess did not wish to take her place on the tripod, and cited the Delphic law which forbade consultation on that day, he himself dragged her by force towards the temple, at which she cried out that he was invincible.<sup>82</sup> The precise meaning of what Plutarch means by “inauspicious” days is uncertain, but if the Pythia could only be consulted once a month, then every other day was probably inauspicious, as the god would not be present on that day.

Not only were there days when the consultation of the oracle was forbidden, but it was also possible that the pilgrim might perhaps find that the priestess was indisposed, even on a day set aside for consultation. It was also possible that the sacrificial victim might prove the day to be inauspicious. Plutarch records an instance from his own lifetime, when a deputation of foreigners had arrived in order to consult the oracle. The victim which was customarily sacrificed prior to any consultation, in order to discover if the god was willing to communicate his message to the priestess, would not respond. The priests doused the victim with water in order that it would

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<sup>78</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 292f: ὄψε̅. Parke *CQ* 3' (1943) 19-22 argues that Plutarch means the fifth century by this, and that Plutarch can call this “recently” because of the long (mythical) history of the oracle; cf. Amandry *Mantique* 81-85, esp. 81-82.

<sup>79</sup> Halliday *Greek Questions* 62; cf. Amandry *Mantique* 81 with n. 4; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.17.

<sup>80</sup> *Contra* Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.17.

<sup>81</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 414b; cf. further below, n. 129 with text.

<sup>82</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 14.6-7: ἦλθεν εἰς Δελφοὺς, καὶ κατὰ τύχην ἡμερῶν ἀποφράδων οὐσῶν (14.6); cf. Hamilton *Plutarch* 34-35; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 2.109-10, *Response* 270; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 338-39, *Response* Q 216. A similar incident seems to have taken place some twenty years prior to Alexander's visit. Diodoros narrates that in 355/4 Philomelos, after capturing Delphi and looting the treasure there, decided to consult the oracle about his war against the Boeotians, and compelled the Pythia to mount the tripod and to give him an oracle about the war: μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα περὶ τοῦ πολέμου βουλόμενος χρῆσασθαι τῷ μαντεῖῳ τὴν Πυθίαν ἠνάγκασεν ἀναβάσασιν ἐπὶ τὸν τρίποδα δοῦναι τὸν χρησμόν (Diod. 16.25.3).



shake its head and thereby signify its willingness to be led to the slaughter, but the priests in this particular case, Plutarch states, were keen to please the visitors (perhaps because foreign delegations were rare in those days of decline) and had to drench the victim before it would submit. The Pythia went to her oracular seat, unwillingly and half-heartedly. As soon as she began, it was clear that her responses were forced. Finally, she became hysterical and with a fearful scream ran towards the exit, and flung herself down, so that not only the enquirers fled, but also the *prophetes* Nikandros, and the “holy men”, *hosioi*, who were present. After a little while they re-entered the shrine and carried out the Pythia who, although still alive, passed away a few days later.<sup>83</sup>

This incident can also be taken to support the evidence that the Pythia was in the presence of her consultant when she prophesied. It has been pointed out that the record of this event in Plutarch deals only with the sound of the Pythia, rather than her physical appearance, and that this means that the Pythia and the consultants were separated: they described her auditory experience only because they could not see her visual appearance as they were separated from her.<sup>84</sup> Much of the description does pertain to the voice of the Pythia: her voice was harsh, and she gave an inarticulate and fearful shriek just before fleeing. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that those present could see the Pythia; rather the description focuses on the most important aspect of her behaviour, namely her voice, which conveyed the prophecy which was the word of the god Apollo. The physical appearance of the Pythia was of secondary consideration, but it is possible, in fact, to see in Plutarch’s comment that the Pythia was agitated a comment on her appearance.<sup>85</sup> In addition, the dramatic nature of the account reads very strongly as if the consultants witnessed her distress.

It would be incorrect to take this incident as any indication of the normal prophetic practice,<sup>86</sup> for Plutarch is in fact demonstrating quite clearly that the incident is abnormal, and authors such as Herodotos, who frequently mention her oracles,

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<sup>83</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 438a-b, cf. 438c; on goat sacrifice, cf. Plut. *Mor.* 435b-c, 437b. At Plut. *Mor.* 435c it is noted that unless the sacrificial victim is shaking all over the Pythia is not brought in to be consulted. This last passage also seems to point out that the Pythia would not be in the *manteion* until the sacrifice had been carried out, and that she must have processed in later; see n. 107 below.

<sup>84</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.29, who suggest that, while the Pythia, consultants and temple staff were on the same level, they could not see her because there was a veil between them.

<sup>85</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 438b.

<sup>86</sup> *Contra* Dodds *Greeks and the Irrational* 72-73. Farnell *Cults* 4.187 correctly interprets that “the premonitory omens were unpropitious, and the Pythoness went to the seat of divination with reluctance: the afflatus of the divinity, being thus untowardly inhaled, produced madness and subsequent death...”; cf. Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 208.

point to nothing unusual in her behaviour.<sup>87</sup> The priestess would not normally be inarticulate or frenzied. It is the unwillingness of the sacrificial victim that points to the god's indisposition to prophesy, and which had affected the priestess, whose ability to respond would have been conditioned by the auspiciousness of the omen. The contrast is drawn between the Pythia's normal and abnormal behaviour: her response here is atypical. In fact, it can hardly be imagined that Hellenic pilgrims would have piously flocked in their great numbers to a priestess who was frenzied and possessed. Rather, the Pythia was in a tranquil state, perhaps under the influence of some form of possession, but not of the maenad type, and gave out oracles in prose or hexameter in an articulate and intelligible manner. In an incident relevant to this, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the Pythia is depicted as running screaming from the adyton. The Pythia has spoken the prologue of the play and she is about to commence her prophetic role. She enters the adyton, where she encounters Orestes, a suppliant, surrounded by the Erinyes,<sup>88</sup> and naturally flees in alarm. Prior to entering the adyton she is calm: it is what she sees there that upsets her, and the incident is not evidence for prophetic madness, but demonstrates a normal reaction to a fearful and unexpected sight. Euripides' *Ion* also contains a significant passage, which has been translated as, "On the tripod most holy is seated the Delphian Maiden / Chanting to children of Hellas the wild cries, laden / With doom, from the lips of Apollo that ring."<sup>89</sup> Fontenrose, however, translates not as "wild cries" but as "loud speech or song", and comments that Euripides is not indicating here that the Pythia is frenzied.<sup>90</sup>

It seems clear that a very different version of the Pythia and her activities must be accepted to the one which until recently has had currency. Diodoros and his story of the chasm with its prophecy-inducing vapours is at least partly responsible for the distorted view of the Pythia, while to the Roman author Lucan, who had never visited

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<sup>87</sup> Herodotos takes it for granted that his listeners and readers will know the procedure of the oracle: in discussing the Thracian oracle of Dionysos among the Bessoï, a branch of the Satrai tribe, it is sufficient for him to state that the priestess of the oracle gave her oracles just as was done at Delphi (Hdt. 7.111.2).

<sup>88</sup> Aeschyl. *Eum.* 34-64.

<sup>89</sup> Eur. *Ion.* 91-93: θάσσει δὲ λυγρὴ τρίποδα ζάθεον / Δελφίς, δέιδουσ' Ἑλληνσι βοάς, / ἄς ἂν Ἀπόλλων κλαδῆσῃ (translated by Way *Euripides* 13).

<sup>90</sup> Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 206. Modern translators can give the non-Greek reader a false impression: Plat. *Phaedr.* 244a-b is translated as "For the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses 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..." (tr. Fowler *Plato* 465). The phrase "have been mad" is a translation of *μανεῖσαι*, while "in their right minds..." translates *σωφρονοῦσαι*. The contrast here is simply between that of a state of prophetic inspiration and one of normality (that is, lack of inspiration).

