

I count the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea
I understand the speech of the mute and hear the voiceless
—Delphic Oracle [Herodotus, I, 47]

In the center of the world, a fissure opened from the black depths of Earth, and waters flowed from a spring. The place was called Delphoi (“Womb”). In its cave sanctuary lived a shamanic priestess called the Pythia—Serpent Woman. Her prophetic power came from a she-dragon in the Castalian spring, whose waters had inspirational qualities. She sat on a tripod, breathing vapors that emerged from a deep cleft in the Earth, until she entered trance and prophesied by chanting in verse.

The shrine was sacred to the indigenous Aegean earth goddess. The Greeks called her Ge, and later Gaia. Earth was said to have been the first Delphic priestess. [Pindar, fr. 55; Euripides, *Iphigenia in Taurus*, 1234-83. This idea of Earth as the original oracle and source of prophecy was widespread. *The Eumenides* play begins with a Pythia intoning, “First in my prayer I call on Earth, primeval prophetess...” [Harrison, 385] Ancient Greek tradition held that there had once been an oracle of Earth at the Gaeion in Olympia, but it had disappeared by the 2nd century. [Pausanias, 10.5.5; Frazer on Apollodorus, note, 10] The oracular cave of Aegira, with its very old wooden image of Broad-bosomed Ge, belonged to Earth too. [Pliny, *Natural History* 28. 147; Pausanias 7, 25]



*Entranced priestess dancing
with wand, circa 1500 BCE.
Stone seal, Vapheio, Greece.*

Ancient Pelasgian seeresses prophesied in the shrine of Delphi before there was a Greece. The Delphic priest Plutarch averred that they “once belonged solely to Earth and Earth’s temple,” and that they had been prophesying for a thousand years. [*De Pythiae Oraculis*, in Goodrich, 210, 203] Related traditions held that Night was the first to speak oracles at Delphi. [Pyndaric scholiast, in Fontenrose 1957: 415] Well into Roman times, Plutarch referenced an Orphic tradition assigning the oracle to “Night and the Moon.” [Harrison, 388] Earth and Night “were both mothers of dreams.” [Dempsey, 8]

Earth’s daughter, Themis, was also a Pythia. Aeschylus called the two “Themis and Gaia, one in nature, many named.” [*Prometheus Bound*, in Harrison, 480] These goddesses were Titans, elder deities overthrown by the classical (patriarchal) Greek gods. Themis signifies all-wise Justice, Right, Law. (Her name comes from the same root as the English *doom*, which originally meant “judgment,” then fate, and only later downfall.) It was Themis who convened

and dissolved the assemblies of the gods, sitting beside Zeus. The *Odyssey* calls her “the beginning and end of councils,” *Odyssey*, II.68

Hesiod listed Themis among the greatest deities. [*Theogony*, 135] Her true might is discernable from her divine children: the Moirae (Fates) and the Horai (Seasons). The eldest of the Horai was Dike, the Way, whose wheel represented the coursing of the sun, moon and stars through the universe. Dike controlled the doors of Day and Night. She also endowed every living being with its own true nature. [Harrison, 482, 515-18, 522-4]

Themis was clearly no mortal woman, but myth depicted her as a powerful priestess in the manner of Isis and Inanna. She was the “good counselor,” the “queen of oracles,” the very personification of prophecy. [Larousse, 136] The prophecies that her seeresses uttered were called *themistes*, “ordinances.” [Harrison, 482-83, 387] As Soteira (“protector, savior”), Themis punished the guilty. [Aeschylus, in Goodrich, 199] Her power of pronouncing judgment and mediating left its mark in the unmatched prestige and authority of the Delphic oracle.

The Pythia prophesied in an underground chamber, the *adyton*, that was placed at the intersection of two fault lines. She began by fasting and bathing in the Castalian spring. She only went forward with a prophecy if the querent’s sacrificial goat shivered after being drenched with cold water. After that, wrote Plutarch, “The Pythia goes down into her inner shrine where she burns laurel and barley flour on the altar.” [*De Pythiae Oraculis*, in Goodrich, 210] A “never-

dyling fire” burned there, and the Cassotis spring welled up from the ground. The Pythia drank from this sacred water, said to confer prophetic power. [Pausanias, x. 24, 7] Then she took her seat on a tripod “placed directly over the chasm,” holding a laurel sprig in her right hand and a bowl of spring water in her left.



The oracle Themis with king Aegeus of Athens. Codrus Painter's Cup, circa 440 BCE.

Within the dark inner sanctuary, the Pythias spoke sonorously, saying sooth in sometimes enigmatic verse. Her inspiration came from a “mantic wind” (*pneuma mantikon*) emanating from the chasm under the tripod where she sat to prophesy. [Maurizio, 76] Some said that she was inspired by the breath of Python. [Fontenrose 1957: 417] Plutarch wrote that spirits breathed into the Pythia, inspiring her prophecy and causing her to give off a beautiful fragrance. She “sang of what was to be as she was borne round in the face of the moon.” [Harrison, 389]

The Pythia was called *mantis* and *promantis*, terms that imply an altered state of some intensity, and also *prophetis*, "female prophet." The original sense of this word is not prediction, but guidance and inspired counsel. It comes from a verb stem meaning "say, speak," just as our word "fate" comes from the Latin root *fari*, with a similar meaning. [Maurizio, 70] The earliest historical record of a Pythia comes from the 6th century, when the female poet Theognis refers to "the priestess from Pytho." [Connelly, 73]

Some said that this long line of oracles originated in north Africa. A Greek tradition held that the Libyan goddess Lamia gave birth to the first Pythia, fathered by Zeus. Lamia was called "the first woman who chanted oracles, and they say that she was named Sibyl by the Libyans." [Pausanias, X, xii, in Olmsted, 67] This story accords with other Greek accounts of north African settlements and cultural influence, as well as archaeological finds of archaic Greek vessels with human figurines painted in a Libyan style. The African influence is most dramatically reflected in the tradition that "Black Doves" founded the oracular shrine of Dodona (below).

Another origin story underlines the importance of shamanic incantation in aboriginal Delphic prophecy. Herophile the Sibyl "used to stand and chant her oracles" on a rock that rose from the ground at Delphi, in the time before the Trojan war, according to Pausanias. This rock was the Omphalos, "navel of the earth," where two eagles flying from opposite sides of the world once met.

