

DIVINATION AND ORACLES IN ANCIENT GREECE (WEEK 5 NOTES)

CRYSTAL ADDEY

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Do you think that the categories ‘inspired’ and ‘inductive’ are useful categories for examining divination practices in the ancient world? How ubiquitous do you think oracles were in ancient Greece and what do you think their main functions and purposes were? What kind of cosmologies, ideas and worldview underlies the use of oracles and other types of divination, such as augury and haruspicy?

THEMES FOR THIS WEEK:

- Categorisations and conceptual boundaries of divination: Inspired and Inductive types of divination; divination by ‘art’ and by ‘nature’ (or artificial and natural divination).
- What is an Oracle? Definitions and Terminology.
- Dream Divination (*Oneiromancy*) and Oracles.
- Oracles and temples: Oracles of Apollo at Delphi, Didyma and Claros; Oracle of Zeus at Dodona; other oracular sanctuaries and temples. Examination of archaeological evidence from Delphi and Dodona: Oracle tablets
- Lot oracles and small oracle shrines
- The reading of omens and signs: augury and haruspicy, *kleidonomancy* and other types of omens

INSPIRED AND INDUCTIVE TYPES OF DIVINATION; DIVINATION BY ‘ART’ AND BY ‘NATURE’ (OR ARTIFICIAL AND NATURAL DIVINATION).

The ancient Greeks (particularly Greek philosophers) categorized and classified divination by dividing into two main types: Inductive (also called artificial) divination and Inspired divination (also called natural) divination. Inspired divination involves direct messages from the gods, such as oracles and oracular dreams. Inductive divination was thought to involve human inference and interpretative skill: types of inductive divination include augury (reading the flight of birds) and haruspicy (reading animal entrails). This categorization is first recorded by Plato, and then reiterated by Cicero. The Platonists and Stoics always distinguished between these two types of divination, which they also refer to as “natural” and “artificial.”¹ Plato not only makes this distinction between inspired and inductive divination but also comments explicitly on their comparative value as modes of prophetic knowledge:

The ancients, then testify that in proportion as prophecy is superior to augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness which comes from god, is superior to sanity, which is of human origin...²

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244d2-6; Cicero, *On Divination (De Divinatione)*. 2.11.26–27; 1.6.11; 1.33.72. Cf. George Luck (1985), *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 231, 271.

² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244d2–6.

Plato here not only asserts that *mantike* (inspired divination) is superior to augury (representative of inductive divination), but significantly, he comments that divine, prophetic madness is superior to sanity, which is of human origin. The Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus postulates a conceptual framework of inductive divination (ultimately caused by human reason and skill) and inspired divination (ultimately caused by the divine) which accords with Plato's distinction in the *Phaedrus* between divine madness and human sanity.

Furthermore, Plato's *Ion* elaborates on the themes discussed in the *Phaedrus* within the context of a long speech by Socrates exploring the nature of divine inspiration, focusing especially on poetic and prophetic inspiration. The whole dialogue explores the distinction between human knowledge and skill (*techne*) and divine inspiration. This is discussed using the example of Ion's great talent as a rhapsode (a singer of epic poetry), with Socrates and Ion debating the origin of this talent.³ During his speech on the nature of divine inspiration, Socrates constantly emphasises that poetry and prophecy are not products of human skill but of divine power. Indeed, this is the first point made by Socrates when he attempts to explain to Ion the origin of his rhapsodic talent:

For, as I was saying just now, this is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power...⁴

Although Socrates specifically refers to rhapsodic talent in this particular instance, within the speech he constantly equates the inspiration from which the talent of the rhapsode, poet and prophet derive.⁵ For example, Socrates reiterates this point a few lines later, comparing poetic inspiration with the inspiration experienced by Corybantian and Bacchic worshippers:

For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise; just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite those fine songs in their senses, but when they have started on the melody and rhythm they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession – as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers – that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report.⁶

Plato emphasises that although the poet, Corybantian or Bacchic worshipper receive their inspiration from different deities (the poet from the Muses, the Corybantian worshipper from Cybele or Rhea, and the Bacchic worshipper from Dionysus) the nature of the inspiration or possession they receive is analogous.

The distinction delineated in the *Ion* between divine power and human skill or art (*techne*) is reflected almost exactly in Iamblichus' account of the different modes of divination. Iamblichus introduces his discussion of inductive divination with the assertion that this mode of divination is accomplished by "human skill"⁷ Iamblichus clearly reflects Plato's discussion with his use of the same term, *techne*, to denote this inferior type of divination. Iamblichus defines inspired divination,

³ Plato, *Ion* 530b-533b.

⁴ Plato, *Ion* 533d. Cf. also 534e, 535a, 536c-d, 542a where Socrates repeatedly makes the same point.