Delphi, is owed the picture of the frenzied Pythia which still has wide acceptance.<sup>91</sup> In his *Civil War*, Lucan has Apollo possess the Pythia: she is described as raging and rushing around madly, her head shaking in a great fury. The portrait increases in colour, with an account of madness, foaming lips, groans and cries.<sup>92</sup> Lucan, however, wrote from ignorance: he had not been to Delphi and he had no knowledge of Delphic procedure. Modern scholars commonly hold that Lucan's description derives from Virgil's account of Aeneas' visit to the Sibyl at Cumae.<sup>93</sup> It can be noted in contrast that Philostratos in the early third century stresses the simplicity of the oracular procedure at Delphi, presumably implying that there was nothing extraordinary about the behaviour of the Pythia.<sup>94</sup>

If the consultants arrived at the right time of the month, they could seek the advice of the Pythia. For this they would need to be accompanied by a *proxenos* and to make the necessary sacrifices. As the times at which the god Apollo could be consulted were infrequent, several enquirers could be expected to be waiting to make inquiries on the day reserved for consultation. The order in which they were to enter the temple and put their question to the Pythia was decided by the use of lots. Aeschylus in the *Eumenides* has the priestess say: "Let them enter in turn according to lot, as decreed. For as the god leads, so I prophesy."<sup>95</sup> There was also the institution of the *promanteia*,<sup>96</sup> by which the Delphians granted to either individuals or communities the right of consulting the oracle first, before other pilgrims. When there were several parties with this right of *promanteia* who wished to consult the oracle, then presumably the lot would be used to establish the order in which they were to consult the oracle. Alternatively, when there were clear differences in status between consultants with *promanteia*, the authorities might have determined the order by reference to the degree of importance of consultants, and this might also have been the case for important consultants without the privilege of *promanteia*. The privilege of *promanteia* could be awarded as a mark of honour,<sup>97</sup> the most famous grant being that for the Khians. It is inscribed in the words "The Delphians gave the Khians

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<sup>91</sup> Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 210.

<sup>92</sup> Lucan *Civil War* 5.165-74, 190-93; cf. Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 209. Note also Amandry's and Fontenrose's comments on prophetic *mania* in Plato's *Phaedr.* (244a-45c, 265a-b). Here Plato's reference to *mania* is to inspired prophecy, not to hysteria or prophetic madness. *Mania* should not be translated as madness, but was translated by the Romans as *insania* or *vecordia*, which could explain Lucan's depiction of the Pythia (Amandry *Mantique* 43; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 204).

<sup>93</sup> Amandry *Mantique* 21, cf. 237-38; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 210.

<sup>94</sup> Philostr. *Apoll.* 6.10.

<sup>95</sup> Aeschyl. *Eum.* 32-33.

<sup>96</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Legrand *REG* 13 (1900) 281-301; cf. Amandry *Mantique* 113-14 n. 3, 3<sup>0</sup>; for *promanteia* at Didyma, see Fontenrose *Didyma* 105.

<sup>97</sup> For example, *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 548.

*promanteia*” on the south-east corner of the altar of the Khians, which is immediately in front of the temple of Apollo itself, where even the modern visitor can see it.<sup>98</sup>

There was a fee for consulting the Delphic oracle. A sacrifice in the form of a *pelanos*, a ritual cake, was part of the cost, and the necessity for the enquirer of either sex to “sacrifice” the *pelanos* is clear. In Euripides’ *Ion*, Ion tells the servant women that it is possible to enter the temple to consult the god if they have sacrificed the *pelanos*.<sup>99</sup> While the evidence of Plutarch suggests that women, except for the priestess herself, were excluded from the temple, it seems that in the fifth century they were able to act as consultants: Kreousa, in Euripides’ *Ion*, is asked by Ion whether she has come with her husband or to consult the oracle by herself.<sup>100</sup> If so, the idea that women consulted the oracle through the use of a proxy could be rejected.<sup>101</sup> A fifth century inscription records an agreement between the people of Phaselis and the Delphians on the subject of charges for consultation of the Delphic oracle. Whenever the state of Phaselis consults the oracle they are to pay seven drachmas and two obols for the *pelanos*; if individuals make a consultation they are to pay four obols for the *pelanos*.<sup>102</sup> That is, a specific price is set for the *pelanos*. The amounts in the inscription are not round sums, and it seems that this is because the cost has been converted from another currency, probably Athenian: seven drachmas, two obols of Delphic currency, the cost of a consultation by the state, would be equivalent to ten Attic drachmas, while the fee for private consultations, four Delphic obols, was the equivalent of a little less than an Attic drachma. It would have been convenient had the consultation fee been fixed in an international currency: ten Attic drachmas for a public, and one for a private consultation. The charges were set in Attic, it has been suggested, in order to make clear the exact cost of consultation.<sup>103</sup> The inscription lays down the charge presumably not only for the Phaselites, but also for consultants

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98 ΔΕΛΦΟΙ ΕΔΩΚΑΝ/ ΧΙΟΙΣ ΠΡΟΜΑΝΤ/ΕΙΑΝ; for which see fig. 6.4 # 25; another example is the *promanteia* given to the Thebans: *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 176. At Dem. 19.327 (cf. 9.32) Demosthenes complains that Athens has been deprived of her *promanteia* at Delphi; cf. Plut. *Per.* 21.3.

99 Eur. *Ion.* 226-29; Parke *Hermathena* 28 (1939) 63 n. 7.

100 Plut. *Mor.* 385c: τὸ μηδεμίᾳ γυναικὶ πρὸς τὸ χρηστήριον εἶναι προσελθεῖν; Eur. *Ion.* 299: σὺν ἀνδρὶ δ’ ἤκεις ἢ μόνη χρηστήρια; cf. 334-35; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 217 n. 26 with references. For women as pilgrims, see ch. 4, esp. nn. 123-44, with text.

101 Flacelière *Greek Oracles* 41.

102 This is clearly the interpretation required of this inscription, see Parke *Hermathena* 28 (1939) 59-65, who dates it probably to the last two decades of the fifth century; for a bibliography on the inscription, see Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.43 n. 62. In the agreement between Delphi and Skiathos, the Skiathians were to be exempt from all charges except for the *pelanos*: *BCH* 63 (1939) p. 184, lines 6-8; cf. below n. 105.

103 Parke *Hermathena* 28 (1939) 61, 64.

from elsewhere throughout the Greek world.<sup>104</sup> There is, however, a fourth century agreement between the island of Skiathos and Delphi, in which the state of Skiathos is to be charged two drachmas for a consultation, while private Skiathan consultants were to pay two obols, much less than the Phaselites.<sup>105</sup> Two possible explanations for the discrepancy have been advanced: that the business of the oracle might have been declining at the time when the agreement was struck, or perhaps that the economic condition of Skiathos might have been taken into account: Phaselis was wealthy, Skiathos poor.<sup>106</sup> Perhaps charges for other states fell between the amounts charged for these two states.

After the sacrifice of the *peianos* there followed the sacrifice of a goat in the temple,<sup>107</sup> the story of the discovery of the oracle by goats and a shepherd, as recorded most fully in Diodoros, being probably aetiological in nature. As consultation of the Pythia involved the sacrifice of a beast this was a limiting factor in the consultation of the oracle, and made this a privilege restricted to wealthy individuals, and to communities who would use state funds in order to purchase the beast.<sup>108</sup> All sacrificial victims had to go to the altar willingly; this was a tenet of sacrificial procedure having its origins in the guilt which arose when humans first began to kill living things.<sup>109</sup> The god Apollo himself had promised the Delphians “rich pickings” from the sacrifices made at Delphi, and they had first choice of any sacrifice made.<sup>110</sup> The quip of Callimachus is instructive in this context, “Like flies around a goatherd or like Delphians at a sacrifice.”<sup>111</sup> This, however, seems to have been the only direct advantage which the Delphians gained from the great flow of wealth into the sanctuary.