The "plain-speaking Sibyl" Herophile was said to have visited many other sanctuaries around the Aegean. [Frazer, 516] Her title Sibyla originated in the word *sibyllainein*, "to be inspired in one's tongue." [Diodorus Siculus, IV. 66. 31] In the Roman era, an international tradition spoke of ten or twelve sibyls by nationality or locale, including not only the Libyan and Delphic, but the Erythraean, Cumaean, Tiburtine, Persian, and others. [see chapter x]

Lisa Maurizio highlights some interesting comments in Plato's *Dialogues* that compare poets with seers and "oracle-chanters." Socrates saw a resemblance between these groups because, he said, what they do comes from nature and divine communication. But because he placed higher value on rational knowledge than inspiration, he devalued the seers: "For these say many noble things, but they do not understand what they say." Plato too refers to a poet sitting "on the Muses' tripod," like the Pythia, but "he is not in his senses, he is like a spring which readily allows its water to flow." But Maurizio counters that the Pythia was anything but senseless, since the ancients described her oracular speech as "coherent, articulate, fluent and knowledgeable almost beyond comprehension." [Maurizio, 77-79]

THE APOLLONIAN TAKEOVER

Greek legend records that Apollo took over Delphi and other archaic oracles, supplanting Ge and killing her water serpent. This being is first described

as a female *drákaina* in the Homeric *Eis Apollona*. This *Hymn to Apollo* demonizes the she-dragon. The poet primed his audience to see her as evil, the cause of doom to anyone who encountered her, and carefully separated her from the waters of the shrine whose guardian she was:

But near by was a sweet flowing spring, and there with his strong bow the lord, the son of Zeus, killed the bloated, great she-dragon, a fierce monster wont to do great mischief to men upon earth, to men themselves and to their thin-shanked sheep; for she was a very bloody plague. [300-10]

This account shows the male newcomer as totally triumphant over the chthonic female power: “And he exulted over the female dragon, and commanded that she would rot there.” [11. 340-60] (Here the poet is creating a folk etymology for Pytho, one of the names for the Delphic dragon, from *pythein*, “to rot.”) The story is reminiscent of Marduk’s killing of the dragon Tiamat—another overthrow of feminine power by a triumphant young god.

*Delphic serpent confronting Apollo at Omphalos.
Attic lekythos, circa 470 BCE*



The *Hymn to Apollo* contains another, related story celebrating the god’s conquest of a goddess sanctuary. Before Apollo takes over Delphi, he first comes to Telphousa and decides to build an oracular temple to himself there. The nymph of the sacred spring resists, attempting to dissuade the interloper with flattering words. She convinces him that it would be better to create a temple below Mount Parnassus, where the steep terrain would prevent horses and mules from trampling the ground. Apollo agrees, and moves on to Delphi where he slays the female dragon and creates a shrine to himself.

But afterwards Apollo returned to Telphousa. Reproaching the nymph of the spring for trying to deceive him, he declared that her place shall be his. Then he “pushed over upon her a crag with a shower of rocks, hiding her streams,” and raised his own altar above her. This is why men pray to him as Apollo Telphousian, “because he humbled the stream of holy Telphousa.” [11.382-7, <http://omacl.org/Hesiod/hymns.html>] The theme of dominion is sharp, explicit—and gendered. The oracle of Telphousa no longer invokes the Earth or nymphs of the waters, but is subsumed into the upstart Apollonian franchise of prophetic shrines.

So various accounts show Apollo displacing Gaea, Themis, and the Serpent as deity of the ancient chthonic sanctuary at Delphi. However, the dragon’s overthrow was more gradual than the legend suggests, because the

Earth Goddess remained potent. Both Euripides and Apollodorus relate that Apollo unseated Earth's child Themis and drove her from the sanctuary. But Earth struck back in defense of her daughter. She confounded the Apollonian cult by sending up dreams "which revealed unto the cities of mortals the past and the future." [Dempsey, 21]

Later writers masculinized the dragon under the name Python. They often describe him as a "child of Earth." [Olmsted, 253-4; Fontenrose 1957: 13, 47] They said that Apollo killed Python, "a dragon set by Earth to guard the oracle," who had tried to prevent the usurper from entering the underground sanctuary. [Pausanias, X, vi, Frazer, 507] But the remembrance of a female dragon persisted. The *Argonautica* calls her "the monster Delphyne." [Apollonius of Rhodes, 2.703] Some scholiasts also name the earth-dragon Delphyne, as a female, or Delphynes, as a male. There is even a Delphic inscription referring to Apollo's opponent as "daughter of Ge." [Fontenrose, Python, 14-15]

Some revisionists attempted to deny the centuries-long tradition of Apollo's violent seizure of the sanctuary. The playwright Aeschylus put these words in the mouth of a Pythia: "The third to have the seat assigned to her – with her predecessor's consent, and not by the use of force against anyone – was another Titaness and child of Earth, Phoebé; and she gave it as a birthday gift to Phoebus, who bears Phoebé's name as an addition to his own." [*The Eumenides*, 3-4] And Apollo did not begin as a prophetic god. He learned the oracular art from Pan, according to Apollodorus, who also repeated the story of his slaying of Python and usurpation of Delphi. [*Bibliothèque* I, 4.1, in Olmsted, 253] In other accounts it was the bee-goddesses of Parnassus who instructed him.

Hyginus related that Python's bones were kept in a cauldron at Delphi. [Olmsted, 254] Others said that he was buried beneath the Omphalos stone, navel of the Earth, where the Pythia rested her hand. [Goodrich, 200] The original stone, a meteorite, is lost. It was shaped like a beehive and covered by a woven net, with two sculptured eagles standing on it. In the 4th century it was replaced by a new stone, with the net replicated in carved relief. In the cliffs above Delphi was the Stone of Rhea, also called Pythos. This was the stone that Rhea gave Chronos when he kept swallowing her children. When he was forced to disgorge all that he had devoured, the stone fell to Mount Parnassus above Delphi. [Dempsey, x]

To honor Python and placate Gaea, the Pythian games were instituted. These were originally musical poetic competitions; later athletics were added. Python's killing was ceremonially re-enacted every eight years. A hut was set up to represent the dragon's house, and a boy led a ritual attack on it with torches. This representative of Apollo then had to serve as a menial for a year, just as the god was made to do as penance for killing the dragon. [Frazer, III, 53-4; Fontenrose 1957: 456]

The new Apollonian hegemony did not change everything, and his usurpation was never complete. [Molnar, et al.] But it looks as if the condition for

the survival of female prophecy at major shrines such as Delphi, Didyma, and Dodona was that it be done in the name of an Olympian god, and no longer the original goddess. Certainly the explicitly patriarchal myth of Apollo's seizure of Delphi (and Telpousa) helps to explain the introduction of a new priesthood as administrators of the shrine, and how men came to bar women from consulting this oracle.

According to Pausanias, the first prophetess after the Apollonian takeover was Phemenoë. She began the tradition of singing the oracle in hexameters (that chanting again). In those days the temple was a simple hut built out of laurel boughs. Legend says a second temple was "made by bees out of wax and feathers," or of twined mountain ferns, and that a third, bronze temple vanished into a chasm in the earth during an earthquake. [Pausanias, X, v; Frazer, 505-6] These mythic phases speak to shifts over the long span of the oracle's existence.

