Crystal Addey

Cosmology, Magic and Divination

Oracles and Divination in Ancient Greece

But in reality the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods.
-Plato, *Phaedrus* 245

Consideration of those who have employed myths justifies us in saying that myths are divine; for indeed the inspired among poets, and the best of philosophers and the founders of solemn rites, and the gods themselves in oracles, have employed myths. Why myths are divine is a question belonging to philosophy.
Sallust, *On the Gods and the Universe,*

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.

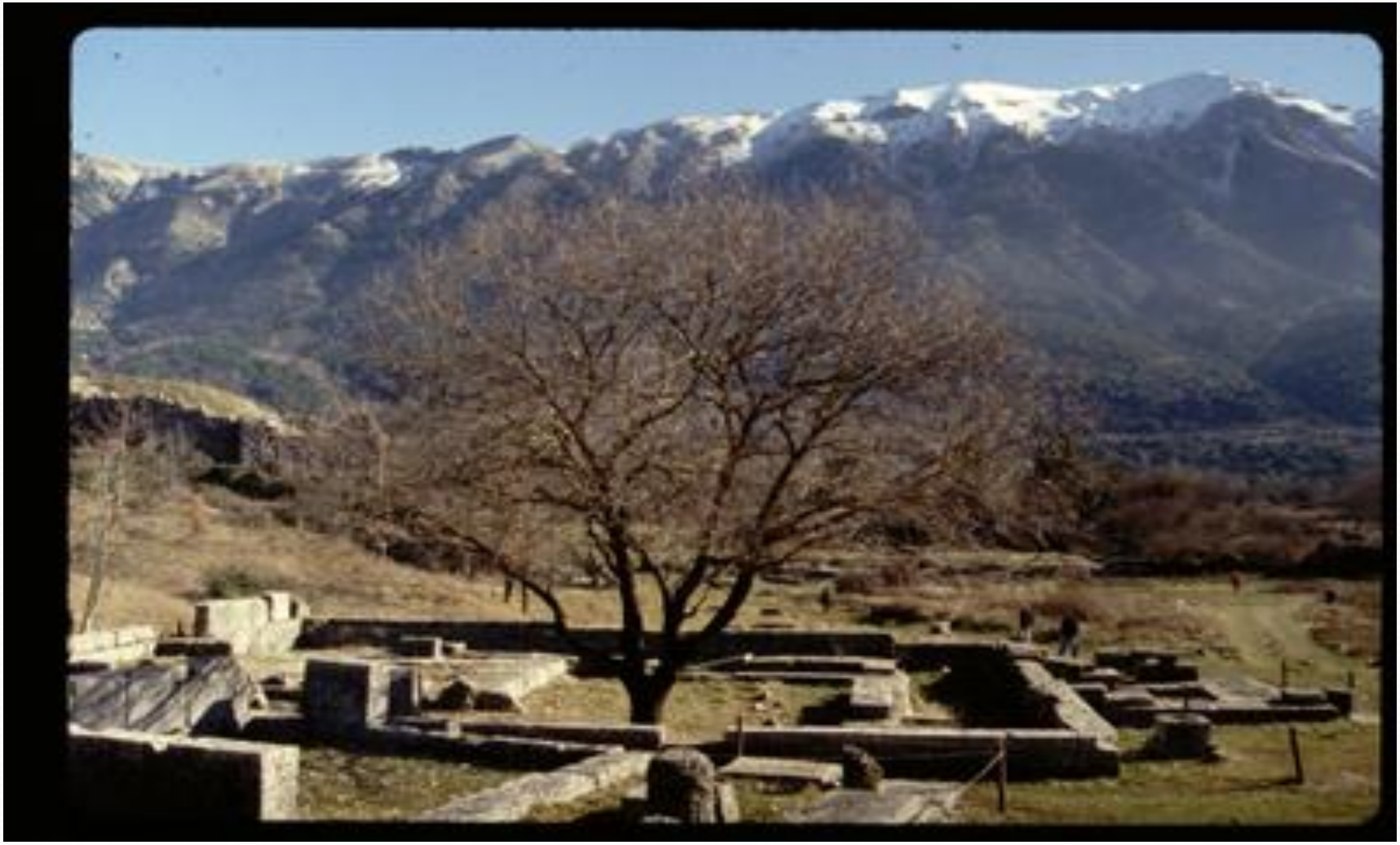
Why did people consult oracles?

