

The oracle neither conceals, nor reveals, but indicates.

—Heraclitus in Plutarch, *Moralia* 404D

I

ORACLE

The appointed day had come. Having journeyed up the winding mountain paths to the sanctuary hidden within the folds of the Parnassian mountains, individuals from near and far, representatives from cities and states, dynasties and kingdoms across the Mediterranean had gathered in Apollo's sanctuary. As dawn broke, the word spread that it would soon be known whether the god Apollo was willing to respond to their questions. Sunlight reflected off the temple's marble frontage, the oracular priestess entered its inner sanctum, and the crowd of consultants moved forward, waiting their turn to know better what the gods had in store. The gods were considered all powerful, all controlling, and all knowing; their decisions, time and again, had proven to be final. The consultants had waited perhaps months, traveled perhaps thousands of miles. Now they waited patiently for their turn, each likely entering the home of the god with a great deal of trepidation as to what he might be told. Some left content. Others disappointed. Most thoughtful. With dusk, the god's priestess fell silent. The crowds dispersed, heading to every corner of the ancient world, bringing with them the prophetic words of the oracle at Delphi.

Without doubt, what fascinates us most about Delphi are the stories surrounding its oracle and the women who, for centuries, acted as the



Figure 1.1. Tondo of an Athenian red-figure cup c. 440–30 BC, found in Vulci, Etruria, showing Aegeus consulting Themis/the Pythia (© Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz [Staatliche Museum, Berlin])

priestesses and mouthpieces of the god Apollo at the center of a Delphic oracular consultation (see fig. 1.1). But just how did the oracle at Delphi work, and why did it work for the ancient Greek world for so long?

These are difficult questions to answer for two central reasons. First, because, incredibly for an institution so central to the Greek world for so long, there has survived no straightforward, complete account about exactly how a consultation with the oracle at Delphi took place, or about how the process of bestowing divine inspiration upon the Pythian priestess worked. Of the sources we have, those from the classical period (sixth through fourth centuries BC) treat the process of consultation

as common knowledge, to the extent that it does not need explaining, and indeed the consultations at Delphi often act as shorthand for descriptions of other oracular sanctuaries (“it happens here just like at Delphi . . .”). Many of the sources interested in discussing how the oracle worked in any detail are actually from Roman times (first century BC to fourth century AD), and thus at best can tell us only what the people in this later period thought (and often they offer conflicting stories) about a process that, as all of those writers agreed, was by then past its heyday. Also, while the archaeological evidence is of some use both in helping us understand the environment in which the consultation took place and in revealing possible scenarios about the process by which the Pythia was inspired during the classical, Hellenistic, and Roman periods, it comes up short in helping us understand the first centuries of the oracle’s existence (the late eighth and seventh centuries BC), during which the oracle was, according to the literary sources, astoundingly active.¹

The second difficulty surrounding the oracle is in analyzing the literary evidence for what questions were put to her and the responses she gave.² This is not only because many of the responses are recorded for us by ancient authors writing long after the response was supposedly uttered, and sometimes by those hostile to pagan religious practices, like the Christian writer Eusebius. And it is not only because these writers themselves often were relying on other sources for their information, with the result that even if two or more describe the same oracular consultation, their records of it are often different. It is also because these writers tend not to record oracular consultations as “straight” history, but rather employ these stories to perform a particular function within their own narratives.³ As a result, some scholars have sought to label as ahistorical nearly everything the oracle from Delphi is said to have pronounced before the fifth century BC. Others have thought it almost impossible to write a history of the Delphic oracle after the fourth century BC because of difficulties with the sources. Still others have tried to steer a middle path in a spectrum of more likely to less likely, albeit with the understanding, as the scholars Herbert Parke and Donald Wormell put it in their still-authoritative catalog of Delphic oracular responses

in 1956, that “there are thus practically no oracles to which we can point with complete confidence in their authenticity.”⁴

As several scholars have remarked, it is thus one of Delphi’s many ironies that the Pythian priestesses—the women central to a process that was supposed to give clarity to difficult decisions in the ancient world—have taken the secret of that process to their graves and left us instead with such an opaque view of this crucial ancient institution. In such a situation, the only option is to produce a fairly static snapshot of what we know was a changing oracular process at Delphi over its more than one thousand-year history; a snapshot that is both a compilation of sources from different times and places (with all the accompanying difficulties such an account brings) and one that inevitably takes a particular stance on a number of conflicting and unresolvable issues.