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<sup>104</sup> Parke *Hermathena* 28 (1939) 64 notes that the charge for oracles at the shrine of Amphilokhos (Cilicia) was two obols (Luc. *Alex.* 19). Thus a private consultation at Delphi was twice as expensive, reflecting the prestige of this oracular centre.

<sup>105</sup> Amandry *BCH* 63 (1939) 183-219; idem *BCH* 68-69 (1944-45) 411-16.

<sup>106</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.32.

<sup>107</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 435b-c and 438a-b mention sacrifices and victim respectively, but not specifically a goat (*contra* Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.41 n. 9), while 437b states that in the case of a goat, the purity of the animal for sacrifice was tested by cold water. In 438a-b the beast signifies its unwillingness to be sacrificed by not trembling until it is absolutely doused in water, so that presumably a goat is implied here. Eur. *Ion* 228-29 refers to a sacrifice but  $\mu\eta\lambda\omicron\nu$  is not specific (cf. 377, referring to sacrifices to the gods in general).

<sup>108</sup> Historically, there were many consultations of the oracle; but by Pausanias' time he can write that few people pass into the innermost part of the temple (Paus. 10.24.5): if by this he means the *manteion*, then this could be an indication of the decline in popularity of the shrine in his day, and also perhaps a reflection of the cost of consultation.

<sup>109</sup> See the discussion of the Nikandros incident, n. 83 with text.

<sup>110</sup> Burkert *Homo Necans* 118 cf. 120. with references to the sources 118-19 nn. 8-15.

<sup>111</sup> Callim. fr. 191.26-27 (Pfeiffer).

The pilgrim enquirer was accompanied as he made his way into the temple by the Delphian *proxenos* of his native city.<sup>112</sup> Presumably all major states had such a *proxenos* at Delphi, though it is possible that occasionally enquirers would come from obscure Greek cities and not have a *proxenos*. In one inscription honouring the Sardinians, the city of Delphi appointed itself as *proxenos* for the city of the Sardinians: clearly the latter did not have a *proxenos* at this time, and the Delphians promised that their city would carry out the preliminary sacrifice for the Sardinians when these came to consult the oracle. Presumably some official would be delegated this task,<sup>113</sup> as clearly the Sardinians had no personal links with the city. In the case of other cities without a *proxenos*, an approach to the temple authorities would presumably have remedied any such deficiency. That the Delphians kept a record of who the *proxenoi* were is indicated by one surviving inscription, which is a long list of *proxenoi* of the second century BC, recording the names of the Delphians who were the *proxenoi* for various states, both within and outside Greece, and including Rome; it seems safe to assume that there were similar lists kept in both earlier and later periods as well, and the list indicates that there was official scrutiny of the identity of *proxenoi*.<sup>114</sup>

Having performed the sacrifice, the enquirer would have come face to face with the priestess. The artistic evidence is explicit on this point, for the worshipper is depicted standing before the Pythia, or the god of prophecy himself:<sup>115</sup> in the presence of divinity, the pilgrim did not sit.<sup>116</sup> The enquirers put the questions directly to the priestess,<sup>117</sup> and while it has been stated that the function of the *prophetes* was to take the oracular answer and “reduce it to some form, and dictate it to the enquirer who could, if he wished, have it recorded in writing”,<sup>118</sup> it is clear that the Pythia not only made her replies directly to the enquirer, but that her words were the oracles; Plutarch is absolutely explicit on this. Whatever the role of the *prophetes*, it was not to improve the utterances of the Pythia. Replies could, however, be written down for the convenience of the enquirer; an official delegation from a city might well have written

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<sup>112</sup> *Proxenos*: see Eur. *Andr.* 1103, cf. *Ion* 335, *Hel.* 146.

<sup>113</sup> *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 548.10.

<sup>114</sup> *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 585 (Rome: *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 585.16-17). See *SIG*<sup>3</sup>, vol. 2, pp. 102-04 for a chart which tabulates the contents of this inscription.

<sup>115</sup> See figs. 6.1, 6.2. This could, however, be an artistic convention symbolising the worshipper in the presence of the god, but see nn. 149-50 below, with text.

<sup>116</sup> *Contra* Parke, *Wormell Delphic Oracle* 1.33.

<sup>117</sup> Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 217; see also Eur. *Andr.* 1104.

<sup>118</sup> Parke, *Wormell Delphic Oracle* 1.33.

down the oracle as it was being given.<sup>119</sup> The way in which the Pythia was able to produce oracles which were suitable responses to the questions asked is unknown. In this respect, whether or not she was inspired is irrelevant. Whatever her state of being she had to come up with an answer to whatever was asked of her, and prior notice of the questions which were to be asked would have been of great assistance in dealing with the problems of enquirers. Doubtless the information which temple staff and *proxenoi* elicited from enquirers before they consulted the Pythia was of use here, and this implies an efficient and sophisticated information system at the site.

The view that priests needed to recast the words of the Pythia stems partly from the belief that she was always a peasant woman.<sup>120</sup> Euripides states that the Pythia “was selected from all the women of Delphi”,<sup>121</sup> and Plutarch that in his day the particular Pythia was a woman of humble means,<sup>122</sup> but this was obviously not a necessary criterion of choice. In fact the words of Plutarch would tend to indicate that this was not always the case. The main criterion for selection of a priestess must have been susceptibility to inspiration: how this was determined is unknown, though it has been suggested that “...no doubt the position was gradually acquired by service to Apollo....”<sup>123</sup> The Pythia may have been a peasant woman in Plutarch’s day, but at other times it is likely that someone from an upper socio-economic grouping was chosen, depending on the availability of suitable candidates.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Hdt. 1.48.1, 7.142.1; Plut. *Phok.* 8.4; *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 1096; Theogn. 1.805-10; Diog. Laert. 5.6.91; cf. Diod. 1.27.1: an oracle inscribed at Delphi for public viewing (as Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.43 n. 69 note, when the enquirers were sent on behalf of someone else, then the reply would be written down; see below n. 143 with text). Note also the statement of Plut. *Mor.* 397c that if the oracle was written down by the priestess instead of being delivered orally, then there would be no reason to believe that the handwriting was actually the god’s, which makes it clear that the oral oracle as delivered by the priestess was the authoritative version. At the sanctuary of Apollo Ptoios (Akraiphia) the oracle could be written down: Hdt. 8.135.2-3; cf. ch. 4 n. 70, with text (the case of Mys).

<sup>120</sup> Lloyd-Jones *GR* 23 (1976) 67; Parker *Greek States and Greek Oracles* 300-01; Flacelière *Greek Oracles* 52.

<sup>121</sup> Eur. *Ion* 1323: πασῶν Δελφίδου ἐξαίρετος.

<sup>122</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 405c.

<sup>123</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.35, 44 n. 85.

<sup>124</sup> Strabo 9.3.8 (420) records of his own time that the temple was poor. Burkert *Homo Necans* 117 n. 3 couples this with the reference under discussion (Plut. *Mor.* 405c), hinting that the poverty of the priestess was a corollary of the poverty of the shrine. But there was still a Delphic intelligentsia in Plutarch’s day, despite his statement that the current Pythia was poor, and Delphi was not a backwater of impoverished peasants from whom the Pythia had to be chosen. It was just that in this case, the Pythia happened to be from a poor background: apparently the god did not consider socio-economic considerations in distributing his prophetic skill.