- 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.

Oracles and Philosophy

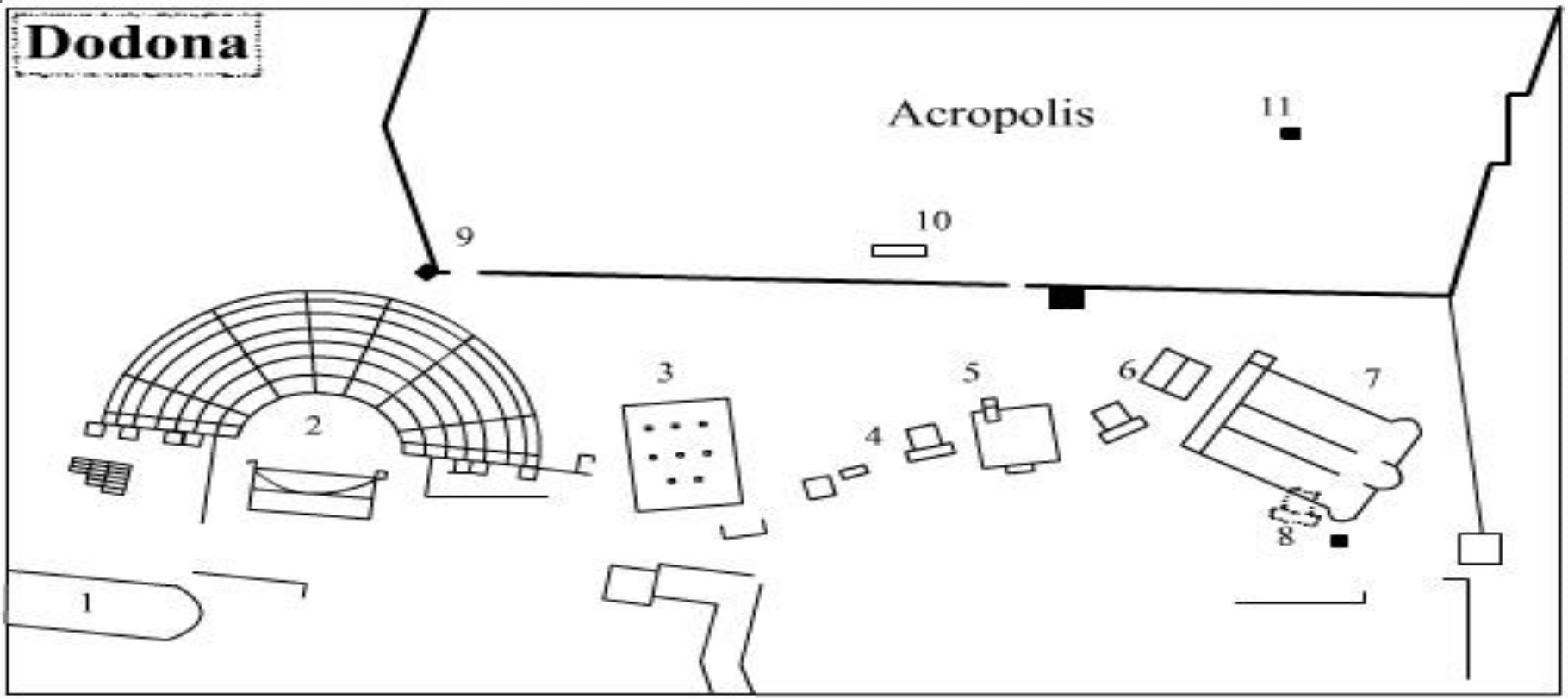
- **Oracles and philosophy were deeply connected in the Ancient World.**
- **Philosophy was used for the interpretation of Oracles: the intellectual thought and personal reflection of the enquirer was a vital part of the experience of consulting an oracle.**
- **Philosophers argued for the truth and usefulness of oracles**
- **Philosophers were sometimes Priests at Oracle sanctuaries.**
- **Philosophers wrote / compiled Collections of Oracles as a philosophical tool for reflection and divine wisdom.**
- **Philosophers themselves consulted oracles .**

