

COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND DIVINATION SEMINAR 4: ORACLES AND DIVINATION IN ANCIENT GREECE DR CRYSTAL ADDEY



Inspired and Inductive Modes of divination

- Inspired (or 'natural') divination:
 - Oracles
 - Oracular sanctuaries
 - Oracles given by the Sibyl and the 'Sibylline Books'
 - Dream divination (dream incubation)
 - Inspired utterances of freelance seers
 - Certain forms of astrology/astral divination?
- Inductive (or 'artificial' or 'technical') divination:
 - Haruspicy
 - Augury/taking of the auspices
 - Dice oracles
 - Astrology
 - Kleromancy (lot divination)
 - Bibliomancy (book divination)

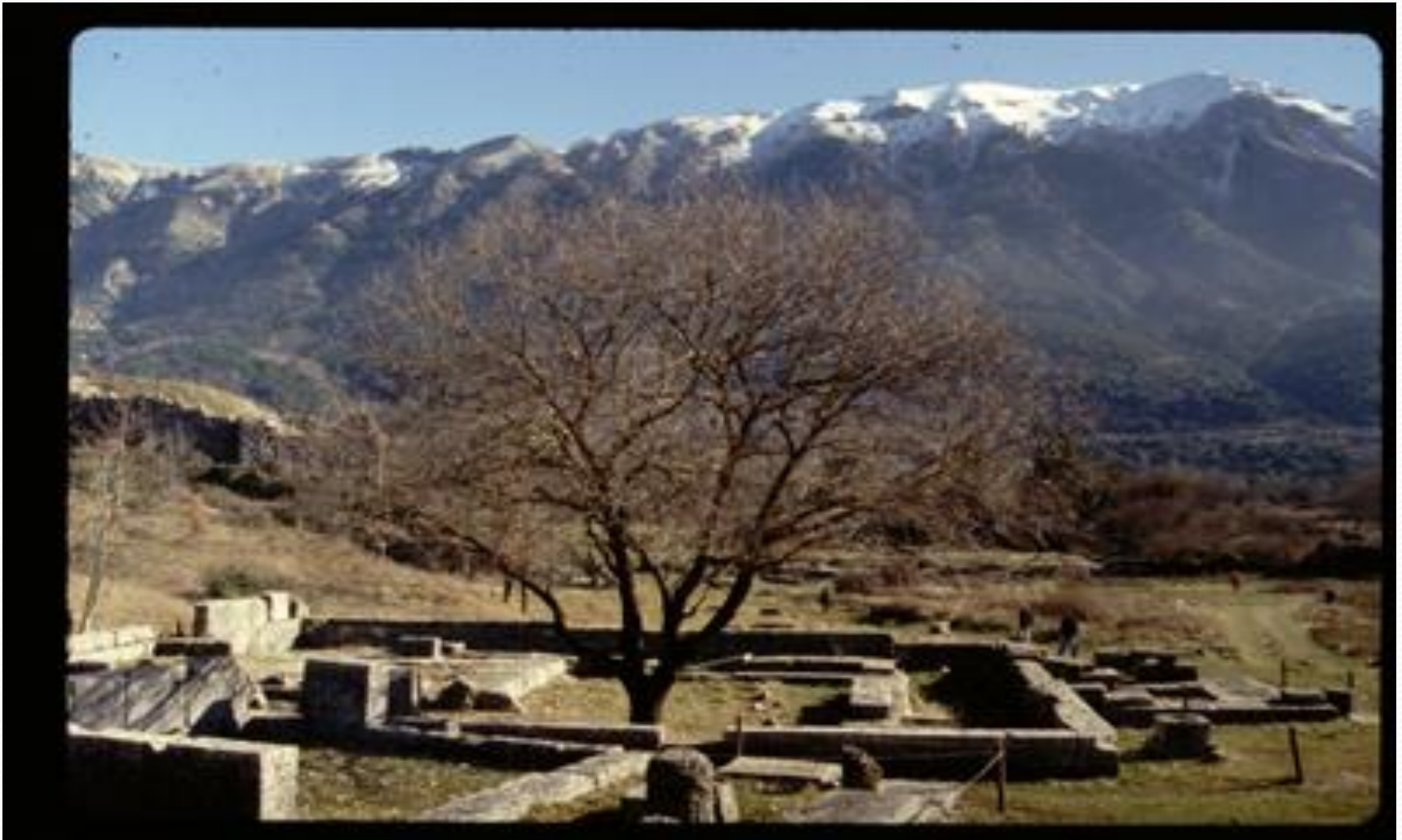
Types of Ancient Oracles

- **Oracle sanctuaries:** where the god, goddess or semi-divine being was thought to speak, usually through an intermediary, either a priest or a priestess who was divinely inspired or possessed.
- **Healing sanctuaries / incubation temples:** Where the oracle was thought to be given directly to the enquirer while they were dreaming, in a vision of the deity who spoke directly to them in their dream.