There once had been a prophetic season at a certain time of year, but as demand for the oracle grew, this was extended to nine months, with a winter hiatus. The Pythia responded to queries on the 7th day of each month. Questioners had to go through a series of ritual acts: fasting, seclusion, immersion in the holy spring, robing, procession, offering ritual cakes and a sacrificial animal, ascension to the oracle and hearing her word. [Goodrich, 202]

A laurel tree stood in the Delphic sanctuary, and appears in vase paintings along with the omphalos stone and tripod. One of the names for laurel in Greek is Daphne, a name with strong oracular connections. Some said that the nymph Daphnis was the first prophetess at Delphi. [Pausanias, 10.5.5] Others equated Daphne with Pasiphae, who had an oracle at Thalamai. [Lyons, #276] The title Daphne was also applied to the prophetess Manto of Thebes, or by other accounts was the name of her sister.

Legend said that Manto was taken captive in the fall of Thebes, before the Trojan war. Fighters took her as war booty to Apollo at Delphi. The god compelled Manto to go to Asia Minor, where she founded the oracular shrine of Claros. The tears she cried there created a spring that was part of the sanctuary. [Fraser, IV, 119, citing a scholiast] Manto married the Carian king Rhacius and her son Mopsos also became a prophet. [Diodorus Siculus, 4.66.5] Some said that both Daphne and Manto were taken in the Theban war, and that Daphne was sent to Delphi and became a virgin sibyl, while Apollo was the real father of Mopsos. Others said that Manto had originally been the title of Theban oracular priestesses (*mantis* means prophetess) and that the name became identified with a particular woman who prophesied in the streets of Thebes, calling on women to pray in the temple of Leto. [Ovid, in *Metamorphoses*, VI].

Most written accounts focus on Manto's male kin. They said that her father, Teresias, changed into a woman after seeing serpents copulate. Years later, the same sight turned him back to a man again. Blinded, he became a famous prophet. So did Manto's son Mopsos. But it was Manto that Diodorus Siculus praised (under the name of Daphne) as more skilled in prophecy than her

father. He reported a saying that Homer had taken many of Manto's verses as his own. [Diodorus Siculus, IV. 66. 30-1]

The theme of conquest is revisited in a legend explaining how laurel became sacred to Apollo. The god pursued the nymph Daphne with the intention of raping her. She appealed to her mother Ge to save her, and was turned into a laurel tree just as the attacker caught up with her. Another story of attempted rape is used to explain the name of the Castalian spring. The nymph Castalia fled from Apollo and plunged into the spring beneath the cliffs of Parnassos to escape him. Other stories show this god punishing seeresses who refused to yield to him sexually. He laid a curse on Cassandra so that her true prophecies would never be believed. His curse on the Sibyl of Cumae decreed that the deathlessness already granted her would be unalleviated by the youthfulness and health of true immortality.



Another survival of the Apollonian coup was the divining pebbles called *thriai* or *psephoi*. They rested in a bowl above the Pythia's tripod, and were "taken up" for divination. [Dempsey, 51] The *thriyai* were pictured as three winged sisters living on nearby Mt Parnassus. They are teachers of divination who "eat honeycomb, and bring everything to pass." Their seniority to Apollo is indicated by traditions that they taught him, or later, that they nursed him. Several sources call them the first *mantis* ("diviners"). One hymn called them the *parthenoi*, virgins. Apollo also calls them *moirai* (fates) or *semai* (a title of Erinyes). [Fontenrose 1957: 427-29]

A legend credited Athena with originating these divining pebbles. The veneration of Athena Pronaia was very important at Delphi, and older than the Apollo's cult there. [Fontenrose 1957: 432 n. 37] Apollo disdained her form of divination, and so Zeus caused it "to fall into discredit, though it had been in high repute before..." (Here a historical shift is wrapped in the robes of myth.) Nonetheless, divining pebbles remained in the inner sanctum of Delphi, where "the pebbles danced about in the bowl, while the inspired priestess prophesied." [Frazer note on Apollodorus, II, 10-11]

Lisa Maurizio found that the phrase "take up" (as in "take up the lots") occurs in slightly less than one in ten of the surviving recorded oracles, but over a lengthy timespan. This indicates a longstanding practice of divination by lots, probably those same pebbles of Athena that had been used since archaic times. Maurizio also points to vase paintings from Delphi showing the Pythia holding a phiale, which she thinks may have been for casting the pebbles in divinations. [Maurizio, 80, n. 70]

Jane Harrison thought that the most ancient Delphic prophecy "was a dream-oracle, that came to you while sleeping on holy ground"—like the Selloi

at Dodona. Joseph Fontenrose agreed; he proposed that the nearby shrine of Lykoreia—the Corycian Cave—had been the original Delphic shrine. Its oracular cave was an incubation chamber connected to dreams of the dead. [Fontenrose 1957: 413]

Euripides gives evidence of “keen competition” between Lykoreia’s chthonic dream oracles and Delphi. [Frazer, 430-1] His mythic history of Delphi describes Ge as taking honor away from Apollo’s oracles by sending dream visions to reveal the future. The backstory is once again Ge’s rage at the theft of her shrine and her daughter’s expulsion from it: “So did avenge that old Earth Queen/ Her child’s wrong on Apollo.” [*Iphigenia in Taurus*, in Harrison, 394] Apollo went complaining to Zeus, who ended the dream oracle so that the sun god was again pre-eminent. [Fontenrose 1957: 431]

Apollo’s takeover of the Delphic oracle marked a succession of expropriations and intrusions of worldly powers on the sanctuary. Male priests came in and took control of the Delphic shrine. But Lisa Maurizio raises a flag of caution against the modern idea that the priests had in any way guided the prophecies, and the commonplace depreciation of the Pythia’s speech as “gabble” or “irrational babble.” She points out that there is no ancient evidence that priests interpreted her prophecies, or reworked them into hexameter verse, as Burkert and others have claimed. She observes that “male fantasies about women” fueled speculations by both ancient and modern men. Modern writers often dismiss her oracular power, which ends up “relegated to the margins.” [Maurizio, 69; Burkert on hexameters, 116]

Maurizio’s study of Greek sources, including surviving inscriptions at the sanctuary, led her to conclude, “Not one ancient source suggests that anyone else other than the Pythia issued oracular responses.” As for the priests and the five *hosioi* (Delphic officials-for-life), all information about them is late, and it is unclear what exactly they did. The term *prophetes* (masculine form) never occurs in Delphic inscriptions, only in other writings. Maurizio emphasizes that it was the Pythia alone who “was the conduit of divine knowledge.” [Maurizio, 69; 84]

But those priests did exercise administrative power at the temple. At some point after the Apollonian seizure, they forbade women to enter the temple or consult the oracle, though all males of Delphi inherited “right of access.” [Pomeroy, 33; Goodrich, 199] Strabo was told that Apollo conquered the Pythia because he wanted the oracle for men only. But the reason given was less than flattering: men needed to be taught gentility and self-control. [Goodrich, 204] As far as we know, the Pythias were the only women who had access to the sanctuary in historic times.