The oracle at Delphi was a priestess, known as the Pythia. We know relatively little about individual Pythias, or about how and why they were chosen.⁵ Most of our information comes from Plutarch, a Greek writing in the first century AD, who came from a city not far from Delphi and served as one of the priests in the temple of Apollo (there was an oracular Pythian priestess at the temple of Apollo, but also priests—more on the latter later). The Pythia had to be a Delphian, and Plutarch tells us that in his day the woman was chosen from one of the “soundest and most respected families to be found in Delphi.” Yet this did not mean a noble family; in fact, Plutarch’s Pythia had “always led an irreproachable life, although, having been brought up in the homes of poor peasants, when she fulfils her prophetic role she does so quite artlessly and without any special knowledge or talent.”⁶ Once chosen, the Pythia served Apollo for life and committed herself to strenuous exercise and chastity. At some point in the oracle’s history, possibly by the fourth century BC and certainly by AD 100, she was given a house to live in, which was paid for by the sanctuary. Plutarch laments that while in previous centuries the sanctuary was so busy that they had to use three Pythias at any one time (two regular and one understudy), in his day one Pythia was enough to cope with the dwindling number of consultants.⁷

Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus “of Sicily”), who lived in the first century BC, tells us that originally the woman picked had also to be a young virgin. But this changed with Echecrates of Thessaly, who, coming to consult the Pythia, fell in love with her, carried her off, and raped her; thus the Delphians decreed that in the future the Pythia should be a woman of fifty years or older, but that she should continue, as Pythia, to wear the dress of a maiden in memory of the original virgin prophetess. Thus, it is thought not uncommon for women to have been married and to have been mothers before being selected as the Pythia, and, as a result, withdrawing from husbands and families to perform their role.⁸

The Pythia was available for consultation only one day per month, thought to be the seventh day of each month because the seventh day of the month of Bysios—the beginning of spring (our March/April)—was considered Apollo’s birthday. Moreover, she was only available nine months of the year, since during the three winter months Apollo was considered absent from Delphi, and instead living with the Hyperboreans (a mythical people who lived at the very edges of the world). During this time, Delphi may have been oracle-less but was not god-less; instead the god Dionysus was thought to rule the sanctuary.⁹

Despite this rather narrow window of opportunity for consultation—only nine days per year—there has been much discussion of the availability (and, indeed, popularity) of alternative forms of divination on offer at Delphi. In particular, scholars have debated the existence of a “lot” oracle: a system whereby a sanctuary official, perhaps the Pythia, would perform a consultation using a set of randomized (“lottery”) objects, which would be “read” to give a response to a particular question.¹⁰ Such a system of alternative consultation may also have been supplemented by a “dice” oracle performed at the Corycian cave high above Delphi (see figs. 0.2, 1.2), which from the sixth century BC onward, was an increasingly popular cult location for the god Pan and the Muses, and a firmly linked part of the “Delphic” itinerary and landscape.¹¹

On the nine days a year set aside for full oracular consultation, the day seems to have progressed as follows. The Pythia would head at dawn to bathe in the Castalian spring near the sanctuary (see fig. 0.2). Once

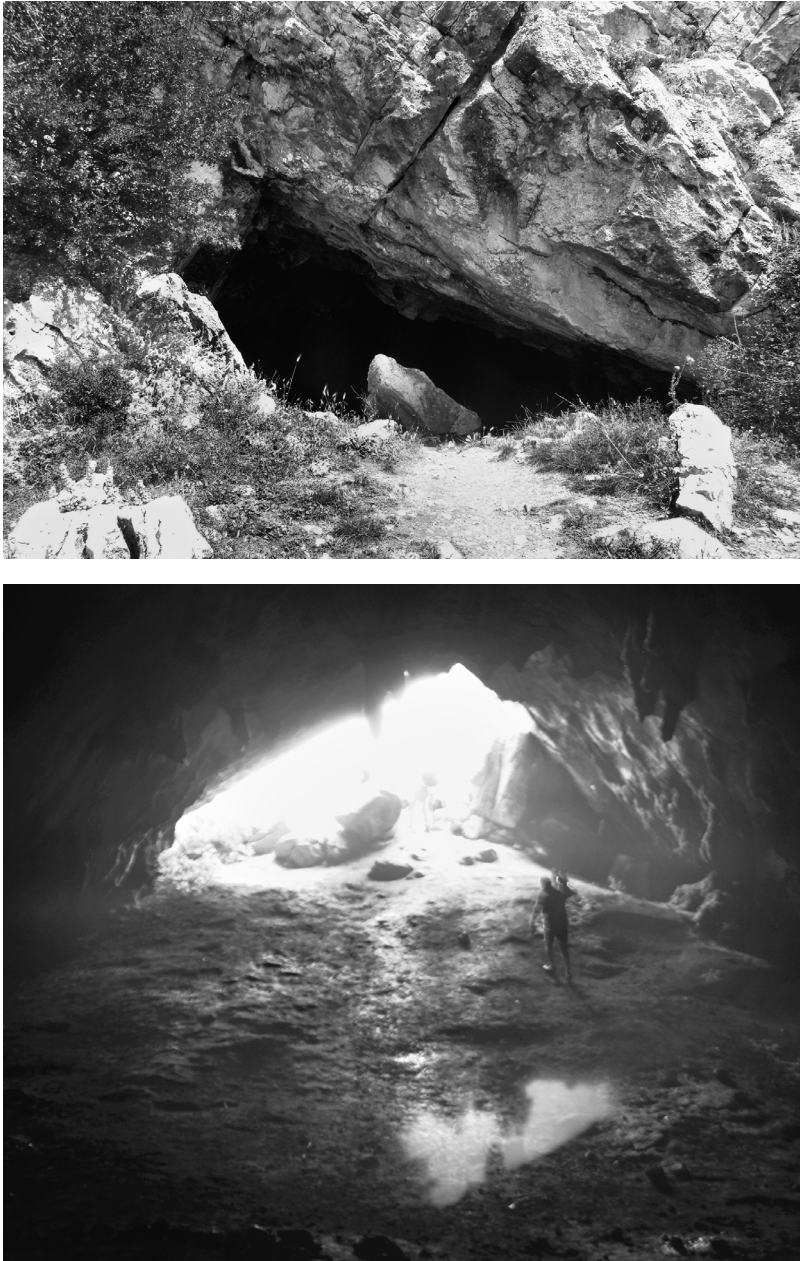


Figure 1.2. The Corycian cave from the outside (*top*) and inside (*bottom*), high above Delphi on a plateau of the Parnassian mountains (© Michael Scott)