- ***Nekumanteia*: Oracles of the dead:** These were special oracular sanctuaries where the dead were thought to reply directly to the enquirer, again through the incubation procedure, where the enquirer slept in the sanctuary and waited for a dream where the dead spoke to them.

Why did people consult oracles?

- Oracles and other forms of divination used in ancient Greece were not thought to simply predict the future. Rather they were thought to offer advice and give guidance about the truth and possibilities of any given situation, revealing the truth about the past, present and future
- Oracles were seen as fundamentally important in every sphere of life, influencing spiritual, religious, personal, social, civic, political and military matters.
- Practical political matters
- Practical personal matters: to decide an auspicious day on which to get married, whether to get married at all, how to make a living, whether to undertake a voyage or travel, whether an enterprise will be successful etc.
- Health and healing.
- Ritual / religious matters: sacrifice, ritual, festivals etc.
- Spiritual: Do I have a soul? Who is god? Etc.

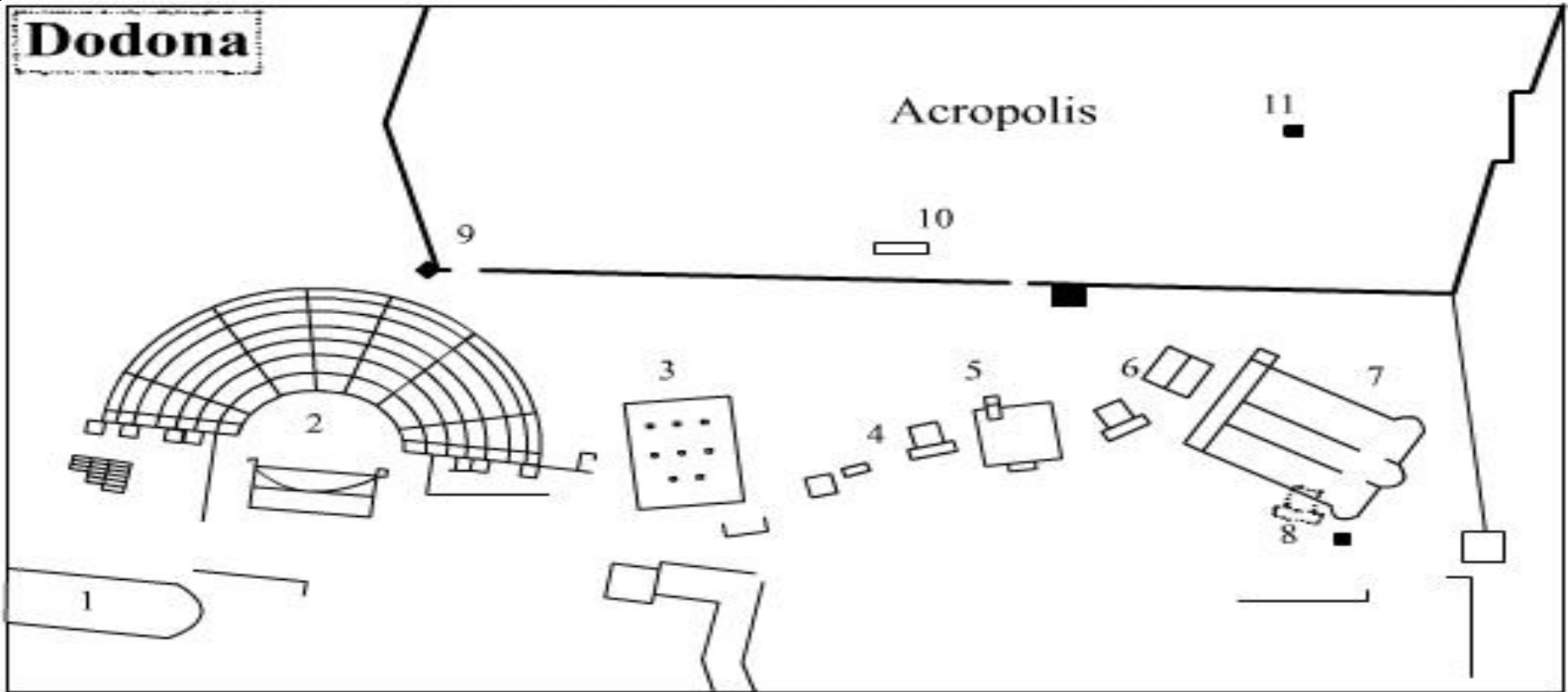
Temple and Oracle of Zeus and Dione at Dodona