⁵ Cf. Plato, *Ion* 534c-d, where Plato explicitly equates the divine inspiration received by the poet with that received by soothsayers and divine seers.

⁶ Plato, *Ion* 533e-534a.

⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries (De Mysteriis)*, 3.15 (135.1-2); Cf. also 3.16 (136.8-9).

mantike, as a mode of divination whose supreme power belongs to the gods and is given to humans by the gods.⁸ Iamblichus seems to consciously recall the discussion on the nature of divine inspiration in Plato's *Ion* with his assertion that inspired divination, *mantike*, obtains all of its power from divinity, and with his assertion that inductive divination is a human art or skill (*techne*).

Cicero's *On Divination (De Divinatione)*, which discusses different types of divination and their plausibility, makes the same distinction between inspired and inductive causation:

Duo enim genera divinandi esse dicebas, unum 'artificiosum,' alterum 'naturale.' Artificiosum constare partim ex coniectura, partim ex observatione diuturna. Naturale quod animus arriperet aut exciperet extrinsecus ex divinitate, unde omnes animos haustos aut acceptos aut libatos haberemus.

You divided divination into two kinds, one artificial and the other natural. 'The artificial,' you said, 'consists in part of conjecture and in part of long-continued observation; while the natural is that which the soul has seized, or, rather, has obtained, from a source outside itself – that is, from God...'⁹

Iamblichus' conceptual framework of inductive divination (based on and ultimately derived from human reason) and inspired divination (ultimately caused by divinity) fits in neatly with Cicero's distinction between natural and artificial divination.

Iamblichus' discussion of the nature of divine inspiration influences his categorisation of divination. He clearly distinguishes two types of divination. The first is inspired divination, which includes oracles and possession by the gods. The second type is inductive or "human" divination, as Iamblichus calls it, divination by signs, which includes haruspicy and astrology. Iamblichus seems to distinguish these two types by their proximity to the divine and by the modes of causation governing them.

Iamblichus' classification of these types of divination with reference to their proximity to divinity will be examined. Iamblichus opens Book 3 with a discussion of the principle of inspired divination (*mantike*):

But it is a thing divine, supernatural, sent from heaven above; both unbegotten and eternal, it takes priority by its own nature.¹⁰

Iamblichus' assertion that inspired divination is divine and eternal clearly concurs with his conception of divine inspiration as total possession by the gods. He expounds the principle of divination:

The greatest talisman, then, against all such difficulties is this: to know the principle of divination...It is not even set in motion by a skill acquired from without, one concerned exclusively with some aspect of human existence. Rather, all of its supreme power belongs to the gods, and is bestowed by the gods. ...All else is subordinate, instrumental to the gift of foreknowledge sent down by the gods.¹¹

⁸ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries (De Mysteriis)*, 3.1 (100.13-14).

⁹ Cicero, *On Divination (De Divinatione)*, 2.11.26 – 27.

¹⁰ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries (De Mysteriis)*, 3.1 (100.6-7).

¹¹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries (De Mysteriis)*, 3.1 (100.8-9; 100.12 - 14; 101.2 - 3).

Again Iamblichus emphasises that the power of inspired divination belongs to the gods – it is divine. This accords with his view that the *mantis* (seer), when he is divinely inspired, is wholly possessed by the gods and does not act or experience in a human manner; when delivering his or her prophecies he or she entirely transcends his corporeality. Thus divine inspiration, experienced by the *mantis* when he or she prophesies, is directly linked with inspired divination.

Inductive divination is an entirely different phenomenon from the inspired mode of divination. In 3.15, Iamblichus states:

Come, then, let us turn to the mode of divination, accomplished by human skill, which partakes largely of guessing and supposition.¹²

Already in this opening sentence, it is clear that Iamblichus considers inductive divination to be a largely “human” endeavour, and far less accurate than the inspired mode, since he describes the predictions made as the result of “guessing” and “supposition.”

Iamblichus explains that this type of divination operates using signs which are implanted (or illuminated) by the gods through nature and also through the agency of *daimones* who are concerned with creation. These signs (*semeia*, *symbola*) are perfect since they are implanted by divinities or semi-divine beings. This process is clearly based on the concept of *sympatheia* (cosmic or universal sympathy) as Iamblichus himself states:

And the union and sympathy of the all and the simultaneous motion, as in a single living being, of parts farthest away as though they were near by, cause the sending down of these signs from the gods to human beings, first through the heaven and then through the air, with the greatest possible brightness.¹³

Iamblichus emphasises the central role of human interpretation in deciphering these signs in inductive divination:

...this kind uses divine signs that have been perfected by the gods in various ways. From divine signs, in virtue of the relationship of things to the signs shown, the technique somehow draws conclusions and guesses at the divination, inferring it from certain probabilities.¹⁴

Iamblichus’ comments imply that the inferiority of inductive divination seems to stem from the human interpretation and supposition of the meaning of these signs rather than the nature of the signs themselves, which proceed from the divine.¹⁵ Thus Iamblichus’ distinction between inspired and inductive divination is based on their proximity to divinity: inspired divination is caused by the supreme power of the gods whereas inductive divination, although utilising signs implanted by the gods through intermediaries such as *daimones*, depends upon human interpretation and skill. Iamblichus’ differentiation of modes of divination as based on their proximity to divinity has

¹² Iambl. *DM* 3.15 (135.1-2).