PRESTIGE OF THE DELPHIC ORACLE

The prestige of Delphi was so great that Greeks considered it their

“common hearth.” Other temples apparently sent representatives there to rekindle and reconsecrate their own fires. Plutarch tells how the city of Plataea sent a “fire-bringing priestess” with an escort to fetch back a sacred tripod from Delphi. [Dempsey, 112-13] The Amphictyonic federation of Hellenic tribes gave this sanctuary special protected status that made it independent of the city-states. Nevertheless two “Sacred Wars” were fought for control of the shrine, the first in 590 BCE, with Sparta defending Delphi, and the second in 357-346.

People journeyed from distant countries, Libya and Italy and Asia Minor, to consult the Delphic oracle on important matters: “the framing of laws, the founding of colonies, the making and unmaking of kings, the beginning of wars, the healing of disease and pestilence.” The Pythia had no coercive power, only the moral authority of the ancient oracle. [Dempsey, 38] Plato exalted Delphi’s preeminence (or Apollo’s, to his way of thinking) in making the best and noblest laws, the building of temples and disposition of ceremonies, and how the dead were to be buried. [Republic, 427, in Dempsey, 63]

The Delphic oracles had foretold the Trojan war, according to Strabo, Pausanias, and other sources. But the Pythias went well beyond prophecy; they directed, judged, mediated, warned, prohibited wrongdoing, discoursed on tradition and history, and interpreted mysteries. Their pronouncements decided momentous events: who would rule and where cities would be founded. They gave laws, settled disputes, and chided tyrannical kings like Clisthenes of Sicyon. That two Lacedaemonian royal houses existed was entirely due to “the pleasure of the Pythian priestess.” [Pausanias, III, I; Frazer 133]

When Lycurgus of Sparta consulted the Delphic oracle in the early 8th century, she gave his city a constitution and popular assemblies that allowed the people a say in all matters. She advised that all land and wealth were to be equally redistributed, including the poor in the bounty. [Goodrich, 237-50] The Pythia told Lycurgus that his city faced two paths, one of concord and freedom, the other of “loathsome strife and weak delusion.” She warned against greed, which would alone cause Sparta to fall. “And in the body of the folk let there/ Reside decision and the power.” [Diodorus Siculus, VII, 12, 2 and 6]

History shows that the peon class of helots did not share in this power. The oracles were not immune to the power structures of Greek society, and yet we find one of them “persuading the Spartans to grant pardon to the rebel Helots, who had taken up a position on Mt. Ithome.” [Dempsey, 111, citing Pausanias iii, n. 8] The Pythias did exert some mitigating effects on slavery, but without advocating any radical change in the system. The sanctuary enabled some enslaved people to buy their freedom, acting as a go-between and shield. They deposited a sum with the temple, which paid off the slaveholders before witnesses and protected the rights and liberty of the newly emancipated.

But there were complications, as one inscription shows: a woman named Dioclea was to be manumitted, but only after a further term of bondage. The text says that if she bore a child during this time (rape being a known condition

of female slavery) she had permission to “throttle” it. This one concession appears to be the limit of the oracle’s response to coerced sex by the master. In other cases, the Pythia sent captives to found colonies or enrolled them as temple slaves, under conditions said to be less onerous than household slavery. [Dempsey, 108-110; on Diodea, 143 n. 2]

There is no historical record of it, but several legends mention Delphic oracles recommending human sacrifices, usually as a means of ending plagues or droughts caused by blood-guilt (!) or by violation of ritual taboos. An Achaean priestess and her lover were said to have been sacrificed for breaking her celibacy requirement. Another story has the oracle telling a king of Haliartus to kill the first person he met on his return home. This legend resembles the biblical account of Jephthah’s vow to sacrifice the first person he met on his return, in exchange for victory in battle; it turned out to be his daughter. The best-known example of human sacrifice attributed to a Pythia was the legendary tribute of seven youths and seven maidens sent to Crete as reparations for the murder of Minos’ son. [Dempsey, 129]

One of the most famous consultations of the oracle was by Croesus, the fantastically rich king of Lydia. He tested six of the most prestigious oracles by sending envoys to ask each of them what he would be doing on a prearranged day. Only the Pythia met this test; she responded that Croesus was boiling a lamb with a tortoise in a brass vessel. The Lydian king then sent lavish gifts with his real burning question: whether he should make war on Cyrus, king of Persia. He was delighted with the oracle’s reply: “Croesus by crossing the Halys would destroy a mighty kingdom.” True, but it turned out to be his own.

Pillars at the entrance to the Delphic sanctuary bore the famous inscriptions: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.” [Pausanias, 10, 24; Frazer 535] Plato mentions these, with a third: “Go surely, and ruin is at hand.” [Dempsey, 141] His own teacher, Socrates, was profoundly influenced by the Delphic maxims, one of which was later attributed to him. So was Pythagoras, whose biographer Diogenes Laertius recorded the Pythia’s prophecy that his pregnant mother would bear a holy child. The woman named her son after the Pythia. (Pythagoras means “spoken by the Pythia.”) As a youth, Pythagoras studied with the Delphic priestess Themistoclea. He learned most of his moral doctrines from her, according to Aristoxenis. Thus the man who coined the word “philosophy” and founded Western mathematics sat at the feet of a female philosopher at Delphi. [“Themistoclea – 600 BCE – woman philosopher,” <http://www.women-philosophers.com/Themistoclea.html>]

Care was taken to maintain a peaceful atmosphere for the priestesses, protecting them from discord and harmful influences so that they could act as divine channels. Their souls should be “free from perturbation” when sitting on the tripod, and after the oracle was delivered, they would abide in “calm and peace.” At the apex of Delphic influence, it became necessary to appoint two Pythias and an assistant to cope with the crowds of querents. [Dempsey, 56, 53]

No one seems to know how the Pythias were selected. They had to be freeborn women of Delphi, without consideration of class or rank (until near the end of their thousand-year tenure). They had to lead virtuous lives and to keep ritual purity. There was once a virginity requirement, as with some other Greek priestesses, but it was waived after a man abducted a youthful Pythia. Then women over fifty were chosen, at least for some centuries. The Pythia was a woman “raised in a poor peasant household” in the first century, the time of Plutarch. To his mind, that meant that she brought “not one iota of art, knowledge or talent” to the shrine, only a “virgin soul.” [Zaidman, 375] What mattered was that she must have a noble character: “She cares nothing for the plaudits or censure that men may care to judge her by.” [*De Pythiae Oraculis*, in Goodrich, 210]

The Delphic priest Plutarch upheld the unfailing truthfulness of the oracle: “Never, to the present day, did the language of the Pythia suffer any impeachment of its veracity.” [*De Pyth. Orac.* xxix, in Dempsey, 63] However, a few cases are known of Pythias being suborned through bribery. One ruled in favor of the Spartan conqueror Kleomenes. [Pausanias, III, iv; Frazer, 137-8] The oracles did show partiality towards Sparta in the bitterly-fought Peloponnesian wars, but then Sparta was their most loyal defender against attack. After Athens fell, the oracle counseled mercy to the defeated—and the Spartans complied.