Temple and Oracle of Zeus and Dione, Dodona



Plan of Sanctuary at Dodona



1. Stadium

2. Theatre

3. Bouleuterion

4. Temple of Aphrodite

5. Temple of Zeus Naios

6. Temples of Dione

7. Basilica

8. Temple of Herakles

9. Gate

10. House of Phylax

11. Cistern

Oracular lead tablet from Dodona



Oracles from Dodona

- Hermon (asks) by aligning himself with which of the gods will there be from Kretaia offspring for him, in addition to those he has now?

(translated by E. Eidinow 2007, 89 [end of 6th/beginning of 5th century BC])

- Kleouts asks Zeus and Dione if it will be better and more profitable for him if he keeps cattle.

(translated by E. Eidinow 2007, 95 [date unknown])

- Whether if I went abroad I would do better at my trade?

(trs. Eidinow 2007, 96 [fifth century BC])

- Nikokrateia asks by sacrificing to which of the gods would she do better and be relieved of her disease? (trs. Eidinow 2007, 105 [date unknown])
- Did Dorkilos steal the cloth? (trs. Eidinow 2007, 117)
- To which of the gods must he have prayed so as to achieve what he has in mind? (trs. Eidinow 2007, 121 [beginning of the fifth century BC])

- For translations of some of the oracular lead tablets from Dodona, see:
- EIDINOW, E, 2013. *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* 2nd ed. (orig. 2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