¹³ Iambl. *DM* 3.16 (138.1 – 5)

¹⁴ Iambl. *DM* 3.15 (135.7 - 10)

¹⁵ This recalls Porphyry’s suggestion about divine inspiration earlier at *DM* 3.4 (109.6-9), that divination using sense-perception must be inferior. Here it is the use of human senses, rather than the signs themselves, that causes the inferiority of inductive divination.

significant implications for his views of the relationship between inspired divination and theurgy, which we will discuss in detail when we examine theurgy and the role of divination within it.

WHAT IS AN ORACLE? DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The problem of how one defines an “oracle” and what are considered to be genuine or false oracles remain difficult questions. The fact that the word “oracle” in English has two senses often confuses the issue of definition. The word “oracle” is often used by scholars to refer to both the place in which the oracle was produced - the oracular sanctuary - and the oracular response given to the enquirer. In Greek, this double sense of the word is partially reflected in the term, *manteion*, which can mean either “an oracular response” or “the seat of an oracle.”

Derivatives of this term also describe oracles: *manteuma* means “an oracular response;” *manteia* refers to “the mode of divination” or an “oracle” while *mantiké* means “the art or faculty of divination.” Another set of terms are connected with the verb form *chraó*, meaning “to proclaim, pronounce, to give the needful answer:”¹⁶ *chresmos* refers to “the answer of an oracle, oracular response, an oracle,” while *chresmodia* refers to “an oracular answer given in verse, a prophecy” and to; *chresterion* also has the double meaning of “the seat of an oracle” (an oracular sanctuary) and “oracular response.” Another term, *logion*, which literally has the meaning “sacred utterance” was also used in the sense of “oracular response/utterance.” All of the above terms are used by ancient authors, often interchangeably, to refer to “an oracle.”

As a working definition, I focus on the oracular response or utterance and define an “oracle” as: “An inspired utterance thought to be derived from a supernatural source (usually a deity) and obtained through some form of ritual, frequently utilising mythical language and epic diction (such as the hexameter).”

Modern scholars often draw a distinction between public and private forms of divination, classifying oracles as a public form of divination obtained *only* through oracular sites, such as Delphi.¹⁷ However, this classification is not so clearly reflected in ancient sources. The ancient Greeks, and particularly many Greek philosophers, seem to have been a lot less concerned with the distinction between public and private forms of ritual than we are today. To them oracles obtained through private forms of ritual were often considered to be just as valid as those obtained through public centres. There were also numerous collections of oracles, such as Sibylline oracles attributed to the legendary figure(s) of the Sibyl and those circulating under the names of the legendary or semi-historical seers Musaeus, Bakis and Epimenides: these oracular utterances, which were distributed from at least the Classical period onwards by itinerant professional oracle-collectors called *chresmologoi* (singular: *chresmologos*), were less clearly attached to a specific place.¹⁸ There were

¹⁶ David Potter (1994), *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 10-12.

¹⁷ Trevor Curnow (2004), *The Oracles of the Ancient World*, London: Duckworth, 1-2, for whom “place” forms a vital part of his definition of an “oracle:” “oracles...were institutions rather than people” (2).

¹⁸ H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell (1956), *The Delphic Oracle. Volume II: The Oracular Responses*, Oxford: Blackwell, xv-xviii; Joseph Fontenrose (1978), *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; 145-65; H.W. Parke (1988) *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*, London: Routledge, 174-89: Appendix 1; David Potter (1990) *Prophecy and History in the crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 103-104; David Potter (1994), *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 95-97; J. Dillery (2005) “Chresmologues and Manteis: Independent Diviners

also many itinerant diviners and prophets whose utterances were considered to be “oracles”: these were also sometimes referred to as *chresmologoi* or, more commonly, as *manteis* (“seers”; singular: *mantis*).¹⁹ It should be noted that the latter term is often used in ancient works to refer to the prophet(ess) at an oracular sanctuary, and is also used to refer to the deity from whom the oracle was thought to be ultimately derived. The term *prophetes* (and the feminine equivalent: *prophetis*) are also used to refer to the prophet or prophetess of an Oracle, as is the term *promantis*.²⁰ With regard to the issue of defining an “oracle,” Robin Lane Fox states:

Major oracles...were a recognised combination of man, god and place. This combination was elaborate, and there was scope for one or other part of it: a place without a person or a person in no one place.²¹

Thus, this definition allows for the inclusion of responses produced in the course of private rituals, such as those preserved in the *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM) and those produced in the course of other types of ritual.²² It also allows for the inclusion of declarations produced by a philosopher, whose mind was thought to be close to the divine, during the course of a ritual.

