

The Importance Of Oracles in Greek

Politics & Warfare

Oracles in the Greek world were supposedly completely impartial from the polis they resided in and from any prophecies made. However there are instances where it is clear that the Oracle in question is not as impartial as they would have their peoples believe, this mainly extends to political and military leanings and personal opinion.

Oracles in ancient Greece played major roles in politics through religion and it was the Oracles that many leaders visited when making any major decision whether that decision is colonisation, war, alliances or trade agreements with other polies or peoples outside this was only if travel to an Oracle was feasible and an easy undertaking for the individual.¹ An example of this is Sparta's war with Athens where the Spartans asked the Oracle of Delphi, Pythia, whether or not Apollo would help the Spartans and be on their side to which she replied that Apollo had said "Whether or not they (the Spartans) asked for his (Apollos) help, the god would assist them in every way".

This statement alone made by the Oracle heavily insinuates that despite supposedly being neutral and uninvolved they are not this however could be attributed to the god rather than the leanings of the Oracle. In addition to this the proclamation of such an audacious declaration of support would have had an effect all on its own when it came to neutral polies and Spartan Propaganda both on their forces and the Athenians who would be heavily demoralised by facing an enemy in which a god takes an 'active' role in the war between their peoples.

In Herodotus Persian wars book six there is in section six a telling of an Athenian Oracle who is used to convince Xerxes to go invade Greece, it should be noted that this Oracle had been banished from Athens and therefore could be using it as a political and military move to return to Athens with a greater position than even before he left.² "With these came Onomacritus, an Athenian oracle-monger,- For Onomacritus had been banished from Athens by Pisistratus' son Hipparchus, having been caught by Lasus of Hermione in the act of interpolating the writings of Musaeus." Not only was the Oracle involved but two princes of Thessaly inviting Xerxes into Hellas suggesting that the Oracles involvement is more a political play rather than out of prophetic motivation. Considering Onomacritus had thrown his allegiance with the Persian king and twisted prophecies or created new ones in which the Persians had the upper hand lends itself more to the view that it is his own self-interest which produces such prophecies.

In another instance purely political in Sparta the issue of legitimacy in the form of a returned son Demaratus 'son of Ariston'. The issue was brought to the Oracle of Delphi but not before the priestess was swayed to the opinion of Cleomenes that Demaratus was not the son of Ariston again illustrating in near-perfect detail that the Oracle did act in terms of self-interest of the opinion of outside influences.³

¹ Robert Flaceliere, 1965, 65

² Hdt. Persian wars. 7.6

³ Hdt. Persian wars. 6.66

In support of the idea that many oracles work with bias of some sort in the ancient world, there is an instance in Plato's work the republic there are two instances where Oracles are treated in contradictory ways in one instance the Delphic Oracle whose laws state that under Apollo "There would remain the greatest, the finest and the foremost of laws-The foundation of sanctuaries, sacrifices and other services paid in tribute to the gods, spirits and heroes."⁴ By monopolising these organisations an Oracle group could maintain a stranglehold on cultural and religious decisions which is intrinsically linked with politics of the time as evident earlier. The effects of this can be seen in the prelude and aftermath of the Peloponnesian war the Oracle at Delphi had supported Sparta in many of its decision making, yet due to the religious monopoly of Delphi on visions and prophecy, Athens still made use of the Oracle despite their support of their enemies in the war as a result of the stranglehold the office held on religious practice due to its ties with Apollo.⁵ Despite the strong devotion to the oracles, some scholars did not put much faith in them whereas others attempted to prove the science behind the communing with the gods. However, toward the end of the fourth century BCE, there was a sharp decline in the use of Oracles as more self-aware scholars emerged in Athens although none would openly deny the gods outright. "No longer shall I go in reverence to the inviolate navel of the earth, nor to the temple at Abae, nor that of Olympia"⁶ This may have come about due to the realisation that the Oracles were using their influence over the people to change the course of politics and even warfare in their Interests.

In conclusion throughout the Fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the prominence of Oracles reached a point where it only began to decline to a state where all that was left of the respectability of the Oracles came in mainly religious forms for many years and the influence on politicking and warfare was reduced if not eliminated from certain poleis or schools of thought. The importance of Oracles in shaping the fifth and fourth centuries is indisputable.

⁴ Pl. Resp. 427 A-D

⁵ Robert Flaceliere, 1965, 69

⁶ Soph. OT. 885-910

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