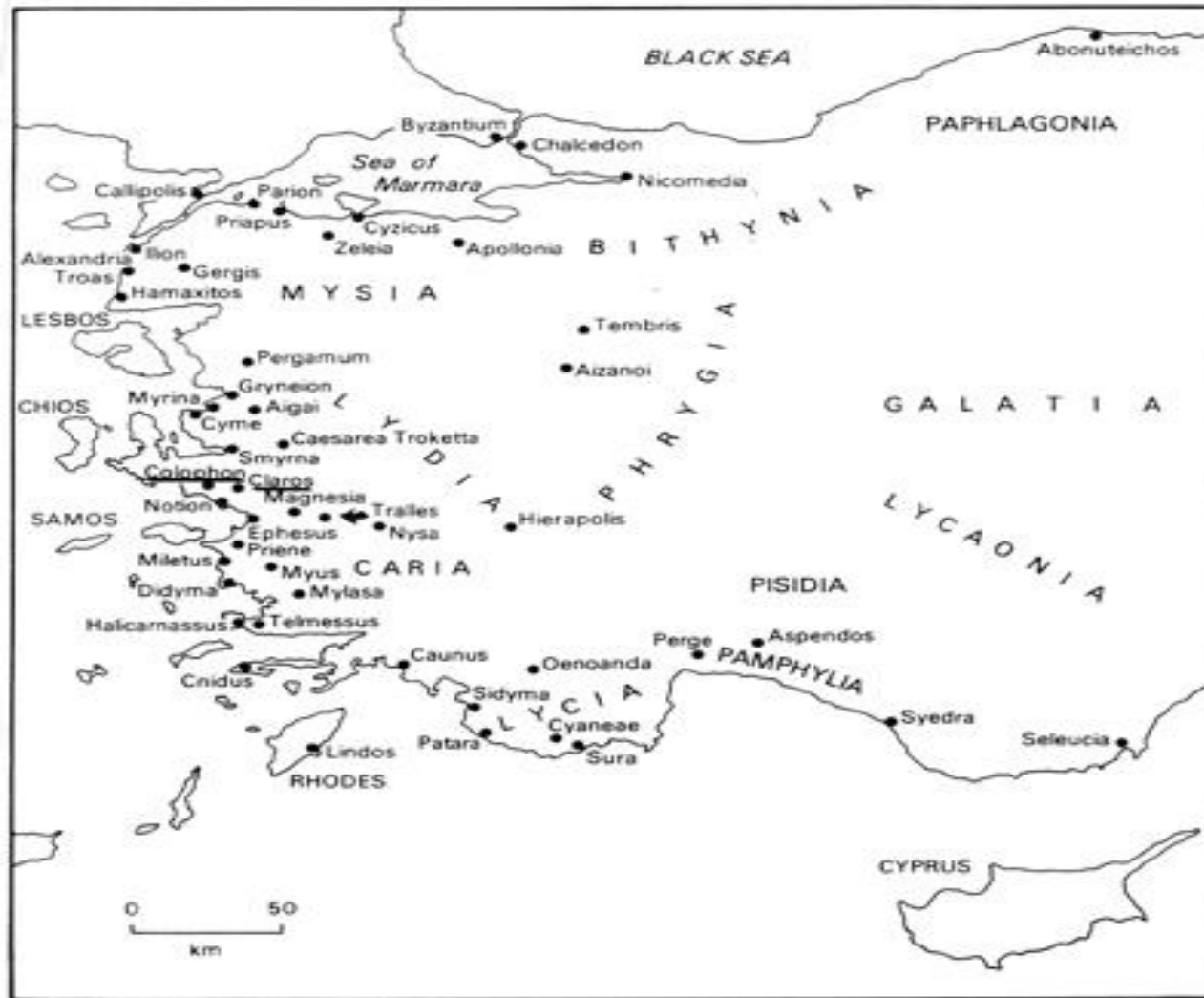
Temple of Apollo, Oracle of Delphi



Temple and Oracle of Apollo, Delphi



Map of Asia Minor (Turkey)



Temple and Oracle of Apollo, Didyma



Temple of Apollo, Didyma (reconstruction)



Ion Mabet, Rekonstruktion The Temple of Apollo, Reconstructed view Le temple d'Apolon, Vue reconstruite Apollonstempel, Schaubild

Example: An oracular inscription from Didyma

- The enquirer (a circus performer): “Appheion, also known as Hernonas, of Aleaxandria enquires, since at all times his ancestral gods stand by him and you yourself also in what work he carries off, on this account he begs you, lord, if with good repute at all times he will come off in his tip-toe dancing and training of bulls and if he will serve with good repute.”
- Apollo’s oracle: “Phoebus and the swift eye of unutterable Serapis and Nemesis who oversees the amphitheatres of athletes you will have as helpers to your plans by prayer.”

Oracle of Claros (general view of sanctuary)



Temple of Apollo, Oracle of Claros



The Operation of the Oracle at Claros

- Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.54:
- “There, unlike at Delphi, it is not a woman, but a man, selected from particular families and usually summoned from Miletus who acts as priest. He hears only the number of the enquirers and their names. Then after departing into a grotto (*specus*: meaning natural or artificial cave) and taking a draught of water from a hidden spring, though generally ignorant of poetic literature, he produces replies in set forms of verse on the subjects which each enquirer had conceived in his mind.”
- Pliny, *Natural History*, 2.232:
- “at Colophon in the grotto (*specus*) of Apollo Clarius is a pool by drinking of which marvelous prophecies are produced but the life of the drinkers are shortened.”

The Seer (*mantis*; plural: *manteis*)

- The Pythia at the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi
- The priestesses (prophetesses) at the Oracle of Apollo at Didyma (Branchidae)
- The priest at the Oracle of Claros
- We hear of both priests (the *selloi*) and priestesses (called 'doves') at the Oracle of Zeus at Dodona
- There were also freelance seers (male and female)

Women and Divination

... But women are better than men. I will prove this [gap of 5 lines in the text; these lines are lost]. Women govern the house and store goods shipped from abroad inside the home. A house bereft of a wife is not tidy or prosperous. In regard to matters concerning the gods – and I judge these matters to be foremost – we women hold the greatest share. In the houses of Phoebus Apollo, women prophesy the mind of Loxias [i.e. Apollo]. Around the pure steps in Dodona by the holy oak, the female race reveals the thoughts of Zeus to those from Greece desiring to know his will. Rites in honour of the Moirai and the nameless goddess are accomplished; these rites are not holy among men, but among women they prosper. All female rites are just in respect of the gods. How is it possible that the female race has an evil reputation?

Euripides, *Melanippe*, Fragment 13 (on women's involvement in religious cults and ritual; this fragment is spoken by a female character, Melanippe)

- S. Auffret, *Mélanippe la philosophe* (Paris 1987). Translated by Lisa Maurizio 1995, 85.