purified, she would return to the sanctuary, probably accompanied by her retinue, and enter into the temple, where she would burn an offering of laurel leaves and barley meal to Apollo, possibly accompanied by a spoken homage to all the local deities (akin to that dramatized in the opening scene of the ancient Greek tragedy *Eumenides* by the playwright Aeschylus).¹² Around the same time, however, the priests of the temple were responsible for verifying that even these rare days of consultation could go ahead. The procedure was to sprinkle cold water on a goat (which itself had to be pure and without defect), probably at the sacred hearth within the temple. If the goat shuddered, it indicated that Apollo was happy to be consulted. The goat would then be sacrificed on the great altar to Apollo outside the temple as a sign to all that the day was auspicious and the consultation would go ahead.¹³

The consultants, who would have had to arrive probably some days before the appointed consultation day, would now play their part. They first had to purify themselves with water from the springs of Delphi. Next, they had to organize themselves according to the strict rules governing the order of consultation. Local Delphians always had first rights of audience. What followed them was a system of queuing that prioritized first Greeks whose city or tribe was part of Delphi's supreme governing council (called the Amphictyony), then all other Greeks, and finally non-Greeks. But within each "section" (e.g., Amphictyonic Greeks), there was also a way to skip to the front, a system known as *promanteia*. Promanteia, the right "to consult the oracle [*manteion*] before [*pro*] others," could be awarded to individuals or cities by the city of Delphi as an expression of the close relationship between them or as thanks for particular actions. Most famously, the island of Chios was awarded promanteia following its dedication of a new giant altar in the Apollo sanctuary (see fig. 1.3), on which they later inscribed, in a rather public way given that the queue very likely went past their altar, the fact that they had been awarded promanteia. If there were several consultants with promanteia within a particular section, their order was decided by lot, as was the order for everyone else within a particular section.¹⁴



Figure 1.3. A reconstruction of the temple terrace, the area in front of the temple of Apollo in the Apollo sanctuary of Delphi, with main structures marked (© Michael Scott) 1 Delphi charioteer. 2 Fourth century BC column with omphalos and tripod. 3 Stoa of Attalus. 4 Apollo temple. 5 Athenian palm tree dedication. 6 Statue and columns of Sicilian rulers. 7 Column and statue of Aemilius Paullus. 8 Altar of Chians. 9 Salamis Apollo. 10 Rhodian statue of Helios. 11 Statues of Attalus II and Eumenes II of Pergamon. 12 Direction of approach for those coming from lower half of Apollo sanctuary. 13 Plataean serpent column.

Once the order was decided, the money had to be paid. Each consultant had to offer the *pelanos*, literally a small sacrificial cake that was burned on the altar, but that they had to buy from the Delphians for an additional amount (the “price” of consultation, and the source of a regular and bountiful income for Delphi). We don’t know a lot about the prices charged, except that they varied. One inscription, which has survived to us, recounts an agreement between Delphi and Phaselis, a city

in Asia Minor, in 402 BC. The price for a “state” inquiry (i.e., by the city) was seven Aeginetan drachmas and two obols. The price for a “private” inquiry by individual Phaselites was four obols.¹⁵ The interesting points here are not only the difference in price for official and personal business (ten times more for official business), but also that such individual agreements could be made (the thinking being perhaps that the cost was related to city wealth, and richer cities like Athens should pay more). But it’s clear that, even at the cheaper end, the price would ensure that thought was given to the necessity of consultation. The price for an individual Phaselite to consult the oracle was the equivalent of about two days pay for an Athenian juryman in the fifth century BC, so combined with the costs of return travel to Delphi, and loss of income while away, this was a real investment. Another inscription, from 370 BC, between Sciathus, an island in the Aegean, and Delphi, records a lower cost: only two drachma for a state inquiry and one sixth of that for a private one. But we don’t know for sure whether this was a difference in agreement between Delphi and Phaselis and Delphi and Sciathus, or whether Delphi had dropped its prices in the fourth century BC (as scholars who argue for the decline of the popularity of the oracle in this period like to think).¹⁶ As well, some people were awarded the honor of not paying at all. King Croesus of Lydia in Asia Minor was one of these, but so were the Asclepiads (the worshippers of the healing god Asclepius) from the island of Cos in later times.¹⁷