DREAM DIVINATION (ONEIROMANCY) AND ORACLES

A problem remains regarding dream divination (*oneiromancy*), another common form of divination in Graeco-Roman Antiquity. Dream incubation, involving sleeping in a temple and receiving a dream featuring a deity who gave an oracle to the dreamer, was ubiquitous in the ancient world, but was this type of divination seen as an “oracle”?

The most noticeable difference between dream divination and traditional oracles was the way in which the prophecy was obtained: in dream divination, the deity was thought actually to appear to the enquirer in a vision and give them the oracle in direct, “face-to-face” conversation in their dream. With a traditional Oracle, a prophet or prophetess was thought to become inspired or possessed by the deity directly (and so the deity was thought to work through a human being in some sense) and

and the Problem of Authority,” in S. Iles Johnston and P.T. Struck (eds.) (2005), *Mantikê. Studies in Ancient Divination, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 155, Leiden: Brill, 167-231.

¹⁹ Itinerant diviners and prophets: J. Dillery (2005) “Chresmologues and *Manteis*: Independent Diviners and the Problem of Authority,” in S. Iles Johnston and P.T. Struck (eds.) (2005), *Mantikê. Studies in Ancient Divination, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 155, Leiden: Brill, 167-231; M.A. Flower (2008), *The Seer in Ancient Greece*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

. On the ambiguity of the terms *chresmologos* and *mantis*, and the difficulty of retaining a clear distinction between these figures cf. Joseph Fontenrose (1978), *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 153; J. Dillery (2005) “Chresmologues and *Manteis*: Independent Diviners and the Problem of Authority,” in S. Iles Johnston and P.T. Struck (eds.) (2005), *Mantikê. Studies in Ancient Divination, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 155, Leiden: Brill, 168-172.

²⁰ For the interchangeable use of these terms in ancient sources and the difficulty of retaining any clear distinctions between them cf. L. Maurizio (1995) “Anthropology and Spirit Possession: A Reconsideration of the Pythia’s Role at Delphi,” *JHS* 115, 70; J. Dillery (2005) “Chresmologues and *Manteis*: Independent Diviners and the Problem of Authority,” in S. Iles Johnston and P.T. Struck (eds.) (2005), *Mantikê. Studies in Ancient Divination, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 155, Leiden: Brill, 168-172.

²¹ Robin Lane Fox (1986) *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean world from the second century AD to the conversion of Constantine*, London: Penguin, 205.

²² The *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM) are a body of papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt; the extant texts date from the second century BC to the fifth century AD. Cf. Hans Dieter Betz (1986), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

issued the oracle using the inspiration of a deity. However, the picture is complicated by the fact that although dream divination was generally used in healing sanctuaries (such as those of Asclepius), such sanctuaries sometimes delivered oracles (“dream oracles”) on matters other than health. As Trevor Curnow notes in his guide to ancient Oracles, “there is no hard and fast demarcation line” between oracular sanctuaries and healing centres.²³ A general approach (followed by many scholars, including myself) is to treat dream divination and incubation practices as methods of obtaining oracles, fully recognising the similarities and areas of overlap between them and other oracle centres, while specifying that they are “dream oracles.”²⁴

ORACLES AND TEMPLES: ORACLES OF APOLLO AT DELPHI, DIDYMA AND CLAROS; ORACLE OF ZEUS AT DODONA; OTHER ORACULAR SANCTUARIES AND TEMPLES.

Ancient Greek Oracles were located in ancient temples, shrines and sanctuaries and involved putting a question to the god, goddess or supernatural being (such as a *daimon* or a hero) of that temple. Usually, a priest or priestess (often called a ‘prophet’ or ‘prophetess’) would then give an answer. This priest or priestess was thought by the Greeks to become ‘inspired’ or ‘possessed’ by the god or goddess of the oracular temple, enabling them to answer the questions of people consulting the Oracle (the enquirers).

Apollo was the god of prophecy and oracles (as well as the god of truth, the sun, light, a sender and healer of plagues, the leader of the Muses, the god of poetry and he also had many other roles) and so many Oracles were under his guardianship. Of his oracular sanctuaries, the Oracle at Delphi is the most famous and well-known. However, other gods and goddesses had oracular temples as well. For example, the Oracle of Dodona in Northern Greece was an Oracle of Zeus, the goddess Demeter had an Oracle at Patras in the Peloponnese, the messenger god Hermes had an Oracle located in the marketplace in Pharai and there were many others. Two very famous oracles were the Oracle of Claros and the Oracle of Didyma: both of these Oracles belonged to Apollo and both were located in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

Most people have heard of the Delphic Oracle and some people know that there were other oracles in Greece and the Graeco-Roman World. But what most people don’t know is the sheer number of them: Trevor Curnow, in his guide to *Oracles in the Ancient World*, counts 123 in Greece alone (Mainland Greece and the Greek Islands). While this number may be slightly overestimated (he includes oracle sites only mentioned by one ancient source, many of which remain undiscovered in archaeological excavations), there were many, many oracles in the Ancient World.