Temple and Oracle of Zeus at Dodona



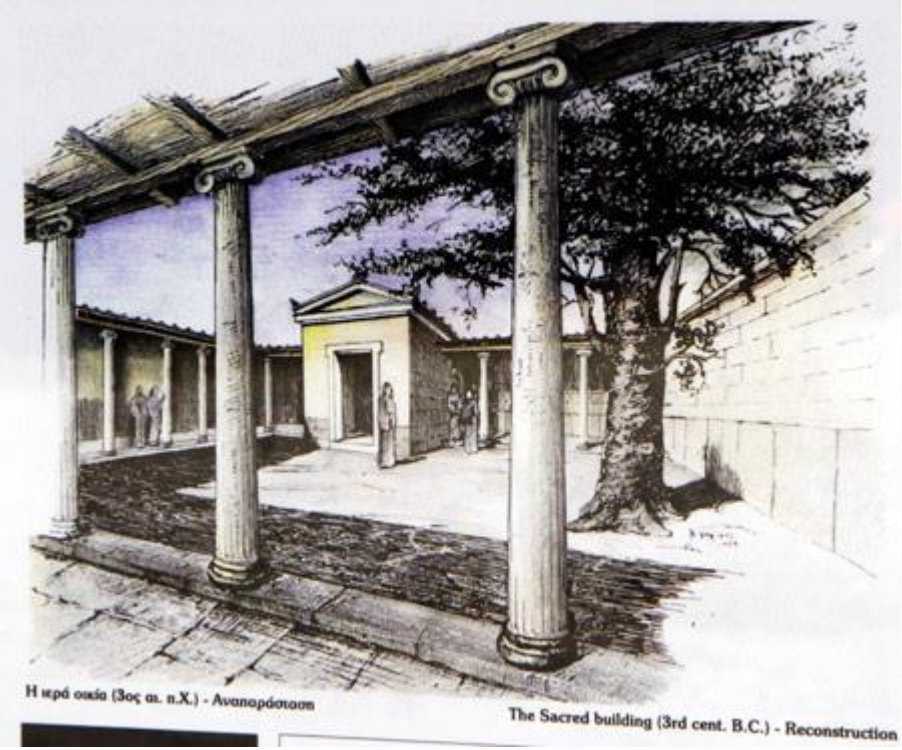
Temple and Oracle of Zeus, Dodona

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

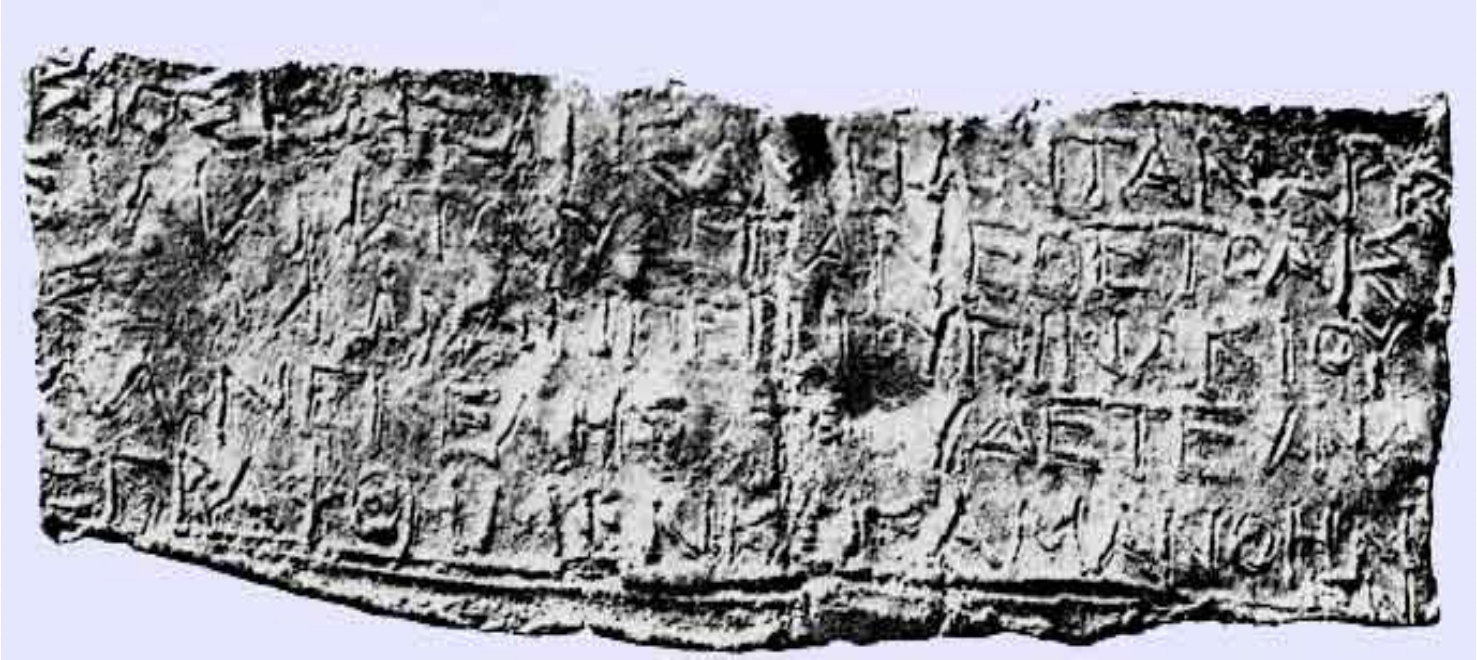
Reconstruction: the sacred house at Dodona (3rd century B.C.)