One case with ambiguous results was the counsel to flee during the Persian invasion. A second query elicited a different prediction, that the city of Athena Tritogenia could only protect itself with a “wooden wall,” after withdrawing before the armies and waiting until “divine Salamis” killed many. The meaning of this prophecy was hotly disputed. The priestess of Athena made the decisive move of announcing that the snake had refused its honey cake, and refugees poured out of the city, “the more readily because the goddess herself had forsaken the Acropolis. [Herodotus, 8.41, in Harrison, 267] Athens moved to defend itself with the wooden walls of its navy, and was victorious over the Persians at Salamis. [Dempsey, 84, 165, 89]

Ruling families seized control of the Delphic temple, and fought “Sacred Wars” over it. Their rich gifts to the sanctuary, housed in treasuries dedicated to cities and regions, made it an attractive target. The Aetolians took Delphi in 290, and Celtic armies sacked the temple not long afterwards. Eventually the aristocracy barred priestesses who came from the common people. In Plutarch's time the Pythia of Delphi was a peasant woman, but by the year 200 she had to be a noble lady. [Lane, 238] As the Delphic oracle was being corrupted in this way, the Roman writer Lucan lamented

The Pythia has lost her voice, however, which has occasioned a sad loss for men of my generation. Our kings dared no longer appeal to her, so fearfully do we all dread the future now. The powerful of our day have shut her mouth. [*Pharsalia*, in Goodrich, 213]

One Pythia is reported to have said, “Stranger, if pure of soul, enter into the sanctuary of the god of purity, having but touched the sacred stream. For lustration is an easy matter for the good. As for the wicked man, not the whole ocean with its waves could wash him clean.” [Dempsey, 162]

MORE ORACULAR WOMEN: AEGIRA, DODONA, LARISA, DIDYMA

Delphi was the most renowned of many oracular spring-sanctuaries. The Erythraean sibyl prophesied at a spring in a cave. The celibate female oracle at Larisa tasted the blood of a night-sacrificed lamb in order to prophesy. [Pausanias, II, xxiv, 107] At Aegira, it was bull’s blood that the seeress drank to attain trance, then descended to a subterranean cave to prophesy. These celibate priestesses seem to have been chosen by lot. Aegira was one of the surviving oracular sanctuaries of Earth. [Pliny, *Natural History* xxviii, 147, in Frazer IV, 175; Pausanias VII, xxv; Olmsted, 257, compares this drinking of bulls’ blood to the Irish *tarbdeis*.]

Another chthonic shrine was the Oracle of the Dead at Ephyra. It stood on a hill near the junction of two rivers. Excavations show that the Necromanteion goes back to the Bronze Age. Its thick stone walls had blocks cut into many sides, with a processional hall leading into “a labyrinth with many doors” and finally into a great chamber. Underneath was a vault with multiple burials. Archaeological excavations indicate that the site was sacred to Persephone, mistress of the dead. [Burkert, 114-15]

An oracle of Pasiphae and the moon goddess Selene was active near Thalamai in Laconia. The legendary Cretan queen Pasiphae was called a daughter of the sun. Legend says that she had sex with a bull and so gave birth to the Minotaur. Like her sister Circe, Pasiphae was said to be a witch. One story claims that she cast a spell on her philandering husband Minos, the king of Knossos, that made his semen poisonous to his lovers. No stories have survived explaining how she became the fount of prophecy at Thalamai. Instead, there were attempts to conflate her with other prophetic women.

Pausanias reported a tradition that the Trojan prophetess Cassandra had died at Thalamai, “and was called Pasiphae because she declared her oracles to all.” Others said that she was Daphne who fled Apollo’s embrace and was turned into a tree. “Be this as it may, it was now said that the oracles brought from this goddess ordained that all Spartans should be on an equality according to the original law made by Lycurgus.” Following this communitarian counsel, king Agis, his mother, grandmother and friends donated large tracts of land and money toward “the common stock.” [*Life of Agis*, 9.2-3, Loeb Classics ed., 1921, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Agis*.html]

A statue of Pasiphae still stood at Thalamai in Roman times. In the first century BCE Cicero reported that the Lacedaemonians kept the custom “of

sleeping, for the object of having dreams, in the temple of Pasiphae." Pausanias concurred, though he garbled the name into Paphia: "People consult it by sleeping; and of what they desire to know, the goddess sends them dreams." [John Dryden and Arthur Hugh Clough edition of Plutarch's Lives, 566, citing Cicero, *De Divinatione* I.43, and Pausanias, Desc. Gr]

People seeking answers could receive direct spiritual experiences without intermediaries at the Boeotian oracle of Trophonios at Lebadea. [Pausanias, 9.37-39] Querents purified themselves for several days in an outer sanctuary. They bathed in the river Hercyna, lived simply, and offered sacrifices to various deities. A soothsayer read the viscera of the sacrificial animals to determine whether the querent would be accepted into the oracular cave. If the signs were good, two boys led him to the river for a final immersion and anointing. (No sources say whether women could consult this oracle.) He drank from the well of Lethe to clear his mind and from the well of Memory (Mnemosyne) for power to remember the visions to come.

The seeker was dressed in special linen robes and shoes and taken to the high cave sanctuary. He went down a ladder, and placed his feet into an opening. Ancient reports say that an invisible force pulled him into the cave, a terrifying experience that precipitated visions. Then the priests pulled the person up through the tunnel and placed him on the throne of Mnemosyne, Titan goddess of Remembrance. They asked what he had seen, and led him back to the outer sanctuary, where he wrote down his vision on a tablet of the temple. "Descent into the cave of Trophonios" became a proverbial expression for a frightful experience. This oracle was highly regarded and outlived many others.

The Trophonios oracle owed its origin to a Pythia's instructions in response to a plague that was ravaging Lebadea. She told them to search for the grave of a hero. A swarm of bees led a shepherd boy to the cave that became the oracular shrine. Several other temples were founded on the pattern of Delphi, with female seers, such as the shrine of Apollo Pythios at Argos. The priestess of Apollo was locked in the temple at Patara overnight when seeking a response. Sometimes foreign seeresses were compared to the Pythia, like the Thracian *promantis* who prophesied "as at Delphi." [Connelly, 80; Holderman, 23]

THE BLACK DOVES OF DODONA

Classical writers often name Dodona as the oldest oracular shrine in Greece. Located in the northwestern mountains near Albania, it was originally an open-air sanctuary around an ancient oak, with a perpetual fire burning. It stood in a high grove of oaks and beeches surrounded by wilderness. Dodona was named after the nymph Dodone and consecrated to Dione, literally "Goddess," whose name comes from an ancient proto-Indo-European root meaning "shining." From this root come words for "day" and "deity," and the Greek

names Dione and Zeus, two gendered words meaning “deity.” Modern texts often say that Dione was “the female form of Zeus,” but never call him “the male form of Dione.” This implication of his precedence is wrong. The two names sprang from the same linguistic source, and in fact Dione’s Mycenaean equivalent Diwiya appears in ancient Linear B inscriptions.