The extent to which Plutarch's statement that in his own day the Pythia was a peasant woman has been accepted as applying to the whole of the history of the Delphic oracle is surprising. It has even been stated that the ancient pagans glorified in the fact that the Pythia was an uneducated woman.<sup>125</sup> If anything, the tone of Plutarch, in noting that the present Pythia is a peasant woman, is in fact almost apologetic - the Pythia might be of poor background, but she has been well brought up - and he would probably have preferred to have reported that the present incumbent of the tripod was an aristocratic woman. A Pythia who was both intelligent and literate would have been capable of formulating the hexameters in which oracles were sometimes given, though by no means always, and probably as the exception rather than the rule:<sup>126</sup> it should be noted that each priestess gave the oracles in accordance with her natural faculties.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, Theon, one of Plutarch's characters, states that "it is impossible for someone who is uneducated and ignorant about poetry to talk in a poetic manner", and goes on to state that the present incumbent has no skills and this explains why the oracles are not given out in Homeric hexameters; past priestesses had a bent in the literary direction, and thus many of the oracles were in verse.<sup>128</sup>

While in Plutarch's day the oracle was served by only one Pythia, this was in the period of the oracle's decline. In the classical period, there were two Pythias, with a third who was, so to speak, kept in reserve.<sup>129</sup> This, of course, attests to the popularity of the oracle in the classical period. But in Plutarch's day, the one priestess met every need.<sup>130</sup> It should also be noted that the stories of the origin of the oracle record that there was only one priestess in the beginning.<sup>131</sup> How far these stories are to be believed is uncertain, but, if they are accepted, it does indicate that the oracle grew to be more popular throughout the classical period. In the classical period the pilgrim would have been greeted by an older woman, but this had not always been the

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<sup>125</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.35.

<sup>126</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 405c.

<sup>127</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 397b.

<sup>128</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 405c-e. The male chauvinism of an early scholar must not escape comment: Farnell *Cults* 4.189 sees in the choice of a priestess from the "lower classes" the priests' desire to have someone most susceptible to suggestion: "...as usually the female is more responsive than the male, and the uncultured rather than the cultured intellect, to certain influences of religious mesmerism, the rulers of the oracle were well advised in generally selecting for the prophetic seat a virtuous women of the lower classes..."; in his view, the Pythia was unaware of the questions posed: this was the responsibility of the priests, for they "were sane enough".

<sup>129</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 414b; cf. Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.35; Flacelière *Greek Oracles* 42.

<sup>130</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 414b. Lloyd-Jones (*JR* 23 (1976) 66 incorrectly states (without giving the reference) that in Plutarch's time there were three priestesses, two involved in actual consultation, with one in reserve: Plut. *Mor.* 414b is in fact referring to an earlier time.

<sup>131</sup> See Diod. 16.26.4; Strabo 9.3.5 (419); Paus. 10.5.7.



case according to the sources. Diodoros states that in early times the prophet had been a virgin, "...for indeed virgins were alleged to be well suited to guard the secrecy of disclosures made by oracles....", but in more recent times one Ekhekrates of Thessaly, coming to the shrine, and lusting after the beauty of the virgin prophetess, carried her off and raped her. As a consequence, the Delphians decreed that the prophetess was to be an older woman, of fifty, but that she should wear the dress of a virgin.<sup>132</sup> The historicity of this story might well be doubted;<sup>133</sup> in fact, it might be a crude explanation accounting for the virgin dress of the old woman, and perhaps the reasons for this dress ought to be sought elsewhere.<sup>134</sup> A woman of mature years was presumably more acceptable as a medium for the wisdom of the god, while the Pythia, if married (nowhere is it stated that she had to be a virgin), would probably have given up living with her husband, in order to live free of sexual relations, and thus in this sense be ritually pure, and avoid the impurity associated with intercourse and childbirth.<sup>135</sup>

The questions asked of the Pythia could concern a wide range of topics, and the personal character of many of the questions asked at the oracle of Zeus at Dodona can be noted in this context.<sup>136</sup> At Delphi, while there were clearly many official enquiries about official matters, there were also a significant number of personal enquiries. No survey of the oracle can be complete without mentioning some of the individual pilgrims who made their way to Delphi in search of an answer to some pressing question. Not only did official delegations, *theoriai*, travel to Delphi, but so too did individual pilgrims who had personal questions to ask. The best case in point is from Euripides: Kreousa and Xouthos have gone to Delphi in search of help about their childlessness, and Kreousa is asked by Ion whether she has come about crops or

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<sup>132</sup> Diod. 16.26.6. An older woman (*graus*): Aeschyl. *Eum.* 38; a woman (*gyne* rather than a *parthenos*): Eur. *Ion* 91; at 1324 Ion calls the Pythia his mother as she has raised him (she has addressed him as son: 1320) and this indicates that she was an older woman); Plut. *Mor.* 435c-d. As Aeschylus and Euripides are fifth century writers, Diodoros' "more recent times" must be pre-classical; the aetiological myth could be classical or even archaic in origin; note Ael. *Nat. An.* 11.10.

<sup>133</sup> Latte *HTR* 33 (1940) 17; Diodoro: himself uses the term *μυθολογούμενα*.

<sup>134</sup> Although the priestess need not be a virgin, the virgin dress could have symbolised her chastity while in the service of Apollo; note Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.35.

<sup>135</sup> The Pythia had her own dwelling: *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 823a (cited as *FD* 3.5.5 (*non vidi*) by Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.44 n. 84). For sexual relations falling under a religious taboo, see ch. 4 nn. 48-52, 55-58; ch. 8 n. 54, with text. One Pythia at least is known to have been married: de la Coste-Messelière *BCH* 49 (1925) 83, no. 10, with Amandry *Mantique* 116 n. 2; Parke, Wormell 1.44 n. 90. For the chastity required of the Pythia: Plut. *Mor.* 435c-d, 438c; a pregnant Pythia would doubtless have been an inconvenience.

<sup>136</sup> Parke *Greek Oracles* 92.

children.<sup>137</sup> In fact, by Plutarch's time, momentous questions of state policy seem to have been rather rare, due to the peaceful and settled conditions applying in Greece, and the questions now posed were frequently on trivial and everyday matters: if one should marry, sail, lend money; while questions asked by states were about crops, the fertility of herds, and public health.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the practical nature of these questions is advanced as an explanation as to why the Pythia of that time prophesied in plain prose rather than elaborate verse.<sup>139</sup> Two well known instances from the classical period can be cited as evidence for problems which could be submitted for the oracle's judgement. Khairephon at Delphi asked if any man was wiser than Sokrates: this oracle can be said to have changed Sokrates' life, and those of the Athenians he encountered.<sup>140</sup> Xenophon went to Delphi to seek advice about campaigning in Asia Minor: he asked the oracle to what gods he should sacrifice and pray in order to have success. Returning to Athens, he told Sokrates of the oracle: the latter reprimanded him, for Xenophon had not asked whether he should go, but how best to accomplish the journey.<sup>141</sup> It was the accessibility of the oracle to Hellenes in general, and its willingness to answer personal, as well as state questions, that encouraged the flow of private pilgrims, laden with their problems, to Delphi.

Just as at Epidauros there is evidence to suggest that cures could be effected by proxy,<sup>142</sup> at Delphi this was a customary procedure and individuals could send others on their behalf to receive an oracle. This was the method employed by monarchs and states, who would of course send representatives to receive the oracle on their behalf. Thus Croesus sent envoys to receive an oracle, and this was delivered openly to them. A late source, however, records that a response could be received under seal by an enquirer, and it has been suggested that this is an indication that the enquirer was seeking an oracle on another's behalf.<sup>143</sup> Presumably in this case, the proxy was not present at the consultation with the Pythia, and the priests would have written down the oracle for the purposes of secrecy.

Certain states had special officials whose duty was to consult the Delphic oracle. At Sparta, these officials were known as *Pythioi*, and it was their

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<sup>137</sup> Eur. *Ion.* 303 (crops: literally "concerning the earth").

<sup>138</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 386c (victory in war, marriage, sailing, farming, travel), 407d, 408c; *FD* 3.1.560 (cf. ch. 4 n. 130, above n. 75, with text); Morgan *Hermathena* 147 (1989) 36.

<sup>139</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 408c.

<sup>140</sup> Plat. *Apol.* 21a.