Η ιερά οικία (3ος αι. π.Χ.) - Αναπαράσταση

The Sacred building (3rd cent. B.C.) - Reconstruction

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:

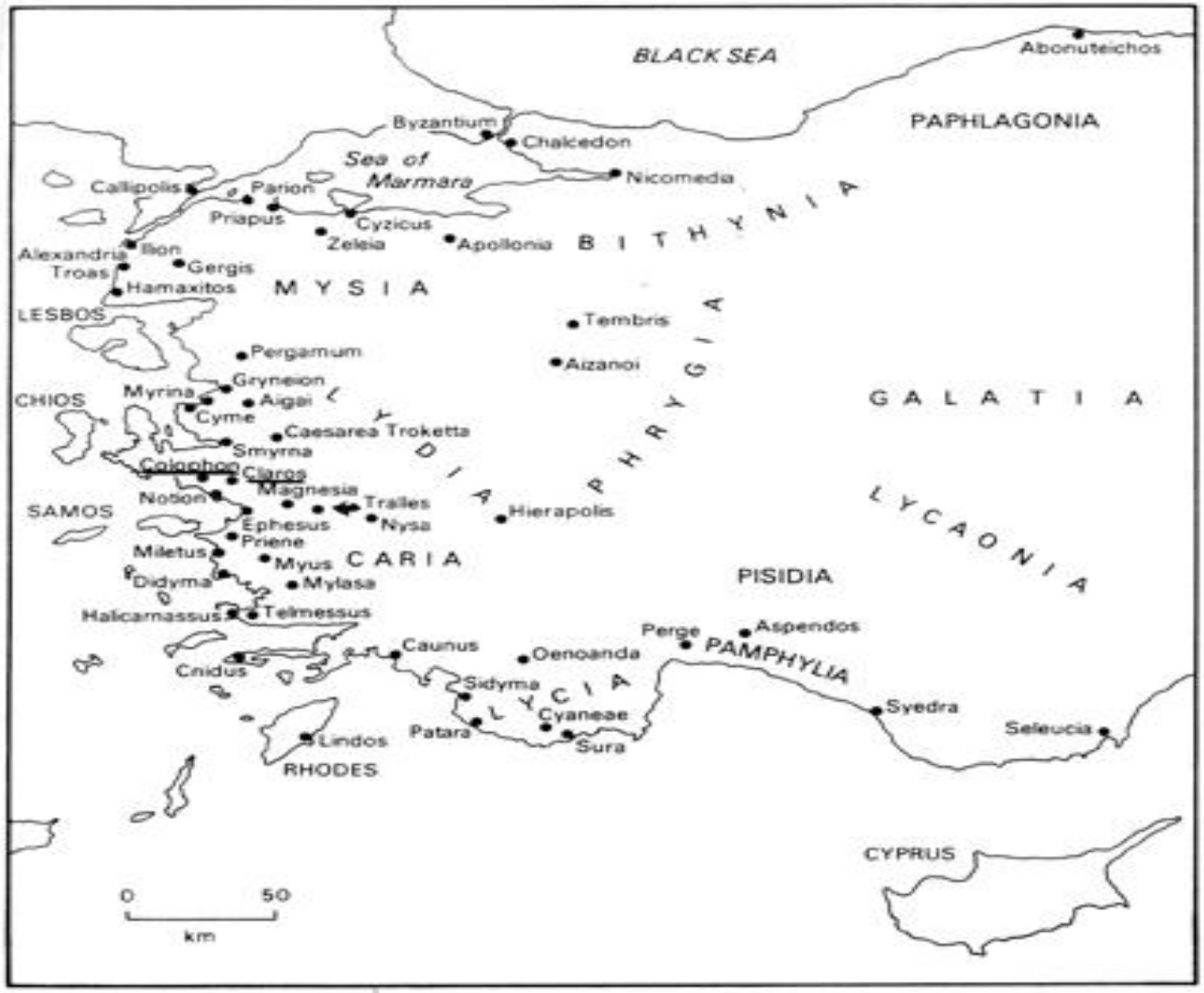
- EIDINOW, E, 2013. *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* 2nd ed. (orig. 2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Temple of Apollo, Oracle of Delphi