Both Dodone and Dione were described as Oceanid goddesses. Hesiod calls Dione a child of the Titans Tethys and Okeanos, fresh-water deities. (The name Tethys meant “grandmother” or “nurse”; she kept company with the birth goddess Eileithyia.) Dione is among the first deities named in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. [*Theogony*, 353] She leads “the chiefest of all the goddesses” in *Homeric Hymn 3*, preceding Rhea and Themis and others who attend Leto as she gives birth to Apollo on Delos. Later sources call Dione a child of Ge. In the *Iliad* she is the mother of Aphrodite and married to Zeus. She is “the shining among divinities,” an praise-name going back to the original meaning of Dione. [*Iliad*, V, 370ff]

The veneration of Dione gradually faded in the rest of Greece, but she remained an important goddess at the ancient Pelasgian shrine of Dodona. Her image appears to have been a plain wooden idol, to which “a magnificent face or mask” was added around 320 BCE. [Hyperides, in Kroll, 75] Zeus Naos was the partner of Dione at the temple. Magnetized by his association with the Earth Mother, he is unlike other forms of Zeus. Some called him Pelasgian Zeus. Dione was paired with Zeus at one other sanctuary, Termessus. [Holderman, 48]

Dodona was a place famous for fertilizing power, as Hesiod, Strabo, and many others testify. Archaeology agrees, showing a long record of ex voto inscriptions imploring the goddess for reproductive potency. [Hadzsits, 47] The earthy nature of the shrine is attested in the *Iliad*’s description of its seers (though it names Zeus, but not Dione). The Dodonaean seers are here called the Selloi, who “dwell with feet like roots, unwashed, and make their beds on the ground.” [*Iliad*, 16:127] Most commentators assume that the Selloi were all men, but here we come up against the linguistic veil cast by the default masculine plural, which makes no distinction between all-male or mixed-gender groups. In any case, no other source names the Selloi.

Hesiod called the Dodona oracles “acorn-eaters” who lived simply and close to the earth, living in the trunk of a beech tree. Revelation came to them in the rustling of the trees and the movements and calls of the pigeons. Plato related a tradition that these “words of the oak... were the first prophetic utterances.” [in *Phaedrus*] But there is another piece. The Hesiodic *Catalogues* also speak of three doves who lived in the oak tree. [Burkert, 114] This leads us to the explicitly female prophetic tradition of the Black Doves.

The prophetesses at Dodona prophesied in a shamanic ecstasy, and “afterwards they do not know anything about what they have said.” [Burkert, 114] Herodotus called them the Black Doves (*Peleia Mēlaina*). [Herodotus, II.55] He related an Egyptian story that Phoenicians had carried off two priestesses of “Theban Zeus” and sold them, one in Libya, the other in Greece. These women

founded two famous oracular temples: of Amun at a Libyan oasis, and of Zeus at Dodona. But the Dodona priestesses Promeneia, Timarete and Nicandra gave Herodotus a different description of their origins:

two black doves, they say, flew away from Thebes in Egypt, and one of them alighted at Dodona, the other in Libya. The former perched on an oak, and speaking with a human voice, told them that there, on that very spot, there should be an oracle of Zeus... As to the bird being black, they merely signify by this that the woman was an Egyptian. It is certainly true that the oracles at Thebes and Dodona are similar in character. [Herodotus, II, 55-6]

Herodotus wrote that this first Egyptian priestess was Thesprotia, and that “as soon as she understood the Greek language, she taught divination.”



Early Archaic ceramic art shows unmistakable signs of North African influence. These dancers greatly resemble Garamantes rock art in Libya.

The historian relates another intriguing fragment of teachings that the Dodona priestesses conveyed to him. He has just finished saying that the Greeks got their gods from Egypt, by way of the Pelasgians, and after consulting with the oracle of Dodona. “But it was only—if I may so put it—the day before yesterday that the Greeks came to know the origin and form of the gods, and whether or not all of them had always existed...” The primary sources for the Olympian pantheon go back to the Homeric epics, and Hesiod and Pindar, only a century before Herodotus. [Herodotus, II. 50-53] With the Dodona priestesses, we catch a glimmer of a more ancient mythic tradition, one quite conscious of its own seniority to the Olympian upstarts.

Further centuries down the track, Pausanias and Strabo also refer to the extreme antiquity of these Peleae or Peleiades. Strabo wrote that they predated the the Delphic oracle Phemenoe. [Hadzsits, 48] In Pausanias, they were the first women to chant the ritual verses: “Ge sends up the harvest, therefore sing the praise of Ge as Mother.” [*Desc. Gr.* 10.12.10] (Here is another reference to Earth as the tutelary deity of the oracles.) Pausanias wrote of “the oracles given by the doves” at Dodona, describing these priestesses as aged women. He recounted how the oracle Phaennis had foretold the Celtic invasion of Asia Minor “a generation before the event took place.” [Pausanias, VII, xxi, 21 Frazer, 149l; X, xv; Frazer, 521]

Strabo related that the Peliades drew auguries from observing three

sacred doves. He observed that the Molossians and Thesprotians called old women *peleiai*, so the title meant "elders" as well as "doves." Strabo added, "And perhaps the much-talked-of Peleides were not birds, but three old women who busied themselves about the temple." [*Geography*, 7] He pointed to another oracle where "three old women were designated as prophets," originally located at Mt. Tomarus in Thessaly. According to Strabo, this temple and its priestesses were later moved to Greece. [Strabo VII, 323; 7.7.12]

The sanctity of the Dodona oaks retained a high repute. Athena carved one of its oaken boughs into the prow of the Argo, endowing Jason's ship with prophetic power. Dodona's original fame as a wind oracle was based on the sound of trees rustling in the breeze, which were likened to eloquent tongues. Later, copper cauldrons were suspended from the trees. They resounded as the wind moved them, striking them together like gongs. [Smith 1867: 840] The "copper vessel in Dodona" became proverbial. [Strabo, VII, 325] Also added later were two pillars, one with a bronze cauldron, and the other with a statue of a boy holding a scourge. As the wind blew, little bones at the end of the scourge struck the cauldron, emitting long tones.