<sup>141</sup> Xen. *Anab.* 3.1.5-7; cf. Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.404, 2.74-75, *Response* 172; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 248, *Response* H 11.

<sup>142</sup> See ch. 8 n. 116, with text.

<sup>143</sup> Zen. 6.11, cited by Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 217-18, n. 27 with further references; cf. above n. 119, with text.

responsibility to consult the oracle on public affairs when the Spartans decided, probably in their assembly, to do so.<sup>144</sup> The Athenians sent a delegation known as the *Pythais* to Delphi. It was the Athenian custom to appoint as its officials *Pythaistai*, the ones who went on the sacred mission, who would observe the sky in the direction of Harma, near Phyle, an Attic deme bordering on Tanagra, looking for lightning. They would keep watch for three days and three nights of three months of the year, from the altar of Zeus Astrapaios, at Athens,<sup>145</sup> and when they saw it they would journey on a sacred mission to Delphi and there offer sacrifice; the delegation travelled by land.<sup>146</sup>

The procedure best known at Delphi is the oracular process involving the Delphic priestess sitting on the sacred tripod and giving a verbal oracle to the enquirer. But there was clearly another form of divination as well. The fifth century Vulci kylix is the best evidence for this procedure.<sup>147</sup> A female figure, named Themis, who can be called a priestess,<sup>148</sup> sits on the tripod, holding in her right hand a twig of laurel, in her left a bowl. Before her stands the enquirer Aigeus, wearing a laurel wreath, and the pillar which divides the scene is clearly behind the two figures: their feet are in the same area.<sup>149</sup> If the Pythia and the consultants were separated from each other in the temple, there is no reason to assume that this could not have been shown.<sup>150</sup> The bowl has been subject to two main interpretations: the priestess might be about to drink the holy water of Kassotis from the cup, but the large size of the bowl should be noted. Moreover, the priestess is actually gazing into the bowl, contemplating its interior. Another possible interpretation is that the bowl is filled with water and that the priestess is contemplating the water's surface as part of the oracular procedure. Yet there is no evidence that hydromancy or lekanomancy were practiced at Delphi,

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<sup>144</sup> Hdt. 6.57.2, 4 (cf. 6.52.5); Xen. *Spartan Const.* 15.5; cf. Parker *Spartan Religion* 154-55, esp. 170 n. 62; Hodkinson *Chiron* 13 (1983) 273 n. 105; Cartledge *Agasilaos* 34.

<sup>145</sup> Strabo 9.2.11 (404).

<sup>146</sup> Strabo 9.3.12 (422); see Parke *JHS* 59 (1939) 80-83; idem *CQ* 39 (1945) 106.

<sup>147</sup> See fig. 6.1. For other artistic evidence, see the discussion of Amandry *Mantique* 66-77, and the references in Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1. 24 with 42 nn. 23-24.

<sup>148</sup> Themis was the name of the goddess who ruled Delphi before Apollo (Paus. 10.5.6). Whether the female depicted on the vase is Themis the goddess or a mortal priestess with the name of Themis is irrelevant (cf. Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 278-81). The female figure is acting as a priestess, and that is how she will be described.

<sup>149</sup> Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 290-92 discusses the relationship of the vase's version of Aigeus' consultation of the Pythia, and that of literature; the bowl was a φιάλη.

<sup>150</sup> Contra Flacelière *Greek Oracles* 45-47, who employs the analogy of the underground *manteion* of Klaros. Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 226 notes "There is nothing in the evidence to show conclusively that the Pythia was separated from enquirers so that they could not see her during the [mantic] session..."

though these practices were common among the Greeks.<sup>151</sup> The bowl also appears in a prophetic context on a cista, where Apollo, a large laurel branch in his left hand, sits on a stool (not a tripod) with an omphalos next to his right foot, and extends a bowl, similar in design to the bowl depicted on the kylix. An armed male, without a wreath, who is unnamed but may possibly be Oedipus, looks with an expression of surprise into the bowl dipped towards him by Apollo.<sup>152</sup> In both depictions, something in the bowl arrests the attention, in the case of the kylix of the priestess, in that of the cista of the armed male figure. Clearly this is not verbal prophecy being depicted, and it seems that this is another form of oracular prediction. It is possible that what is represented are examples of kleromancy or thrioboly: divination by lots or dice.<sup>153</sup>

Lexicographers mention that sacred lots were employed at Delphi.<sup>154</sup> Apollo's epithet *klarios* is possibly to be derived from "lot" (κλήρος), while the verb used to describe the Pythia's oracles "to give oracular response" (ἀναίρεῖν) is connected with the employment of lots to give oracles, while even the terms "to deliver an oracle" (χρᾶσθαι), and "an oracle" (χρησμός) imply the use of a physical object as the means of providing the oracle.<sup>155</sup> The mechanics by which the lot oracle worked are not altogether clear. It is possible that the lots, which were in the bowl, somehow leapt in response to the question asked of the Pythia: this is the testimony of the Suda.<sup>156</sup> The way in which the lots landed - perhaps on one side or another - may

<sup>151</sup> Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 281-82.

<sup>152</sup> The Praenestine cista, Barberini collection, see fig. 6.2; Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 283-85. A note of caution, however, must be advanced: the acceptance of the artistic evidence depends on the degree to which the artists had knowledge of Delphic procedure.

<sup>153</sup> Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 285. It is also interesting to note that the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* provides evidence for Apollo's interest in ornithoscopia, but not in ornithomanteia, of which the god disapproved. *Hom. Hymn Hermes* 543-49; see also Eur. *Ion* 377; Amandry *Mantique* 57-59; Pollard *Seers, Shrines and Sirens* 22-23. Apollo taught Hermes the art of prophesying by pebbles in exchange for the pipe, Apollod. 3.10.2. Paus. 10.6.1 refers to Parnassos, son of Poseidon (mortal father Kleopompos), discoverer of prophecy (*manteia*) by birds; cf. Steph. Byz. *s.v.* Παρνασσός, who records a belief that Parnassos was the first to prophesy at Delphi.

<sup>154</sup> Μαντικά ψῆφοι, θρίαι: *EM s.v.* Θρίαι, θρία; Hesych *s.v.* Θρίαι, θρίαζειν; Suda *s.v.* Θρίαι, θρία, cf. Πυθώ; Steph. Byz. *s.v.* Θρία; *FGH* 328 Philochoros F 195J (Zen. *Prov. Cent.* 5.75); Callim. *Hymn Ap.* 45 (with Schol.); Nonnus *Narrationes ad Greg. Naz. In Julian. imp. invect.* (Westermann *Mythographoi* 67, p. 384) (A82); Eudocia *Violarium* 265, 778 (A94-95). *EM* alone states that there were three lots involved, which seems to be a corruption from Zen. *Prov. Cent.* 5.75, where it is stated that there were three Thriai: *EM* has a sacred lot for each. *Hom. Hymn Herm.* 552-63 refers to the Thriai (without naming them as such); see also for the Thriai, Amandry *Mantique* 27-29, 133; Fontenrose *Python* 426-33. Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 219 n. 33 also refers to Kosmas *Carm. Greg.* 610-11 (*Migne Patrol. Gr.* 38).

<sup>155</sup> Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 286.