The Prophetesses of Dodona

That, then, I heard from the Theban priests; and what follows, the prophetesses of Dodona say: that two black doves had come flying from Thebes in Egypt, one to Libya and one to Dodona; [2] the latter settled on an oak tree, and there uttered human speech, declaring that a place of divination from Zeus must be made there; the people of Dodona understood that the message was divine, and therefore established the oracular shrine. [3] The dove which came to Libya told the Libyans (they say) to make an oracle of Ammon; this also is sacred to Zeus. Such was the story told by the Dodonaean priestesses, the eldest of whom was Promeneia and the next Timarete and the youngest Nicandra; and the rest of the servants of the temple at Dodona similarly held it true. I expect that these women were called “doves” by the people of Dodona because they spoke a strange language, and the people thought it like the cries of birds... The fashions of divination at Thebes of Egypt and at Dodona are like one another; moreover, the practice of divining from the sacrificed victim has also come from Egypt.

Herodotus, *Histories* 2.53-57

The Ritual of the Oracle at Didyma

And as for the woman at Branchidae who gives oracles, it is either by holding the staff first given by a certain god that she is filled by the divine radiance; or else when sitting on the axle she predicts the future; or whether dipping her feet or skirt in the water, or inhaling vapour from the water, at any rate, she receives the god: prepared and made ready by any or all of these preliminaries for his reception from without, she partakes of the god.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.11

(trans. Emma Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell. 2003. Atlanta: SBL).

The functioning of the Oracle at Didyma

This is what is shown by the abundance of sacrifices, the established custom of the whole ritual, and everything that is performed with due piety prior to divination: also the baths of the prophetess, her fasting for three whole days, abiding in the innermost sanctuaries, already possessed by light, and rejoicing in it for a long time. For all these things show that the god has been invoked, and that his arrival comes from without, a marvelous inspiration even before coming to his accustomed place; and in the very spirit rising from the spring it shows forth another god, more senior and distinct from the site, who is responsible for the site, the spring and for all divination.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.11

(trans. Emma Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell. 2003. Atlanta: SBL).

Plutarch on the Pythia

It is for these reasons that they guard the chastity of the priestess [the Pythia], and keep her life free from all association and contact with strangers, and take the omens before the oracle, thinking that it is clear to the god [Apollo] when she has the temperament and disposition suitable to submit to the inspiration without harm to herself. The power of the spirit [i.e. inspiration] does not affect all persons always in the same way, but it only supplies an enkindling and an inception, as has been said, for them that are in a proper state to be affected and to undergo the change.

Plutarch, *The Obsolescence [Decline] of Oracles* 438c

Who was the Pythia?

Even so the maiden who now serves the god here was born of as lawful and honourable wedlock as anyone, and her life has been in all respects proper; but, having been brought up in the home of poor peasants, she brings nothing with her as the result of technical skill or any other expertness or faculty, as he goes down into the shrine. On the contrary, just as Xenophon believes that a bride should have seen as little and heard as little as possible before she proceeds to her husband's house, so this girl, inexperienced and uninformed about practically everything, a pure, virgin soul, becomes the associate of the god.

Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi no longer given in verse* 405c-d

The Training of the Pythia

- The Pythia had to be a local woman from Delphi
- Social class was no barrier
- Was the Pythia chosen by lot (kleromancy = lot divination)?
- Older Pythias (seers of Apollo) training their younger counterparts
- The ritual expertise of the Pythia: she understands the *kairos* (right time) for oracular consultation



The Expertise of the Pythia



- Ritual preparations and the oracular ritual
- The Pythia gave oracles in an altered state of consciousness characterised as ‘divine inspiration’ – does this entail that she was mad and raving in her oracular pronouncements?
- Plato, *Phaedrus* 244
- Traditional scholarly interpretation: the Pythia produced nonsensical words which were ‘translated’ into oracles by the male priests – but this interpretation is questionable - and gendered? Note that twentieth century (mostly male) scholars cannot imagine a woman producing oracles in hexameter verses
- The question of the Pythia’s mental state and capacities when giving oracles: rational or irrational?
- See Lisa Maurizio (1995) on the expertise of the Pythia

An oracular ritual that went wrong: taking the omens and finding the right time (*kairos*) for oracular consultation

Whenever, then, the imaginative and prophetic faculty is in a state of proper adjustment for attempering itself to the spirit as to a drug, inspiration in those who foretell the future is bound to come; and whenever the conditions are not thus, it is bound not to come, or when it does come to be misleading, abnormal, and confusing, as we know in the case of the priestess who died not so long ago. As it happened, a deputation from abroad had arrived to consult the oracle. The victim, it is said, remained unmoved and unaffected in any way by the first libations; but the priests, in their eagerness to please, went far beyond their wonted usage, and only after the victim had been subjected to a deluge and nearly drowned did it at last give in.