All this would take time, and consultants would be obliged to wait for long periods (the surviving inscriptions speak of a *chresmographeion*—a sort of shelter built against the north retaining wall of the temple terrace—as their “waiting area” in the shade). When it was his turn, however, the consultant would enter the temple, where he (no women except the Pythia were allowed into the inner part of the temple) was required to perform another sacrifice on the inner hearth. If not a Delphian, he had to be accompanied in this process by a Delphian who acted as *proxenos*, the “local representative.”¹⁸ The sacrifice, often of an animal (which the consultant would also pay for), was burned, part offered to the gods, part given to the Delphians, and part used “for the

knife” (meaning most probably that it was given as a tip to the man actually conducting the sacrifice).¹⁹ Once this was completed, the consultant moved forward to where the Pythia was waiting and was encouraged by the priests of the temple to “think pure thoughts and speak well-omened words,” and finally the consultation could begin.²⁰

It is at this point that the sources become even more difficult to reconcile. The first difficulty is over the arrangement of the inner sanctum of the temple. The Pythia was said to prophesize from the *adyton*, a special restricted access area within the temple. Several different sources tell us the *adyton* was a fairly packed environment, containing the *omphalos* (the stone representing the center of the world), two statues of Apollo (one in wood and one in gold), Apollo’s lyre and sacred armor, the tomb of Dionysus (although this may have also been the *omphalos*), as well as the Pythia sitting on her tripod alongside a laurel tree.²¹ But scholars have bitterly disputed where and how this *adyton* was situated within the temple, some arguing it was sunk into the floor at the back of the *cella* (the main part), others that it was a completely underground space, and others that it was simply part of the inner *cella*.²² The initial excavations of the temple found no obvious architectural evidence for such a sunken space, although the latest plan of the (fourth century BC) temple now shows a square room walled off within the *cella*, which may or may not have been the *adyton* (see fig. 1.4).²³

Where did the consultant stand? The issue becomes even more difficult. The famous vase painting of the Pythia on her tripod facing a consultant has traditionally been interpreted as demonstrating that the consultant was in the room, facing the Pythia, delivering his question directly to her and thus hearing her response directly as well (fig. 1.1).²⁴ But Herodotus and Plutarch also indicate that there was some sort of other structure within the *cella* of the temple in which the inquirers sat at the moment of consultation. This room, named the *megaron* by Herodotus (7.140) and the *oikos* by Plutarch (*Mor.* 437C), has not been identified archaeologically.

Who else was present? Again the sources give us an unclear answer. We know that there were the priests of the temple of Apollo, who

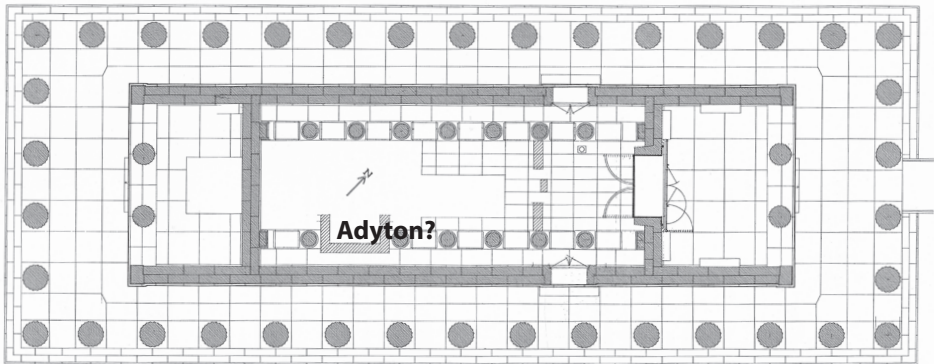


Figure 1.4. The latest plan of the fourth century BC temple of Apollo in the Apollo sanctuary at Delphi, indicating the possible location of the adyton where consultations took place (© EFA [Amandry and Hansen *FD II Temple du IV^{ème} siècle* fig. 18.19])

had conducted the ceremony involving the goat.²⁵ Yet the sources also mention individuals named *prophetes*, and, in later sources, individuals called *hosioi*, as well as a group of women who were in charge of keeping the flame burning on the (laurel-wood-only) inner sacred hearth.²⁶ Part of the problem in understanding this collection of people and their roles is that the terms may overlap (e.g., “prophetes” is used in literature but not recorded as an actual title in Delphic inscriptions), and that the numbers as well as groups of people present changed over time.²⁷ If, as Plutarch says, the consultants stayed in a separate room, then the likelihood is their question was given orally, or in writing, to one of the priests of Apollo, who, in later times perhaps along with the *hosioi*, accompanied the Pythia into the adyton and put the question to her. Did they write down/interpret/versify/make up her response? None of the ancient sources give us a clear answer, although it does seem to have been possible for the consultant not only to have (at least partially) heard the Pythia’s response while sitting in a separate room, but also to receive either an oral or written form of the response in turn from the priests.²⁸ But just what role the priests had in forming that response depends on what kind of response we understand the Pythia to have

given, which, in turn, depends on just how we understand her to have been “inspired.”