Apollo’s Oracle at Delphi

The Oracle of Apollo at Delphi was one of the most renowned institutions in the ancient world. For at least a thousand years of recorded history, Greeks and Romans consulted the oracle, both as

²³ Trevor Curnow (2004), *The Oracles of the Ancient World*, London: Duckworth, 4, who includes healing sanctuaries which used some kind of oracular method in his guide to ancient oracles.

²⁴ Following Walter Burkert (1985), *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, Oxford: Blackwell, 114; Julie Lewis (2006), “Greek Oracles in the Second Century CE,” PhD thesis submitted to the University of Exeter.; Robin Lane Fox (1986), *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean world from the second century AD to the conversion of Constantine*, London: Penguin, 205; David Potter (1994) *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 37-38, 43.

private individuals and as official ambassadors for kings and states. This oracular shrine was held in the highest regard: Plato, for example, includes consultation of the Delphic Oracle as one of the most important religious duties in his ideal state.²⁵

But how exactly did the oracular consultation process work? We know that for most of the Oracle's history, the oracle could be consulted once a month, on the 7th day of each month, with the exception of the three winter months. The prophetess of the oracle was referred to as the Pythia; it used to be thought that she had to be a virgin; however scholars now think that she had to dress in the clothes of an unmarried girl, thus appearing symbolically as a virgin and she had to engage in ritual purification at the start of the days that she was to prophesy, but there is no evidence to suggest that her life was particularly restricted in other ways.²⁶

On the allotted day, the Pythia underwent her ritual preparations: first she had a ceremonial bath in the Castalian spring (which is in a cave) and then she purified herself with a fumigation of laurel leaves and barley meal.²⁷ Before the day was declared truly auspicious, the priests entered the innermost sanctuary and presented a goat to Apollo; the goat was sprinkled with cold water to see if it would give the proper omen by trembling throughout its limbs. Failure to obtain this indication might lead to cancelling the consultation for that day. After the sign had been given, the victim was offered as an indication to enquirers that the day was auspicious.²⁸ Then the Pythia, the prophetess of the oracle, entered the Temple of Apollo. Each enquirer offered a sacred cake on their way into the temple, then sacrificed sheep or goats on the inner hearth of the temple and then entered to hear their question put to the Pythia by the priest.²⁹ The Pythia sat on the tripod, a three-legged chair, became inspired, filled with divine inspiration and uttered the oracle, which was then written down (and possibly interpreted) by the priests for the enquirer.

It should be pointed out that although the Pythia was thought to become divinely inspired, this does not mean that she became frenzied, wild and raving. There is no reliable evidence in ancient literature or art for a frenzied and raving Pythia. This stereotype of the Pythia has become commonplace in scholarship, arising from a famous passage Plato's *Phaedrus* where Socrates states that prophetic *mania*, or madness, is parallel to telestic, poetic and amorous mania.³⁰ However *mania* means transport, rapture, inspiration, ecstasy, not insanity, frenzy, delirium and hysteria. The Pythia did not, as far as we can tell, experience violent emotional outbursts any more than poets or lovers do in the inspiration and emotion which they experience.³¹ Herodotus, speaking of many men's visits to Delphi, both historical and unhistorical, always represents the Pythia as speaking directly to the consultant, sanely and articulately, if often ambiguously, without any indication of unusual excitement. Plutarch, in his *Moralia* (397b, 404, 414e), attributes the Pythia's inspiration to the god's impulse: Apollo moves her to speak, but she speaks with her own voice, and each Pythia according to her native endowments. The god does not speak with the Pythia's vocal chords and lips: Apollo puts the visions in her mind and a light in her soul that causes her to see the future; and she reveals the vision in her own words. As the sun makes use of the moon in reflecting light, so Apollo makes use of the Pythia in speaking oracles. Plutarch's *Lamprias* expressly rejects the notion that the god possesses the body of the Pythia as a python (divining spirit) takes possession of a prophet's body.

²⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 427b1-c9, 470a2-4, 540b9-c3; *Laws* 738b8-c1, 865bb2-3, 988a.

²⁶ Hugh Bowden (2005), *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy*, 16.

²⁷ Scholia in Euripides, *Phoen*, 224; Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi no longer given in verse*, 397a; cf. H.W. Parke (1939), *A History of the Delphic Oracle*, 28.