<sup>156</sup> Suda *s.v.* Πυθώ.

have provided the clue to their interpretation. The lots seem to have been in the form of beans. The fourth century agreement between Delphi and Skiathos which regulates the amounts which the people of Skiathos are to pay for consulting the oracle,<sup>157</sup> mentions two procedures: the verbal method and the method “by two beans”. The two beans must correspond to the lot method, and the beans perhaps presuppose several alternatives: in answer to a question, one bean might mean “yes” and the other “no”; or perhaps if two beans, after having “leapt” (accepting the Suda), were arranged in a certain way then this meant “yes” and “no” depending on how they landed; or perhaps the beans were of different colours, each colour representing a different alternative.<sup>158</sup> At any rate, speculation alone is possible as no literary evidence is explicit on this point. One thing, however, is clear: the consultants did not choose the bean. In the cases of the kylix and cista discussed above, the decision is made in the bowl already: in the case of the kylix the priestess looks intently at the contents of the bowl, while for the cista, the consultant is shown looking into it.<sup>159</sup>

The bean method is attested in one episode, though in this case it was not the type of method normally employed. The Thessalians requested that the priestess choose a king of Thessaly by drawing one from many beans carved with the names of various candidates.<sup>160</sup> The story might be unhistorical; it does not fit the pattern of the lot employing beans as known from the admittedly meagre evidence. A suggestion that the Thessalian instance could provide a pattern for how the Pythia chose from several alternatives encounters the obstacle of the reference to “two beans” in the agreement between Delphi and Skiathos.<sup>161</sup> In a similar case, the Athenians, seeking a decision from Delphi about whether or not to cultivate a plot of land at Eleusis, had two pieces of tin inscribed and then wrapped in wool so that they could not be distinguished from each other, and placed one in a silver and one in a gold jar. An embassy was chosen to go to Delphi to ask which piece of tin, in which jar - the gold or the silver - should determine what action the Athenians were to take. This unusual

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<sup>157</sup> Amandry *BCH* 63 (1939) p. 184, lines 14-16 with Amandry's comments, pp. 195-200; note idem *BCH* 68-69 (1944-45) 411-16, *Mantuque* 32-36, with 25-32 on Delphic cleromancy in general.

<sup>158</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.18.

<sup>159</sup> The idea of a lot oracle has not gained universal acceptance. Sokolowski argues that the reference to the two beans (φρυκτῶ) as deduced by Amandry in the agreement between Skiathos and Delphi is in fact a reference to sacrificial cakes (*RA* 1949, 981-84). Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 223 agrees with Sokolowski; cf. Latte *HTR* 33 (1940) 18 n. 9, who rejects the idea that there was a lot oracle at Delphi; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.18-19 argue that the epigraphic and artistic evidence favours the existence of the lot oracle. Even if the epigraphic evidence is questioned, the artistic evidence is strong, and has the support of lexicographical entries.

<sup>160</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 492a-b; cf. Hdt. 6.109.2; Farnell *Cults* 4.191; Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 288; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.19, 102.

<sup>161</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.18.

course of action provides a variation on the normal prophetic answer in that the oracle could not answer “yes” or “no” about the land but must choose a particular jar.<sup>162</sup>

The artistic representations of the lot oracle help to strengthen further the evidence that the Pythia was expected to be visible to her enquirers, as the Pythia or Apollo and consultant are shown together. In the case of lot oracles, such as that of Aigeus, or even in the case of the choice of a Thessalian king by lot, the Pythia would have needed to be in a position of proximity to the enquirer, so that he could see the lot as chosen by the Pythia, just as it appears that she was seen to be unable to prophecy in the incident involving Nikandros. The Pythia is recorded to have addressed enquirers as they came into the temple:<sup>163</sup> if she could see them, surely they could see her. It is sometimes supposed that the Pythia descended into a special chamber, an adyton, for the mantic session.<sup>164</sup> This is based on the evidence of Plutarch, who uses verbs of descent,<sup>165</sup> but these might equally refer to the descent from the ancient town to the temple; Alexander, when he forced the Pythia to prophesy “went up” and dragged her towards the temple.<sup>166</sup> It has, however, been pointed out that the terms used can also simply mean “come to” or “reach”.<sup>167</sup> Several ancient authors when referring to consultations simply use verbs meaning to enter,<sup>168</sup> and thus there is no reason to suppose that the Pythia descended into a special chamber away from the consultant.

Accordingly, at Delphi, both oral prophecy and prophecy by lot were practised. It is probable that the use of the lot was the more ancient form of divination.<sup>169</sup> Oral prophecy by verse or prose would have been the more prestigious of the two forms, and the more detailed in answer, and might have been restricted to

<sup>162</sup> See Stewart *GRBS* 26 (1985) 67-68.

<sup>163</sup> Such as in the case of Lykourgos, the Spartan lawgiver; see Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 2. 89, no. 216; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 270, Response Q7.

<sup>164</sup> Courby *FD* 2, 1.62-66; Holland *ATA* 37 (1933) 201-14. For a hypothetical representation of the adyton, see fig. 6.3.

<sup>165</sup> Pythia: Plut. *Mor.* 397a (κάτεισεν), 408c (κατέλθην), 438b (κατέβην); Diog. Laert. 5.91 (κατιοῦσα). Consultants: Plut. *Tim.* 3.2 (καταβαίνουτος), *Mor.* 407d (κατέβαινε); for consultants, see also Pind. *Pyth.* 4.55 (καταβάντα); Hdt. 5.92e2 (ἔσκαταβαίνει). Cf. *Hom. Hymn Apollo* 443, where Apollo enters the adyton (κατέδυσσε). See too Val. Max. 1.8.10 (*descendere*); Oros. *Hist.* 6.15.11, of which Fontenrose 227 n. 45 states *descendere* “probably indicates belief in the oracular cave”; cf. Amandry 1917 on Val. Max. 1.8.10. The argument of Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.28, that the verbs meaning motion down are used not only for the Pythia but also by those consulting her, and thus this fact “destroys” the argument that the Pythia descended, has no validity.

<sup>166</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 14.7; cf. above n. 82, with text.

<sup>167</sup> Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 227.

<sup>168</sup> Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 227 with n. 47.

<sup>169</sup> Robbins *CP* 11 (1916) 287-89.

important enquiries only. Naturally, this form of prophecy was the more impressive, and attracted more attention than the lot oracle.

The last oracle of Delphi as recorded by the sources was said to have been delivered in the time of Julian the Apostate, who attempted to restore paganism as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the mid-fourth century AD. The tenth century source *Artemii Passio* by John of Rhodes records that Oribasios brought back an oracle for Julian from Delphi,<sup>170</sup> an oracle which the twelfth century historian Kedrenos also records (with the further detail that Julian had sent Oribasios to Delphi to rebuild the temple of Apollo): “Tell the emperor that the Daidalic hall has fallen. No longer does Phoebus have his chamber, nor mantic laurel, nor prophetic spring; and the speaking water has been silenced.”<sup>171</sup> Despite the arguments of one modern scholar,<sup>172</sup> the oracle as it stands must be associated with Delphi, though it may well be an apocryphal invention by Christian sources: if its authenticity is accepted, then this oracle represents not so much an oracle as probably a plea to the emperor to restore the fortunes of Delphi.<sup>173</sup> Whether a genuine plea from an embattled pagan site, or a triumphant Christian epitaph on the demise of paganism, the implication is clear: Delphi’s existence as an oracular site was at an end. The death of Julian and the restoration of Christianity meant the end of pagan Delphi, a decline which had already begun by the first century BC.<sup>174</sup> This development had been a product of Roman rule. Delphi had been well patronised in its heyday, giving advice about warfare to belligerent Greek states, but the *Pax Romana* had put an end to warfare amongst the Greeks, and the peaceful conditions which then prevailed throughout Greece deprived Delphi of many of its consultants.

In addition to its oracular function, Delphi, as a Panhellenic centre, was also the host of a penteteric festival attracting pilgrims, as athletes, musicians and spectators, from throughout the Hellenic world.<sup>175</sup> There were both musical and athletic contests at the site, as well as chariot-racing, but music always seems to have been the most important competition. The Pythian festival was probably originally

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<sup>170</sup> See Markopoulos *GRBS* 26 (1985) 209 for the identity of the author of this work; see also Thompson *CQ* 40 (1946) 35-36; Levin *ANRW* 2, 18.2 (1989) 1617-18.

<sup>171</sup> Tr. Gregory *GRBS* 24 (1983) 356

<sup>172</sup> Vatin, discussed by Gregory *GRBS* 24 (1983) 357-61.