No issue has been more hotly debated than the process by which the Pythia was inspired to give her response. First, the ancient sources. Before the fourth century BC, there is no source that discusses how the Pythia was inspired, but all say that she sat on her tripod, from which she uttered “*boai*” “cries/songs” (e.g., Eur. *Ion* 91). From the fourth century BC, some sources mention her shaking a laurel branch, but perhaps as a gesture of purification rather than of inspiration.²⁹ We have to wait until Diodorus Siculus in the first century BC for the first mention of a “chasm” below the Pythia.³⁰ Some subsequent writers agree with this, but others describe it is a space she physically descends into and prophesizes from.³¹ In Diodorus’s narrative, it was this chasm, and the powerful vapor that emerged from it, that led to the initial discovery and installation of an oracle at Delphi. He recounts the story of how a goatherd noticed that his goats, approaching a particular hole on the mountainside, started to shriek and leap around. Goatherds began to do the same when they approached, and also began to prophesize. The news of the spot spread and many people started leaping into the hole, so “to eliminate the danger, the locals appointed one woman as prophetess for all. They built her an apparatus [the tripod] on which she could be safe during her trances.”³²

Plutarch, in the first century AD, mentions the *pneuma* (translated as “wind,” “air,” “breeze,” “breath,” or “inspiration”), and that occasionally the oikos was filled with a “delightful fragrance” as a result of the *pneuma*, but he does not describe its exact nature. Instead he relays a long-running argument among his friends about why the oracle is less active now than it was in the past. The arguments include less *pneuma*; the moral degeneration of mankind leading to its abandonment by the gods; the depopulation of Greece and the departure of the *daimones* (spirits) responsible for divination. But Plutarch also insists that the Pythia did not at any point rant or rave. Instead, he comments that, after a consultation session, the Pythia “feels calm and peaceful.” In fact, the only time the Pythia is said to have sounded odd was on the occasion when the entire process of consultation had been forced (the goat was deluged in cold water to

ensure that it shivered to provide the right signs for the consultation to go ahead). The result was that the Pythia's voice sounded odd. "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," which suggests that, in normal circumstances, the Pythia responded in a normal-sounding voice and manner.³³

Strabo, a geographer of the ancient world writing in the first century AD, represents the Pythia as sitting on the tripod, receiving the *pneuma*, speaking oracles in both prose and verse. Another writer, Lucan, however, still in the first century AD, gives a very different impression of the Pythia, in which the her body is taken over by the god through the inhalation of the vapor, and she raves as a result. In the writings of Pausanias, a Greek travel writer from the second century AD, the Pythia also drinks from the Cassotis spring (the one that runs by and under the temple at Delphi) for inspiration. In the writings of Lucian, a rhetorician from the second century AD, the Pythia chews laurel leaves for inspiration and drinks not from the Cassotis, but from the Castalian spring. In the Christian writers, for example John Chrysostom, the picture focuses again on the effects of the *pneuma*: the Pythia's "madness" is caused by the "evil" *pneuma* rising upward from beneath her, entering through her genitals as she sits on the tripod.³⁴

Thus the most well-known modern picture of a Pythia, inspired/sent "mad" by breathing in/being taken over by "vapors" from a chasm below the tripod, and giving as a result raving and insensible answers (which then have to be made sense of by the priests around her) is a composite one, from mostly late Roman and indeed several anti-pagan sources. Scholars have long pointed out that in particular the Roman assumption of the Pythia's madness, and search for an explanation for it (via the chasm and its vapors), could well have emerged from the mistranslation of Plato's description of her divine inspiration as *mania* (linked in Greek to *mantike*—"divination"), which became the Latin *insania* ("insanity"). To a Roman audience, used to divination carried out through a series of taught, more scientific "arts" (e.g., the reading of livers from sacrificed animals), understanding her *mania*, her madness, as a result

of intoxication by gas from a subterranean chasm rendered the Delphic oracular process “intelligible and satisfying.”³⁵

Yet despite this understanding of the raving Pythia as a consequence of cultural mistranslation and subsequent elaboration, and despite the fact that no source mentions it before the first century BC, the picture of the Pythia breathing in vapors from a chasm below her tripod has always been the dominant model for understanding how the oracle at Delphi functioned. To such an extent that finding the mechanism of the vapors was originally regarded as the litmus test for successful archaeological investigation at Delphi. The original excavators of the site were extremely disappointed not to find a chasm below the temple—they felt almost cheated by the “deception” of the literary sources.³⁶ The stakes were understandably high: at the time of Delphi’s excavation in the 1890s, interest in the oracle, and in psychic research more generally, could not have been stronger. In 1891 the burlesque opera *Apollo, or The Oracle at Delphi* played to great acclaim on Broadway. In the same year, John Collier painted his famous *Priestess of Delphi* in which a sensual priestess breathes in vapors from her tripod over a chasm (see plate 4), and the Society of Psychical Research was started by Cambridge academics and published its first volume examining the oracle at Delphi. In the wake of the disappointing excavations, thus, there was a feeling that the ancient sources had lied. The scholar A. P. Oppé in 1904 in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* argued that the entire practice at Delphi was a farce, a sham, put on by the priests of Apollo, tricking the ancient world.³⁷ Others sought different explanations for the Pythia’s madness: they focused on the laurel leaves, and suggested the Pythia had been high from eating laurel. One German scholar, Professor Oesterreich, even ate laurel leaves to test the theory, remarking disappointedly that he felt no different.³⁸ Others opined that the answer relied not in some form of drug, but in psychology. Herbert Parke and Donald Wormell argued in the 1950s that the Pythia, in the heat of the moment after so much preparation on the particular day of consultation, and after so many years perhaps involved with the temple as one of the women guarding the sacred flame, would have found herself in an emotionally intense relationship with the god, and could easily have fallen victim to

self-induced hypnosis.³⁹ More recently, scholars have employed a series of anthropological approaches to understand belief in spirit possession, and applied these to how the Pythia may have functioned.⁴⁰