Temple and Oracle of Apollo, Delphi

Temple and Oracle of Apollo, Delphi

Map of Asia Minor (Turkey)



Oracle of Apollo, Didyma

Temple of Apollo, Didyma

Temple and Oracle of Apollo, Didyma

Statue of a lion, at the sanctuary of Didyma

Temple of Apollo, Didyma (reconstruction)

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.”

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

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 Operation of the Oracle at Claros (2)

- **Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 3.11** (trs. Emma Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell. 2003. Atlanta: SBL):
- "It is agreed by everyone that the oracle at Colophon prophesies by means of water. There is a spring in a subterranean chamber, and from it the prophet drinks on certain appointed nights, after performing many preliminary ceremonies, and after drinking, he delivers his oracles, no longer seen by the spectators present…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."

Oracles and Mysteries

- Cornelius Labeo, *On the Oracle of Apollo of Claros*:
- someone asked the Clarian Apollo: Which of the gods is he to be regarded who is called Iao?' The reply:
- "Men who have learned sacred mysteries should keep them hidden in secrecy. But if indeed you have small intelligence and a feeble brain, observe that Iao is the god above all gods. In winter he is Hades, at the beginning of the spring Zeus, the Sun in summer and in the autumn delicate Iao." Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1.18.19
- An oracle of Apollo: "You look for a privilege equal to that of the gods; that is not permitted to you" *Theosophy* 1.40
- An Oracle of Apollo: "It is difficult for the eyes of mortals to contemplate the immortal nature, unless this person receives a divine sign" *Theosophy* 1.40

The Operation of the Oracle at Claros (3)

- "That this water has oracular power is immediately obvious. But how this is so, as the saying goes, "not every man may know." For it seems that some prophetic spirit passes through the water; but this is not correct, for the divine does not permeate what partakes in a fragmented and divided manner, but it is by exercising its power from without and illuminating the spring, that it fills it with its own prophetic power. Still, not every inspiration that the water gives is from the god, but this only bestows the receptivity and purification of the luminous spirit in us, through which we are able to receive the god. But the presence of the god is different from and prior to this, and flashes like lightning from above. This holds aloof from no one who, through a kindred nature, is in union with it; but it is immediately present, and uses the prophet as an instrument while he is neither himself nor has any consciousness of what he says or where on the earth he is, so that even after prophesying, he sometimes scarcely gets control of himself." Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 3.11 (trs. Emma Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell. 2003. Atlanta: SBL).

Statue of Asclepius (Epidauros museum)

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
- 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.
- 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.**