<sup>173</sup> Gregory *GRBS* 24 (1983) 361-66.

<sup>174</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.408, 2.177-78, *Response* 436; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 208-09, 349, *Response* 249 (Val. Max. 1.8.10; Luc. *Civil War* 5.112-197; Oros. *Hist.* 6.15.11); Levin *ANRW* 2, 18.2 (1989) 1604-05, esp. 1604 n. 14. For the history of Delphi under the Romans, see Levin 1599-1620.

<sup>175</sup> Delphi was not, of course, the site of the largest Panhellenic festival: this honour belonged to Olympia.

organised, before the First Sacred War, as a festival held every eight years.<sup>176</sup> At the first celebration held after the First Sacred War, in 586, the Amphiktyons celebrated the victory with a sacrifice, and there were monetary awards for the gymnastic contests, paid for from the proceeds of the spoils (that is, the contest was a *khrematites agon*).<sup>177</sup> This generosity on the part of the authorities did not extend to the following celebration of 582, possibly because the spoils had been exhausted; the prize became, once more, the garland (and the contest was thus a *stephanites agon*).<sup>178</sup> From 586 the Pythian festival was celebrated every four years.<sup>179</sup>

The Pythian festival commenced on the seventh day of the month Boukatios, the second month of summer,<sup>180</sup> and was organised by the Amphiktyony.<sup>181</sup> The envoys, spectators and competitors for the festival probably would have come by sea, arriving at the port of Kirrha (Krisa), and then making their way to Delphi by land.<sup>182</sup> The Pythian festival was part of a wider circuit of festivals, being one of the four original Panhellenic festivals of mainland Greece, and took place in the third year of the Olympiad.<sup>183</sup> Starting with the Olympic games in the first year of an Olympiad, or with the Pythian in the third year of an Olympiad, it was possible to compete at and attend all of the four within a space of twenty-five months.<sup>184</sup> Many athletes were

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<sup>176</sup> Cens. 18.6; Schol. *Od.* 3.267; Burkert *Homo Necans* 130 n. 77 also cites Schol. *Pind.* p. 4.14 Drachmann; cf. Fontenrose *Cult of Apollo* 125. On the First Sacred War, see ch. 2 n. 78, with text.

<sup>177</sup> *FGH 238 Marmor Parium* 37 (*IG XII 5*, 444.37); *FGH 124 Kallisthenes T 23* (*SIG<sup>3</sup> 275*, *FD* 3.1.400); cf. Paus 10.7.5.

<sup>178</sup> *FGH 238 Marmor Parium* 38 (*IG XII 5*, 444.38), 582/1 BC; Paus. 10.7.5.

<sup>179</sup> Fontenrose *Cult of Apollo* 125. For the Pythian games, see esp. Krause *Pythien*; Mommsen *Delphika* 149-214; Picard *Delphi and the Pythian Games* 69-81; on the date of the first celebration, Miller *CSCA* 11 (1978) 127-58.

<sup>180</sup> See ch. 1 n. 13, with text; Farnell *Cults* 4.291; Fontenrose *Cult of Apollo* 125.

<sup>181</sup> Amphiktyonic role in the contests: Paus. 10.7.4-8; see for the Amphiktyony, Daux *BCH* 81 (1957) 95-120; Roux *Amphictionie* 1-19. Games in honour of Pythian Apollo were held not only in Delphi but throughout the Greek world: Picard *Delphi and the Pythian Games* 79.

<sup>182</sup> Helioid. *Aeth.* 2.26; cf. Strabo 9 3.3 (418): it was an ascent of 80 stadia from Kirrha to Delphi; cf. Burkert *Homo Necans* 118. The Athenians sent their sacred mission, known as the *Pythais*, to Delphi by a land route: Strabo 9.3.12 (422) (for the *Pythais*, see above, nn. 145-46, with text); cf. ch. 2, n. 11, with text.

<sup>183</sup> Diod. 15.60; Paus. 10.7.4; see Krause *Pythien* 29-36; Klee *Gymnischen Agone* 52-53 on the date of the Pythia.

<sup>184</sup> The cycle was as follows:

Year 1	Isthmian (April)	Olympic (August)
Year 2	Nemean (July)	
Year 3	Isthmian (April)	Pythian (August)
Year 4	Nemean (July)	



victorious in all four games and were known as *periodonikai*.<sup>185</sup> While it was a woman, the Pythian priestess, who had the most prominent position at Delphi, there is evidence that women could not compete against men and certainly there were separate Panhellenic competitions for women at Delphi by Roman times. However, it is unclear whether the female competitions were actually part of the festival, or whether, as at Olympia, the women competed at a different festival.<sup>186</sup> It is, of course, possible that the Pythia played at the festival a role as prominent as that of the priestess of Demeter at Olympia.<sup>187</sup>

Pausanias states that the oldest competition at Delphi, and the first for which prizes were awarded, was for the singing of a hymn, to the accompaniment of the lyre, in honour of the god.<sup>188</sup> Hesiod was debarred from competing because of his inability to play the lyre in accompaniment to his singing; on the other hand, it seems that the competitor did not have to write the song itself, for Eleuther was said to have won the prize on account of his good singing, despite the fact that the song he sang was not his own composition. The criterion, therefore, was not the merits of the song but the musical ability of the performer.<sup>189</sup>

Various additions were made to the repertoire of the musical contests at Delphi; these innovations were not unusual, the contests at the Olympic games being subject to similar changes. In 586 competitions for flute playing and for singing to the flute were added and the competitions for athletics were instituted for the first time.<sup>190</sup> At the second penteteric Pythian games in 582 a prize was no longer awarded for singing to the accompaniment of the flute, for this genre was considered to be ill-omened, as the music itself was depressing, and the words of the songs sounded like dirges.<sup>191</sup> At the eighth Pythia, in 558, a lyre competition, without singing, was added.<sup>192</sup> Plutarch records that in his time there was a discussion as to whether some new competitions, additions to the original musical contests, comprising contests in tragic performance,

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<sup>185</sup> Knab *Periodonikon* lists all the known examples of *periodonikai* for the history of the Panhellenic games; cf. Klee *Gymnischen Agone* 71-108 for a list of all the victors at the Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean games.

<sup>186</sup> See *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 802; for women as competitors, see ch. 4, esp. nn. 136-44, with text; translation of *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 802 at ch. 4 n. 144, with text.

<sup>187</sup> See ch. 4 n. 134, with text.

<sup>188</sup> Paus. 10.7.2-3; Strabo 9.3.10 (121). Phil. *Apoll.* 6.10 notes that while at the Pythian festival there were musical contests and plays, this was not the case at Olympia.

<sup>189</sup> Paus. 10.7.3 (Hesiod and Eleuther); Plut. *Mor.* 1133e (that there were musical competitions at Greek festivals).

<sup>190</sup> Paus. 10.7.4-5, cf. 2.22.8.

<sup>191</sup> Paus. 10.7.5-6.

<sup>192</sup> Paus. 10.7.7.

prose writing and poetry, should be deleted from the programme:<sup>193</sup> the outcome of the debate seems to have been in favour of abandoning these contests.<sup>194</sup> The dithyrambic competition, for both tragedy and comedy, had probably been added in the fourth century.<sup>195</sup>

Delphi had thus been home to song before sport, and the sporting contests were similar to those at Olympia, with the exception of the four-horse chariot-race, *tethrippon*, and the *dolikhos* and the *diaulos* for boys were added by the amphiktyons to the traditional Olympic races.<sup>196</sup> The chariot race was instituted in 582, with Kleisthenes, tyrant of Sikyon, the victor,<sup>197</sup> and further additions were the race in armour at the twenty-third festival, a race for two-horse chariots at the forty-eighth, and a four-horse chariot-race for foals at the fifty-third.<sup>198</sup> The pankration for boys, the race involving a chariot drawn by two foals, and a race for foals that had been ridden, were also later additions.<sup>199</sup> The prize for the victor was invariably a crown of laurel.<sup>200</sup>

There was an established order for the competitions at the Pythian festival. The poetic contests were first, then the gymnastic,<sup>201</sup> in which the boy wrestlers performed first, then men wrestlers, an order which was followed by the boxers and the pankratiasts.<sup>202</sup> The hoplite shield races presumably followed,<sup>203</sup> while the

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<sup>193</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 674d-75d.