²⁸ Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, 435b; Euripides, *Ion* 419ff

²⁹ Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi no longer given in verse*, 397a; *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, 435b; Euripides, *Ion* 93ff.

³⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244A-B, trs: H.N. Fowler (1982), Vol I, Loeb edn.

³¹ Cf. Joseph Fontenrose (1978), *The Delphic Oracle*, 204 – 205.

Zeus' Oracle at Dodona

Next we turn to Zeus' Oracle at Dodona. Ancient tradition held Dodona to be the oldest of the Greek oracles (Herodotus 2.52: "the oracle at Dodona...the most ancient oracle established among the Greeks..."). This is a Sanctuary (sacred temple enclosure) in northwestern Greece (22 km south of Ioannina). The ancient historian Herodotus tells us that when he visited Dodona, the priests told him that black doves (*Peleiades*) flew from Thebes, and one of them founded the sanctuary of Zeus Ammon in Libya while the other alighted in the oak tree at Dodona, and announced in human speech that the oracle of Zeus was to be built in that place (2.55). Herodotus also relates that priestesses were abducted by Phoenicians from Egyptian Thebes and brought to Dodona: she subsequently founded an oracle when she had learnt to speak Greek. The women were called doves by the people of Dodona because their foreign speech sounded like doves. Herodotus mentions the names of the priestesses at Dodona in his time: Promeneia, Timarete and Nicandre (oldest to youngest). In Homer's *Iliad* (16.233), the hero Achilles prays to Dodonean Zeus: 'Lord Zeus, Dodonean, Pelasgian Zeus, you who dwell far off and rule over wintry Dodona, and around you live your prophets, the Selli, whose feet are unwashed and who sleep on the ground...' In the *Odyssey* (14.427ff; 19.296ff) the hero Odysseus comes to Dodona to ask the oracular oak tree how he should return to his home on Ithaca, secretly or openly. There is also a tradition that the Great Goddess, Ge or Gaia, had her abode at Dodona in the roots of a great oak-tree (Hesiod, *Eoiai*, Fragment 134).

Excavations on site indicate that the oracle functioned from the time of the Bronze Age (ca. 2500-1100 BC) until the end of the 4th century AD. During this time the cult was practiced in the open air around the sacred oak tree. From the 8th – 4th centuries BC, a precinct of bronze tripods with cauldrons surrounded the oak-tree. The cauldrons all touched each other, whenever one of them was struck the sound reverberated through all the rest and continued for a long time. Cauldrons may have been apotropaic, guarding against evil influences. Many fragments of iron and bronze tripods have been found which seem to confirm this ancient tradition. From the 4th century BC, the precinct with tripods was replaced with a stone wall which surrounded the temple and the oak-tree.

Since excavations of the sanctuary at Dodona started in 1875-6, approx 1,400 lead tablets have been found at the site of the oracular sanctuary of Dodona. The tablets, dating from 6th century to around end of second century BC, contain questions from men and women, slave and free, addressed to the gods, mostly Zeus 'Naos' or 'Naos' and sometimes also to his companion at the site the mysterious goddess Dione. Occasionally they also seem to record replies. Many of these oracular lead tablets have not been published, although Esther Eidinow has published a selection of them.

The majority of consultants of Dodona whose questions have been published asked about key decisions they were about to take. For most part, they wanted to know the likely outcome of their current plan, hoping to ensure that, whatever action they finally took, it would edge them closer to good fortune. Thus, they visited the oracle with a good idea of what they intended to do and that comprised the substance of their question. Many of the lead tablets from Dodona show that women frequently consulted this oracle as well as men.

Apollo's Oracle at Didyma / Branchidae

Next we turn to Apollo's Oracle at Didyma, also called Branchidae. This Oracle centre was in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. From the Archaic period, the oracle was under the control of the nearby

city Miletus. The Oracle operated from the Archaic period (approximately 8th century BC) until 494 B.C. when Miletos was sacked by the Persians. The Oracle was then revived in the Hellenistic period (the 330's B.C.) and continued to operate until the Late Antique period, approximately the 4th century AD. It enjoyed a period of considerable success and renown in the Late Antique period.

The oracle at Didyma in the Archaic period was managed by the family of the Branchidae, these were the descendants of the legendary founder of the oracle, Branchus. This arrangement was quite unusual. The Apolline oracles of the Greek mainland, and also elsewhere in Ionia (so far as our evidence goes) were not under the control of particular families. Hereditary priesthoods were common in Greek cities and had survived even in cults which had become part of the state religion of a *polis* (Greek city state). Also families of diviners were known in which the gift of prophecy was hereditary. Hereditary priesthoods were also common in mystery cults. Branchus is only known to us from Hellenistic sources (accident of tradition). The legends told of him are early in origin. Significantly, Branchus has a name almost unique in Greek mythology. Not used as a personal name in the classical period; not surprising as it was the same as the Greek word for 'sore throat' or 'hoarseness.' There was a legend to explain this nomenclature: it was said that his mother while pregnant saw a vision that the sun entered her mouth and emerged from her womb. Hence the child born to her was called 'Branchus because the sun had passed through her throat. The vision was a prophecy that Branchus was the son of the Sun god. This legend of course is not meant to be taken literally, but implies that Branchus came from the line of Apollo, just as doctors and healers were thought to come from the line of Asclepius, the god of healing.