Unlike Delphi, women could and did consult the oracle of Dodona and others as well. Like Delphi, Apollo had claimed the female oracles of Patara in Lycia, and Didyma, where Artemis Pythia was worshipped, and of Claros, all in western Anatolia. [Fontenrose, 187, on Artemis Pythia] At Patara, "the priestess who delivers the oracles... is shut up in the temple during the night." [Herodotus, I, 181 (114)] The implication is that her prophecies were received by dream-incubation.

The Claros oracle arose from a sacred spring and cave near Colophon. It was already a sacred site in the 9th century. A circular stone altar appeared there around 650 BCE, and a larger rectangular one was added a century later when a temple of Apollo was constructed. The spring underneath was said to have been created by the tears of Manto, the prophetesses that Apollo sent into exile to found the oracle. [Burkert, 115] Later accounts displace her, naming her son Mopsos as the founder of Claros. Like Delphi, the Claros sanctuary had an *omphalos* stone, but its oracle was a man. He entered a divine state (*entheos*) by drinking water from the spring, and during the ecstasy "he is not in control of himself and does not follow what he is saying, or where he is..." [Iamblichus, in Olmsted, 257]

The female oracles at Didyma in Asia Minor also show signs of entering into shamanic states, as they were sometimes called "the Grunters." [Holland-Smith, 31] The seeress prepared for prophesy through "a rule of complete purity," retreating for three days to fast and sacrifice. She then descended to the innermost, unroofed chamber of the sacred spring. She drank from its waters; some say she placed her feet in them, others that she wetted the hem of her robe. Then the oracle sat on a cylindrical stone axon, breathing water vapor from the sacred pool while a choir sang. She held a sacred laurel wand that filled her

with divine light, in the words of Iamblichus. Questioners stood at the threshold of the holy of holies to hear the oracle's response. [Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Lucian, in Fontenrose, 197-8. He thinks the stone axis at Didyma may have been a tripod, citing Constantine's reference to the oracles of the tripods.]

According to Herodotus, Didyma's temple predated Greek colonization of Asia Minor. Later, statues of both men and women of the priestly Branchidae family lined the Sacred Way, a long processional road leading from Miletos to the temple. It's often assumed, from legendary geneologies, that the oracle was founded by a man named Branchos and was originally masculine. But this tradition is late and attempts to Hellenize the Anatolian origins of the shrine. [Parke, 123] In any case, Persian invaders destroyed the Didyma temple in 493, interrupting its traditions for a century and a half. The consensus seems to be that priestesses had taken over this oracle by Hellenistic times, on the Delphic model. [Connelly, 80] Roman-era accounts describe female prophets at Didyma, and several inscriptions refer to female *prophetis*. [Maurizio, 85 n. 97]

Only one name—Tryphosa—has survived of the Didyma priestesses, though city and temple decrees listed the names of the male priests. [Lane, 223] In the same way, only a few names of the Pythias have come down to us: Phemenoë, Xenocleia, Themistoclea, Aristonicé, Clea, and Herophile. The stories of the priestesses themselves are veiled from history.

CASSANDRA , PROPHETESS OF TROY

In epics and plays, the seeress confronted obstacles and moral dilemmas. The prophecies of the Trojan princess Cassandra went unheeded, and she was seen as a madwoman. Her father imprisoned her on the citadel walls to silence her, and later promised her to a man whose armies Troy needed for its defense. When the city fell, Cassandra was forced to become the concubine of Agamemnon, the "destroyer of her family and city." [Pomeroy, 110]

Legend said that Apollo had conferred second-sight on Cassandra because of her beauty, but became angry when she refused to his sexual advances. He spat into her mouth, and ordained that others would never believe in the truth of her prophecies. A different legend said that Cassandra and her twin brother played in a temple of Apollo while their family celebrated their birthday. The parents had too much wine and forgot them there overnight. In the morning, Hecuba returned to the temple and found the sacred serpents licking their eyes and ears, "purging with their tongues the sense organs of the children." They conferred the power of prophecy on Cassandra and Helenus, though little more is told of the brother. [Pseudo-Apollodorus 1.9.11, scholia n. 2; Frazer note on Apollodorus, Vol II, 48]

Cassandra, the daughter of king Priam and queen Hecuba of Troy, is described in the Iliad as a priestess of Athena. Her first prophecy declared that

her newborn brother Paris would cause the destruction of Troy. Later, she insisted that Paris should not be allowed to sail off to claim Helen. Her warnings of the coming disaster of the Greek invasion were ignored. Well into the war, no one heeded her warnings and lamentations as they dragged the Trojan horse into the citadel. She predicted her own enslavement to Agamemnon, his death and her own, and the fall of his house of Atreus. The Homeric epics and the Athenian dramatists all show her prophecies coming true.

Greek artists loved to paint Cassandra taking refuge in Athena's temple, clinging to her statue, at the moment when Ajax took her captive. They dwelt on the imminent rape by depicting the prophetess, not in the robes of a Trojan princess and priestess, but naked or nearly so, even with her legs spread. The Greek warriors assumed that Ajax had raped Cassandra in the temple, which he denied. Then king Agamemnon claimed Cassandra as his slave-concubine and took her home to Mycenae.

As Aeschylus told it, Cassandra did not respond to queen Clytemnestra's welcome, but remained silent and refused to get out of the wagon. After the royal couple entered the palace, the seeress began lamenting to Apollo: Aiee! Suddenly she cried out that the fire was upon her, and began to prophesy. She saw with her inner eye Clytemnestra killing Agamemnon in his bath—"such boldness! a woman to slay a man!"—and that she herself would be slain with a double axe. [*Agamemnon*, 1231] She saw into the past, all the crimes that had been committed within the house of Atreus, and predicted its coming downfall.

Lisa Maurizio offers interesting observations about Cassandra's style of prophecy, as described in epics and plays. The seeress enters the ecstatic state with moans and incoherent speech and then moves into poetic prophecy. She uses animal metaphors to deliver her message—a symbolic language that has parallels in other cultures. [Maurizio,] Animals also figure in the symbolism of prophecy itself, especially serpents and bees, and in the ceremonies of Greek goddesses, and the priestesses who lead them.

SNAKE PRIESTESSES

Delphi was not the only shrine connected with serpents. Snake oracles can be traced back to at least the second millennium BCE, with the famous Cretan statuettes holding snakes coiled around their arms and seals showing women worshipping a snake-crowned goddess.

Priestess with serpent, Mycenae, circa 1300



Serpent vessels with female figures suggest similar ceremonies in Attica around 650 BCE. Even older are the Cretan and Canaanite “snake tubes,” used as stands for vessels receiving libations to the goddess, also found in Sudan.

Serpent dancers are recorded in Asia Minor, where the Phrygian priestess of Sabazios slipped a live golden snake into her robes and to the ground: the “god through the bosom.” [Clement of Alexandria, in Thomson, 235] Snake-priestesses also persisted in classical Greece.