The chasm idea, however, was hard to forget. The Rev. T. Dempsey in the early twentieth century argued that perhaps, just as Plutarch had suggested the oracle worked less in his day thanks to less *pneuma*, the chasm had, in modern times, completely closed up.⁴¹ Others sought even more ingenious explanations for how the vapors had been created without a chasm, including one in which the Pythia herself descended to a room below her tripod to light a fire that produced the smoke (possibly from the hemp plant) she then breathed in, as if it were vapors from the god.⁴² This explanation, coupled with the analysis of a particular stone block filled with mysterious holes and grooves, thought to be that on which the tripod and *omphalos* were positioned and through which the vapors arose (still on view at Delphi but now recognized as a stone later recut as an olive press), crystallized the sense that the ancients had “bought” a hoax for more than a thousand years at Delphi.⁴³

More recently, the debate over the presence of inspiring vapors at Delphi has re-emerged, thanks to a reassessment of Delphi's geology.⁴⁴ Analysis by the geologist Jelle De Boer and the archaeologist John Hale through the 1980s and 1990s led, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, to their publishing evidence for two major geological fault lines crossing at Delphi (one running east-west, the other north-south) directly underneath the temple of Apollo (see plates 1, 2; figs. 0.1, 0.2). At the same time, they argued that the bedrock beneath the temple was fissured, which would allow for small amounts of gas to rise up through the rock, despite the absence of a chasm. This gas originated from the bituminous (full of hydrocarbons) limestone naturally occurring in this area, which would have been stimulated to release its gas by shifts in the active fault lines beneath. Testing both the travertine (itself a product found only in active fault areas) and the water beneath the temple at Delphi, they found ethane, methane, and ethylene, which had been used as an anaesthesia in the 1920s, thanks to its ability to produce a pleasant, disembodied, trancelike state. They postulated that the geology

of Delphi could thus have produced enough of these potent gases to, within an enclosed space like the adyton, put the Pythia into a trancelike state.⁴⁵ The ancients may not have been lying after all.

This research created huge excitement in public and academic circles, but in reality, while fascinating, it still did not really solve the problem. Even if intoxicating gases were produced in the temple at Delphi, and these gases did “inspire” the Pythia (despite that none of the sources before the first century BC point to this as the method of inspiration), how did the answers she gave, even if massaged and shaped by the priests of Apollo, remain suitable, useful, right enough for the oracle to continue as a valid institution for over one thousand years? Or as Simon Price, a scholar with a reputation for pushing straight to the heart of a problem, put it: “Why was it that the sane, rational Greeks wanted to hear the rantings of an old woman up in the hills of central Greece?”⁴⁶ To understand this, we must put the process of oracular consultation at Delphi in its wider religious context, and think more carefully about the way in which the oracle was perceived.

Oracles were an essential, and respected, part of the Greek world. They were also everywhere you looked. Scholarship has demonstrated the vast array of oracular sanctuaries on offer, which varied from the Pythian priestess at Delphi to the consultation of the rustling of leaves of Zeus’s sacred tree at Dodona in northern Greece, to consultation with spirits of the dead, like at Heracleia Pontice on the Black Sea (see map 1).⁴⁷ Sometimes even the same god could have very different forms of oracular consultation at his different sanctuaries: so while Apollo *Pythios* (as Apollo was worshiped at Delphi) had the Pythia at Delphi, at the sanctuary of Apollo *Pythaios* in Argos, his priestess took part in nocturnal sacrifices and drank the blood of the sacrificial victims as part of her inspiration to prophesize.⁴⁸ But this form of divination (putting a question to a god through a priestly representative) was also just one of the forms of divination available in ancient Greece. Another was the reading of signs from particular natural events and actions and interpreting them in relation to a particular question. Just about everything could be read: the flight of birds (although not the movement of fish), patterns of words, sneezing, entrails, fire, vegetables, ripples on water, reflections in

mirrors, trees, atmospheric phenomena, stars, as well as randomized dice, beans and other forms of “lot” oracle. In addition, there was a host of wandering *chresmologoi* or *manteis* (“oracle-tellers” or “seers”) who could be engaged on the street in any major Greek city for consultations, which could be conducted in a variety of ways, from the reading of appropriate oracle responses in books of oracles to connecting with dead spirits.⁴⁹

Key here is that the Greek world was filled with a “constant hum” of divine communication.⁵⁰ It was a system used by all levels of Greek society, and as well, it was a system in which everyone had their “preferred” form of communication, which could alter depending on the type and importance of the question to be asked. The Athenian general Nicias in the fifth century BC had his own personal seer as did many other military commanders. In the sixth century BC, Peisistratus, the Athenian tyrant, never consulted Delphi, but liked using *chresmologoi*. Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC liked his *manteis* to come from Asia Minor. Such seers could be incredibly well respected: Lampon was a seer in the fifth century BC but also a friend of the famous general and statesman Pericles and responsible for the foundation of Thurii in South Italy. Nicias’s chief seer, Stilbides, was also one of his top soldiers.