There is another legend, reported by the poet Callimachus in a poem called "*Branchus*," that Branchus did not have his prophetic gifts from birth but these were bestowed on him as a youth. He was of exceptional beauty and Apollo seeing him herding in the country fell in love with him and kissed him. The god's act was said to be commemorated in his traditional cult-title at Didyma, Apollo Philesios. The Greek name could correctly mean 'loving' or 'kissing'. Apollo said to bestow on Branchus the gift of prophecy. After this Branchus proceeded to utter oracles, and the gift descended in the family until the Persian destruction of the temple in the early 5th century

In the same poem, Callimachus gives a derivation for the place-name Didyma, which he took to mean 'twin' and to refer to the existence of two springs. The importance of the spring for the oracle-centre is a notion which recurs throughout its history, but the double springs are not mentioned elsewhere. We should note that the name "Didyma," is related to the Greek word *didymoi*, meaning twins. This word was used in ancient astrology for the sign Gemini, the twins. In the case of Didyma, it could well be derived from the fact that the twin gods, Apollo and Artemis were both worshipped here. In the sanctuary of Didyma, there was a temple of Artemis as well as Apollo.

A foundation legend connects the foundation of the oracle at Didyma with the mystery cult of the *Kabeiroi*, mystery deities of Thracian or Phrygian origin, who were accepted in many Greek cities, especially in the Northern and Eastern Aegean. Miletus and Didyma have supplied plenty of evidence for their worship in the imperial period. By the 1st century AD, the worship of Apollo and of the *Kabeiroi* had become so closely assoc that it is usual for the prophet of Didyma on official inscriptions to describe himself as "also at the same time Kotarches" (priest of the *Kabeiroi*).

Archaeological evidence: great shortage of material for the Archaic period as the site was ravaged by Persians in 494BC and when rebuilding began nearly 2 centuries later, it was on a colossal scale which largely demolished the earlier remains. The Oracle was destroyed in 494 BC, when Miletus and the surrounding areas were sacked by the Persians. It was not rebuilt until the 330's BC. There is historical, literary evidence that it was revived again to play a part in supporting Alexander's cause. There are stories of the Branchidae (exiled in Bactria by the Persians) being executed / slaughtered by Alexander, apparently for deserting the oracle and assisting the Persians. The Hellenistic king, Seleucus I, Nicator was the first of his dynasty to begin the great series of royal benefactors of Didyma. Through 3rd BC, Seleucus and his dynasty maintained a special relation with Miletus and its Apollo. He gave a large sum to the Milesians to rebuild the sanctuary at Didyma. The temple of Didyma as rebuilt in the Hellenistic and Roman periods was a highly remarkable and elaborate structure. It was bigger than the Parthenon, the large temple of the Athena on the Acropolis in Athens. Work on it had definitely started by 299 BC and continued for 2 centuries.

The cella, the inner part of the temple where oracular inquiry took place is a huge space and open to the sky, a very unusual feature. The cella was not accessed through the usual door, but instead there are two vaulted cave-like corridors that provide very limited access to the central part of the sanctuary. There was an unusual antechamber between cella and pronaos that is accessed by a monumental staircase from the cella. According to Parke, this antechamber was the *chresmographion*, which functioned as a specialized space where the oracles were delivered in written form (the record office of the oracular responses). Since 3rd century BC there had stood somewhere in temple precinct a building which was later demolished. Its actual site remains undiscovered, but many stones survived from the construction and were reused elsewhere. It was built in the Doric style – this is the antechamber. It was evidently a building under the control of the prophets – starting about 39BC it became usual for each of these annual officials to have his name inscribed on the outside, and also to add any reference to events in his year of office which he chose to record. Staircases stood on each side of the antechamber: one of them, consisting of a double flight of steps, led to an upper terrace overlooking the cella. These staircases were constructed with special care (so not just used for maintenance of the roof of the antechamber). The staircases were named as 'labyrinth' in various inscriptions. However the work on the building was not allowed to interrupt seriously the functioning of the oracle, which continued throughout these centuries.

The Oracles at Didyma were given by a priestess who was thought to be inspired by Apollo. The philosopher Iamblichus, in his work *On the mysteries*, written in the fourth century AD, gives us our only description of the rituals involved in the oracle consultation process 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 then goes on to give details of the preparatory rituals which the prophetess undergoes:

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.