<sup>194</sup> Judging from the tone of Plut. *Mor.* 674f. A victor poet is referred to at Plut. *Mor.* 638b.

<sup>195</sup> Picard *Delphi and the Pythian Games* 72.

<sup>196</sup> Paus. 10.7.5.

<sup>197</sup> Paus. 10.7.6.

<sup>198</sup> Paus. 10.7.7.

<sup>199</sup> Paus. 10.7.8. Note the chart in Miller *Arete* 103 listing the competitions and years when they were added to the Pythian festival, and the chart for the Olympics, Miller 102 (also in Cartledge *Greek Religious Festivals* 108); Plut. *Mor.* 675d comments on the changes made in competitions at Olympia.

<sup>200</sup> Paus. 10.7.8; cf. Farnell *Cults* 4.293-95.

<sup>201</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 638b.

<sup>202</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 639a. The pankration was a mixture of wrestling and boxing (Plut. *Symp.* 638d), so its position after these two sports was appropriate. Soph. *Elect.* 681-85 (cf. 698) records that the races came before the other competitions, implying that running was the first physical contest; Heliod. *Aeth.* 4.1 lists the competitions as follows: running, wrestling and boxing, and this list was probably meant to indicate the order of the contests.

<sup>203</sup> Hoplite competition: Heliod. *Aeth.* 4.1; *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 419 (gift by Eudoxos of Argos of ten shields for use in the Pythian armour race). Heliod. *Aeth.* 4.1 has the hoplite competitions after the races, wrestling and boxing (with no mention of the pankration). Soph. *Elect.* 681-763 has the hippic events on a day after the races; see the festival programme at Fontenrose *Cult of Apollo* 127.

hippic contests at the festival came after the poetic and athletic.<sup>204</sup> The running competitions took place in the stadium at the top of the sacred site, which was of Parnassan stone until rebuilt in Pentelic marble by Herodes Atticus as one of his many building projects.<sup>205</sup>

Delphi also hosted competitions of an artistic nature: painters vied to be chosen as the best in their field,<sup>206</sup> but the nature of the competition is unclear. As most painting was done on walls, it seems most likely that the artists had to paint under supervised conditions. Portraits, could, however, be executed on moveable objects, such as shields, but it was probably not permissible to enter paintings already executed, as this would allow for the possibility of fraud. From the third century onwards the *tekhnitai* of Dionysos, groups of professional actors and musicians, participated in festivals throughout Greece. The Athenian *tekhnitai* were given various privileges by the Delphic Amphiktyony in order to ensure that they participated in the Pythian festival.<sup>207</sup>

Delphi's significance can be seen in the episodes involving the Persian menace in the fifth century BC. It has been stated that Delphi lost prestige after the Persian Wars because the oracle medised,<sup>208</sup> but this assessment of the oracle in the post Persian War period is clearly contradicted by the large number of dedications which flowed into the oracular centre in the aftermath of the war, and by the promise of the dedication to the god of a proportion of the spoils. It is clear that the oracle was certainly not viewed by the Hellenes in general as having medised, and it was consulted after the battle of Plataea in the second Persian invasion as to the correct manner in which to sacrifice to the gods.<sup>209</sup> Herodotos, who notes that even the first pessimistic oracle of Delphi did not deter the Athenians from armed struggle against the Persians, has nothing of a derogatory nature to write about the Pythia during the Persian Wars. This incident shows enquirers who were unhappy with the oracle which they received, and their consequent reaction: the Athenians in 480 sent an embassy to the oracle to seek advice on what action was to be taken against the Persian

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<sup>204</sup> Klee *Gymnischen Agone* 27. The newly established Leukophryena festival in Magnesia was to be the same type of competition as the Pythian, and the order of the contests for the Leukophryena could be taken as the Pythian order, i.e. with the hippic contests last; *I. Magn.* 31.21-22: ἀγωνία στεφανίτην ἰσοπύθιον μουσικόν τε καὶ γυμνικὸν καὶ ἵππικόν; cf. 22.8-10.

<sup>205</sup> Paus. 10.32.1.

<sup>206</sup> Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 35.35.58; cf. Fontenrose *Cult of Apollo* 139 n. 18.

<sup>207</sup> *FD* 3.2.68.1, 71-74; cf. Picard *Delphi and the Pythian Games* 73.

<sup>208</sup> Lloyd-Jones *GR* 23 (1976) 69; Dodds *Greeks and the Irrational* 74-75; cf. Ferguson *Among the Gods* 77.

<sup>209</sup> Plut. *Arist.* 20.4; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 2.46, *Response* 104; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 320, *Response* Q156.

threat, and received a reply that they ought not to oppose the Persians and should flee to the ends of the earth. This, however, did not please the envoys who asked instead for a second oracle,<sup>210</sup> which they were duly given. Their case was surely an unusual one, and most pilgrims would have accepted the oracle's response, no matter how unpalatable or obscure. The point is, however, that even though they were unhappy, they asked again, rather than ignoring the oracle or seeking advice from elsewhere. Dodds argues that the "scandalous behaviour" of the oracle during the Persian Wars was covered up by Delphi after the war, and that the attempt to do this was accepted "without question" by the Greeks.<sup>211</sup> The Delphians certainly circulated many stories that exonerated them from involvement with the Persians,<sup>212</sup> but it is possible to view the oracle's behaviour as acceptable: the Persians were seemingly invincible, and to encourage neutrality or flight could be interpreted as the best advice that could be given. Despite having taken a passive stand against the Persians, Delphi did not lose its status as a pilgrimage destination, and throughout the rest of the fifth century certainly continued to enjoy its former reputation, being visited by many pilgrims in search of advice.

Delphi was the home of both the oracle and the games, and thus had a dual significance. This was true also of Olympia, where there was an oracle of Zeus as well as games in his honour, but the oracle of Zeus never had the prestige of the oracle at Delphi; on the other hand, the fame of the Olympics far exceeded that of the Pythian contests. Delphi as a site attracted petitioners who sought the advice of the god, and musicians and athletes went to Delphi to compete. The true nature of the Delphic oracle and the role it played in Greek history will always be partly obscure. But if only the classical evidence is accepted, and the late evidence ignored, the mantic session can be simply described. The Pythia, entering the temple, made her way to the adyton, and mounted the tripod. After paying for the *pelanos* and sacrificing, a petitioner, accompanied by his *proxenos*, the *prophetes* and *hosioi*, would come into the presence of the Pythia. He would put the question, relating to any concern from matters of state to matters of childlessness, and she would reply, in either hexameters or prose according to her ability. It is also possible that the Pythia made use of lots to answer questions put to her. The Pythia and the consultant were in close proximity: the enquirers received their answers directly. Consultations took place only at certain times of the year. There was no chasm, and no vapours; the Pythia, like mediums elsewhere, induced her own sense of "possession." The priestess was not frenzied;

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<sup>210</sup> Hdt. 7.140.1-142.1; Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 2.41-42, *Responses* 94-95; Fontenrose *Delphic Oracle* 316-17, *Responses* Q146-47.

<sup>211</sup> Dodds *Greeks and the Irrational* 74-75.

<sup>212</sup> Parke, Wormell *Delphic Oracle* 1.171-74.

rather, she was calm and rational. The oracle was busy throughout the classical period but declined thereafter, though still active in the time of Plutarch, until it finally succumbed to pressure from Christianity in the fourth century AD, and was silent, with Apollo defeated by a new cult.