The importance of divination does not mean, however, that the oracular system was never mocked in Greek culture. The consultation of oracles was lampooned in Greek comedy: in Aristophanes’ *Knights* and *Birds*, for example, oracle sellers are figures of fun. The strength of their connection with the divine too could be questioned. Euripides, in a fragment of an otherwise lost play (Frag. 973N), wrote “the best seer is the one who guessed right.” Sometimes too their usefulness could be questioned. Xenophon, in the fourth century BC, argued that divination became useful only when human capacity ended.⁵¹ We shall see in the coming chapters instances wherein even the oracle of Apollo at Delphi was said to have been bribed and to have become biased, or was treated with circumspection by even its most loyal consultants. But all these instances represent an aberration from the norm, an aberration that did not in the long term shake belief in the system as a whole, a system that continued to speak of divination as a useful and real connection to the gods.

It is difficult for us to understand this kind of mindset today. In the 1930s, the anthropologist Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard tried to understand the Greeks' acceptance of oracles by observing the Azande community in Central Africa, who used a form of poison-chicken oracle to resolve disputes and make difficult community, as well as individual, decisions. His research showed that within the framework of a particular culture and life in which everyone agreed that the poison-chicken oracle was a proper and respected way to choose a solution, it was as good a means as any to help run a community.⁵² But where does this leave us with the Pythia? On the one hand, we have to imagine ourselves into a society in which oracular connection with the divine was a commonly accepted cultural activity into a world that was believed to be controlled by the gods. Those gods could be for you or against you, and so it made sense to make every effort not only to appease them with offerings, but to use a variety of methods of divination to find out what they had in mind for the future. At the same time, the gathering of tradition about the power and importance of an oracle like the Pythia at Delphi, coupled with the prolonged rituals encountered before the consultation, would have helped to ensure belief in the process and its outcome. This does not mean people had to *know* exactly how the Pythia connected with the god: even Plutarch, himself (as indicated above) a priest at Delphi in the first century AD, was content to relate the argument and debate among his friends, who each had their own ideas about how the inspiration took place and why it happened less frequently in their time. Key is that—however it happened—there was a belief in a connection between the divine and human world through the Pythia.

At the same time, a number of other factors must be taken into consideration to understand how the Pythia retained her reputation for over one thousand years. The first is the kind of information sought from the Pythia. The questioning of the Pythia in the sixth century BC by King Croesus of Lydia in Asia Minor is often thought, because it is so well known, to be typical of how consultants put their questions to the oracle. But one of the things Herodotus, our major source for this encounter, is likely indicating is that Croesus's encounter with Delphi

shows how little this “non-Greek” understood about Greek culture. As we shall see in later chapters, Croesus’s direct question to oracles all around the Mediterranean in order to find out which was the “best” (the “what am I doing at this moment?” question) was, in fact, a very unusual type of question to ask an oracle. Not because it was a test of present knowledge, but because it involved such a direct request for information. Very rarely, it seems, did consultants ask the oracle direct questions about the future (so Croesus’s second question about whether he would win the war against King Cyrus of Persia was again an odd form of question).⁵³ Instead, most questions put to the oracle seem to have been in the form of “would it be better and more profitable for me to do X or Y?” or else, “to which god shall I pray before I do X?”⁵⁴ This is to say, consultants presented problems to the Pythia in the form of options, or rather sought guidance for how their goals might come about, rather than asking directly what would happen in the future.

Such a process, focused around guidance rather than revelation, underlines the kind of occasions on which people chose to consult the oracle at Delphi, particularly instances in which individuals, or a community, were having trouble reaching a consensus over which of a particular set of potential actions to take. It is this usefulness of an oracle at moments of community indecision that has been, as we shall explore in the following chapters, thought critical in turning the Delphic oracle into such a well-known and important institution in the Greek world in the late eighth and seventh centuries BC, the period that bore witness to the tectonic forces of community creation that laid the bedrock for the landscape of the classical world.

Second to be considered is the question of the Pythia’s response. Scholars have long remarked on the perfect hexameter verse responses reported in the literary sources as coming straight from the Pythia. There has been substantial doubt cast over her ability to utter directly such poetry, and instead scholars have pointed the finger at her priests as the ones who constructed the responses. At the same time, scholars have pointed to Delphi as a developing “information center,” since it was one of the few places in the ancient world people were going to from all over on

a regular basis, and bringing with them information about their homelands. As a result, a picture has formed of priests who were “plugged in” to the information “hub” at Delphi and thus able to give better-informed guesses about which options were better and outcomes more likely (and have more ability to put those responses into verse). I have some sympathy with elements of this picture: no doubt Delphi was, especially in the sixth through fourth centuries BC, something of an information center. We can only imagine the exchange of information going on during the nine days of the year that consultants from all over the Greek world could turn up (not to mention the days either side they had to wait, or at the Pythian games, or while constructing monuments or while visiting the sanctuary to see it in all its splendor), and the degree to which this information fed back into the consultation system. But at the same time, this can only at best explain the success of Delphi once it had become a success. When Delphi’s oracle first began to be consulted, there was precious little more information going to Delphi than elsewhere.