So here we see the priestess of the Oracle had to go extensive ritual preparations before commencing the Oracular ritual. She had to withdraw to innermost sanctuaries for mediation and contemplation before the ritual, undertake special baths and purifications and fast for three days. When Iamblichus says that she is already possessed by light, he seems to be referring to the divine power of the god. Divine power is often envisaged by late Platonist philosophers as being like light, since it emanates from above and yet permeates and infuses everything which it touches in the lower planes of reality. The spring plays a very important part in the oracular ritual: the priestess dips her feet or her skirt in the water and also inhales the vapour rising from the water. This is matched by what we know of other oracular sites, such as those at Delphi and Claros, where springs also played a vital role in the oracular ritual.

Apollo's Oracle at Claros

Next we turn to Apollo's oracle at Claros, also located in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Like Didyma, it was situated at a spring whose waters were regarded as possessing special properties. Neither sanctuary was in the immediate vicinity of a city. Claros was in easy reach of two towns – Notion 2 km away, and Colophon 12km away. The oracle of Apollo was controlled by the government of these 2 cities. By 307/6 BC (Hellenistic period) the oracle at Claros was under the control of Colophon, as Colophon took control over Notion. No inscriptional or literary records survive which mention any particular oracular response before the time of Alexander (in the Hellenistic period). From this evidence the scholar Buresch has argued that the practice of divination was only developed at Claros in Hellenistic times. But other scholars such as H.W. Parke have argued that from very early, probably prehellene periods, Claros had been the site of an oracle, but the extent and frequency of its activity remain quite uncertain. If one assumed that no oracular activity occurred prior to the Hellenistic period this would be to discount the significance of the rich store of legendary references dating from 7th century BC.

The archaeological excavation of Louis Robert has proved that at the end of the 4th century BC work had begun on constructing a temple at Claros which was to remain the general plan of the building down to the end of its history. No doubt this construction work had been preceded by some form of temple since the 7th century BC. More rebuilding was carried out and the sanctuary greatly altered in the Augustan period. But one basic feature which persisted was the special adoption of the shrine for the purpose of oracular consultation.

The Temple was provided with a basement, much of it roofed over, to give access to the spring. The pronaos was very deep and contained an elaborate system of basement passages beneath the level of the floor. This labyrinth like structure consists of two narrow staircases and passageways with seven changes of direction. These vaulted corridors are narrow and shallow, 0.7m in width and 1.80m in height. Both corridors open to the adyton, which consisted of two vaulted chambers.

Although no inscriptions were found naming the corridors as ‘labyrinth’ the maze-like form of the structure itself suggests a link with Didyma labyrinth.

The Operation of the Oracle at Claros

The main examples of oracular responses preserved from Didyma usually inscribed in the sanctuary itself or in the territory of Miletus. Didymaeian responses are not usually found in the cities of those enquiring. The reverse is true of Claros. While Louis Robert found very numerous records of sacred embassies and choirs attending at the sanctuary, he did not find there a single text of an answer delivered. But a wide selection of verse responses of Clarian Apollo have been found in various towns which had enquired at the sanctuary.

With regard to the process of consulting the oracle at Claros, the Roman historian Tacitus relates:

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. It was told that to Germanicus in ambiguous phrases, as is the custom of the oracles, he forecast in verse that his death would be premature.³²

Meanwhile, the Roman writer Pliny states that:

...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.³³

The description of the ‘grotto’ as *specus* (which can mean either a natural or an artificial cavern) misled scholars who thought the oracle was located in a natural cave and looked for archaeological evidence of the oracle in caves surrounding the site. Louis Robert found the temple and exposed its structure, then the *specus* was identified as an artificial construction in its basement. The evidence suggests that this adyton (inner room) in the basement was deliberately constructed to look like a cave.

The Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus speaks of how the oracle was consulted at Claros:

It is agreed by everyone that the oracle at Colophon prophesies by means of water. There is a spring in a subterranean chamber, and from it the prophet drinks on certain appointed nights, after performing many preliminary ceremonies, and after drinking, he

³² Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.54.

³³ Pliny, *Natural History*, 2.232.

delivers his oracles, no longer seen by the spectators present...Even before drinking, he fasts the whole day and night, and after becoming divinely inspired, he withdraws by himself to sacred, inaccessible places, and by this withdrawal and separation from human affairs, he purifies himself for receiving the god; and through these means, he has the inspiration of god illuminating the pure sanctuary of his own soul, and providing for it an unhindered divine possession, and a perfect and unimpeded presence.³⁴

Iamblichus talks of the prophetic inspiration coming from the spring water from which the prophet drinks. His account seems to suggest that people generally attributed the prophetic power at Claros to the spring. Iamblichus tells us that the oracular ritual took place at night, a fact confirmed by Aelius Aristides who also talks of the “sacred night” for consulting the oracle at Claros.

³⁴ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.11.

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