Plutarch, *The Obsolescence [Decline] of Oracles* 438a-b (ca. AD 50-120)

An oracular ritual that went wrong

What, then, was the result touching the priestess? She went down into the oracle unwillingly, they say, and half-heartedly; and at her first responses it was at once plain from the harshness of her voice that she was not responding properly; she was like a labouring ship and was filled with a mighty and baleful spirit. Finally she became hysterical and with a frightful shriek rushed towards the exit and threw herself down, with the result that not only the members of the deputation fled, but also the oracle-interpreter Nicander and those holy men that were present. However, after a little, they went in and took her up, still conscious; and she lived on for a few days.

Plutarch, *The Obsolescence [Decline] of Oracles* 438a-b (ca. AD 50-120)

The timing of oracular consultation: finding the right time (*kairos*)

- On the set day(s) for oracular consultation, the Delphic priests had to perform preliminary rituals – consisting of reading the omens from the libation poured on a goat to see if it shivered or trembled (cf. also Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles* 435b–c, 437a–b).
- Within this dialogue, Ammonius attributes the explanation of this omen to the priests of the oracle: all parts of the animal must shake and quiver and this must be accompanied by a tremulous sound and “... unless this takes place, they [the priests] say that the oracle is not functioning and do not even bring in the prophetic priestess” (*De def. or.* 435c).

Finding the right time (*kairos*) for oracular ritual

- The goat seems to represent a sign of the god's presence or lack thereof in relation to the suitability of the state of the Pythia's soul as being ready *at that time* to receive this inspiration from the god and thus deliver oracles effectively, since "every faculty duly performs its natural functions better or worse concurrently with some particular time (καῖρός); and if that time (καῖρός) escapes our notice, it is only reasonable that the god should give signs of it" (Plutarch, *De def. or.* 437c)

Bibliography (List of References cited)

- Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries (De Mysteriis)*, trs. E. Clarke, J. Dillon and J. Hershbell (2003). Atlanta: SBL.
- EIDINOW, E, 2013. *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* 2nd ed. (orig. 2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pliny. *Natural History, Volume I: Books 1-2*. Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 330. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938.
- Tacitus. *Histories: Books 4-5. Annals: Books 1-3*. Translated by Clifford H. Moore, John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library 249. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931.

Further Reading

- Addey, C. *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the gods*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014 (available from TSD Library as an e-book): see especially Chapters 1 and 2
- See the chapters collected in:
- Addey, C. (ed.), *Divination and Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, London-New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Burkert, W., “Signs, Commands and Knowledge: Ancient Divination Between Enigma and Epiphany,” in Johnston, Sarah Iles and Peter Struck, *Mantike: Studies in Ancient Divination*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, 29-49.
- Eidinow, E., 2013. [Oracular Consultation, Fate, and the Concept of the Individual](#). In: ROSENBERGER, V., ed., *Oracles in the Ancient World: Religious Options and the Individual*. Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Iles Johnston, S., *Ancient Greek Divination*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Further Reading

- Beerden, Kim, *World Full of Signs: Ancient Greek Divination in Context*, Leiden-Boston: Brill 2013: see especially Section 3, Chapters 7 and 8.

(Available through UWTSD Library catalogue as an e-book)

- Connelly, Joan Breton, *Portrait of a Priestess. Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Maurizio, L., 'Anthropology and Spirit Possession: A Reconsideration of the Pythia's Role at Delphi', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995), 69-86: **Available on JSTOR.**
(NOTE: crucial article for the debate about the Pythia's expertise and agency in delivering oracles)

Week 4 Student Activity

Necromancy and Oracles of the Dead

- Please undertake some preliminary research on ancient Greek necromancy and Oracles of the Dead and be prepared to discuss your findings in the seminar.
- Questions to consider: What was necromancy and how would you define it? In what contexts was necromancy used and would you describe these contexts as 'religious' or 'magical' or both? What were Oracles of the Dead and where were they located?