

432 BCE

Delphic response to Lacedaemonians

Delphi was the polis that was home to the sanctuary of Apollo (Oulhen 2004:412). It was important both politically, and religiously, as it was the site of Apollo's victory over Python and his subsequent founding of the oracle (HHAp. 285-374). After its discovery by goat-herders and the decision to let just one person act as a conduit for Apollo's visions (Diod.16.26), the oracle was visited by supplicants with important, unanswerable questions from across the Greek world (e.g. in Eur. Med. (663-688) Aegeus visited Delphi to ask how to solve his childlessness). These visitors often donated considerable wealth to the sanctuary (e.g. Hdt. 1.50).

In 432 BCE, the Lacedaemonians sent a messenger to Delphi to ask it would be advisable to enter a war with the Athenians who had broken their treaty with the Lacedaemonians (Thuc.1.118.3).

Hornblower (1997:195) highlights the religious connotations of the Greek term used by Thucydides for 'treaty', which comes from the Greek first-person singular verb 'I pour a libation', a religious act. Intrinsically, a treaty, as a kind of oath, was sacred as a feature that defines oaths is to swear by a supernatural power, usually a god, to enforce the declaration (Sommerstein and Torrance 2014:1-2). This supernatural guarantee, as well as the self-inflicted conditional curse that makes up another part of the oath, (Sommerstein and Torrance 2014:2) are a reason for the Lacedaemonians to be certain that the treaty was not broken unnecessarily (Thuc.1.118.3).

The reply the Lacedaemonians received from Delphi were reassurances that, if they put their full might into the war, they would be victorious and that the god would support their efforts, even without being invoked (Thuc.1.118.3).

Unfortunately, Thucydides is an unreliable source for these events as, at the time they were occurring, he was not exiled from Athens so would have had little information on internal Lacedaemonian affairs (Rhodes 1998:1).

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