More fundamental in understanding the Pythia’s success from the outset is the in-built ambiguity of her responses, in part as a direct result of the nature of the questions asked. As we saw above, questions normally came in the form of “is it better and more profitable that I do X or Y” or “which gods should I pray to before I do X.” As a result, if the Pythia replied “do X” or “it is better and more profitable to do X,” and X proved disastrous, people would still never know how bad option Y might have been in comparison. As well, even if the oracle replied telling you to pray to a particular god, this indicated only a prerequisite action to ensure a chance of success; it did not guarantee a good result: praying to a god came with the understanding that there was no guarantee the god would listen in return. The comparative form of the question, and the unequal nature of the relationship between human and divine, ensured that it was impossible for the oracle to be categorically wrong in its response.

Sometimes that ambiguity seems to have been taken a step further in the form of a more complex answer, which in turn demanded a process of further interpretation from the consultant. King Croesus’s inappropriate question about waging war, for example, received a very ambiguous

Delphic answer: “Croesus, having crossed the river Halys, will destroy a great empire.” The response doesn’t make clear whether it will be Croesus’s empire or that of his enemies. In Herodotus’s narrative, Croesus took it to mean his enemies, but it turned out to be his own (Croesus lost his kingdom as a result of losing the battle). Once again, the oracle, thanks to the ambiguity of the response could not be argued to have been wrong: it was Croesus who had chosen to misinterpret the Pythia’s response.⁵⁵

Plutarch, in the first century AD, commented on this well-known ambiguity in oracular responses of the past, noting that, in his day, responses tended to be more direct, but that in olden times, ambiguous replies were necessary because they protected the Pythia from the powerful people who came to consult her: “Apollo, though not prepared to conceal the truth, manifests it in roundabout ways: by clothing it in poetic form he rids it of what is harsh or offensive, as one does with brilliant light by reflecting it and thus splitting it into several rays.”⁵⁶ Not for nothing was the god Apollo often known as Apollo Loxias, Apollo “the ambiguous one.”

Moreover, and crucially, an ambiguous response demanded further debate and deliberation from the consultant and his city. What often began as an issue the community could not decide on, was referred to the Delphic oracle for further enlightenment, and was thus often sent back to the community for continued deliberation about the problem, but with the fresh information/indication and momentum toward making a decision in the form of the god’s response. As classicist Sarah I. Johnston puts it, consulting the oracle at Delphi “extends [consultants’] agency; it puts new reins in their hands.”⁵⁷ Consulting the Pythia thus did not always provide a quick answer to a straightforward question, but rather paved the path for a process of deliberation that allowed the community to come to its own decision.⁵⁸ Indeed the very process of deciding to consult Delphi, sending representatives to ask the question, waiting for one of the rare consultation days and potentially more than one if it was a very busy time, and then returning with a response that became part of a further debate meant a decision to consult Delphi substantially slowed down the decision process and gave the community much longer to mull over the issue.

All this means that we need to understand the Pythia at Delphi not as providing a “fortune-telling service,” but rather as a “sense-making mechanism” for the individuals, cities, and communities of ancient Greece. Or as Heraclitus said in the quote that opens this chapter, “the oracle neither conceals, nor reveals, but indicates.” Delphi was, as one businessman once remarked to me, something of an ancient management consultant. It was an adviser, albeit one with powerful authority.⁵⁹ In a world that never seriously doubted the power and omnipresence of the gods, a complex and widespread system for consultation on what the gods had in store made perfect sense. Within that network of different levels and types of consultation, the Pythian priestess at Delphi had emerged, by the end of seventh century BC, preeminent, and would continue to be consulted right through until the fourth century AD. What a consultation at Delphi offered was a chance to air a difficult decision in fresh light, receive extra (divine-inspired) information and direction, which, while itself necessitating further discussion, brought with it powerful authority and thus a significant push toward consensus in regard to community decisions, and contentment that one was following the will of the gods in individual decisions. At the same time, the processes by which the Pythia was consulted—the form of the questions and the form of her responses—insulated the oracle at Delphi so that even Croesus’s exasperated attempts to show the oracle as having lied to him failed to dent its reputation. It gave Delphi a Teflon coating, a resistance to failure that, while challenged on particular occasions, would ensure that the oracle survived for over a millennium.

But, how, when, and why did it all begin? Just how did the city and sanctuary of Delphi, with its oracle at its center, emerge to such preeminence by the end of the seventh century BC? What can we know about the earliest development of this institution and its surrounding community that would come to be known as the center of the ancient world, and how did the ancients themselves seek to explain the importance and origins of Delphi and its oracle? These questions are the focus of the next two chapters.