A maiden priestess tended snakes at a grove sanctuary in Epiros. Only she could enter their circular enclosure. Every year she performed a divinatory rite in which she came to them naked with an offering of honey cakes. “Now if when the priestess comes near them the snakes are seen to be gentle, and if they take to their food kindly, that is taken to mean that there will be a plentiful year and free from disease; but if they frighten her, and do not take the honey-cakes she offers them, then they portend the reverse.” [Aelian, in Harrison, 429] This snake was said to be descended from the Delphic Python. [Connelly, 80]

In Elis, a line of priestesses fed a snake that lived in the archaic hillside sanctuary of Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth. An old woman was chosen every year to bring water to bathe the infant snake Sosipolis and to offer barley-cakes made with honey. Other women waited outside, burning incense and singing hymns. [Harrison, 240] Another “great snake” was kept in the shrine of Erectheus at the Acropolis, whose guardian it was. Athena wore its emblem on her breastplate. During the Persian invasion, many people fled Athens after the snake refused its monthly honey-cake. [Harrison, 267]



The old oracular traditions had impressive staying powers, even after the new gods displaced the original tutelary goddess. Dio Chrysostom wrote of his encounter with an old peasant woman, guardian of a shrine of Zeus near Olympia. The Mother of the Gods had gifted her with the prophetic art, and farmers came to consult her about crops and animals. [Thomson, 289] Even in the terrain claimed by Zeus, it was still the ancient Earth Mother who was the source of divine foresight.

MELISSAE

Like snakes and doves, bees also possessed oracular power. The sancrosanct *pangeis* priestesses of the women's Mysteries at Eleusis were called *melissae*, “bees.” Little is known about them, except that they lived apart from men. [Pomeroy, 75-7] Priestesses of Demeter and Persephone also carried the title *melissae*, as did Aphrodite in her Sicilian temple at Eryx. For Porphyry, the bee title of Demeter’s priestesses signified their initiation into “the mysteries of

the terrene goddess.” [Porphyry, “On the Cave of the Nymphs,” 8] *Melissa* was also a title of the Pythias. Pindar sang that the Pythia was known as the Delphic bee. [*Pythian Ode* IV, 62] The omphalos stone was shaped like a beehive, and bees were said to have made the second temple of Delphi out of honeycomb and feathers, as Pausanias related. [Fontenrose 1957:428]

No direct mention of *melissae* survives at the Artemision at Ephesos, although the male priests were called *essenoi*, “drones,” and the goddess herself was drenched in bee-symbolism. Bees were carved on her robes and ornaments, such as the golden bee pins circa 700 BCE, and small plaques with bees and flowers found at the Ephesian Artemision. The first known coins were bee-stamped electrum coins of Ephesos, circa 550 BCE. Later, bronze *tesserae* showed a bee on one side, and the stag of Artemis on the other. These were not coins, but perhaps ritual tokens, on which the word beeswax can be made out. Hilda Ransome thought that they were connected with the mysteries of Artemis. She quoted a line from a lost play of Aeschylus, *The Priestesses*: “Hold your peace! the beekeepers are at hand to open the house of Artemis.” [Ransome, 58-60, quotesvw Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1283]

Ransome assembled considerable documentation of bee-goddess iconography: ornaments showing bees with women’s heads, like the golden plaques from Cameiros, Rhodes, and the gold pins from Thera, and pin heads in the Pelopponese with bees between spirals lodged between the forepaws of lions, or rosebuds, bees, lions and sphinxes. Ransome found that the goddesses Rhea, Demeter, Cybele, and Selene were named as Bee. [Ransome, 59-60]



Bee coin from Ephesus (stag on reverse)

The first *melissae* were nymphs who discovered honey, and who themselves were symbolized by or described as bees. Ancient sources often speak of bees in relation to goddesses and nymphs. Vergil wrote that to attract swarming bees, “They clash the cymbals of the Great Mother.” [Baring and Cashford, 119] A Greek myth said that the nymphs tried to stop people from eating flesh and convince them to eat fruit instead. “One of these nymphs, *Melissa* by name, first discovered the use of the honeycomb and how to prepare mead by mixing honey with water, and she taught these arts to the other nymphs; it was from this *Melissa*, the myth says, that the bees got their name.” [Ransome, 96] Bees in their larval stages are still called nymphs, from the ancient Greek nomenclature. [Pollux 2.147, in Ransome, 96 n. 1]

A celebrated passage in the *Odyssey* describes a Cave of the Nymphs, where bees circulate around fine stone honeypots, “like nectar pure.” The

nymphs weave purple webs on stone beams. Perpetual waters stream through the grotto, which mortals enter from the north and immortals from the auspicious southern direction. At the crest of rock above the cave is an olive tree, the fateful *Moria* of Athena. [*Odyssey*, XIII. 104]

In Porphyry's exegesis of these verses, the portals are the gates of Cancer and Capricorn, through which souls descend and ascend. The stone columns represent bones, and the purple tissues flesh. So Porphyry saw this scene as symbolizing the generation of human life. He comments that the Cave symbolizes "all invisible powers." Thus, "Ceres educated Proserpine with her Nymphs in a cave," and the cave nymphs proffer "fountains of intellectual waters (according to the divine voice of the Muses), which are the progeny of a terrene spirit." Porphyry adds that the ancients called souls "bees," and he recalls the Greek custom of offering libations of milk mixed with honey to the dead. [Porphyry, 3-11]

Honey was one of the main ingredients in libations, often mixed with milk or wine or oil. The Greeks called offerings of milk and honey "sober" sacrifices, without wine and meat, and believed the bees themselves to be sober. These libations were so deeply engrained in women's ceremony that the Orthodox Church was still struggling to stamp them out in the 7th century.



The bee nymphs bring us back to the divinatory *thryiai* at Delphi. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* describes them as "holy ones, sisters born—three virgins gifted with wings: their heads are besprinkled with white meal, and they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus." [lines 553-63] The poem sets apart these pollen-crowned "teachers of divination" as preceding Apollo's claims on the prophetic arts. "From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honey-comb and bringing all things to pass." [*Homer: Hymn to Hermes*, Online: <www.piney.com/ClassHomHymHermes.html>] These verses imply that the three sisters are fateful goddesses, rather than human oracles.

Adrienne Mayor has interpreted the passage that follows as a reference to the oracular bees as "women who revealed the future while under the influence of 'maddening' fresh honey." They entered prophetic ecstasy by eating the "food of the gods," *meli chloron* (green honey). [Mayor, 40]

**Divinely maddened, they are inspired to speak the truth
But if they are deprived of the divine honeycomb
They cannot prophesy.**

Mayor presents evidence that this "mad" honey was unripe, "green" honey from rhododendrons that contained psychoactive grayanotoxins. (*Meli chloron* can be translated as "green," "fresh," or "yellow" honey.) She notes that the *Hymn*

compares the prophetic frenzy of the *melissae* to the transports of maenads. According to Euripides, the maenads waved “wands flowing with honey,” and drank mead (honey wine) which sent them into a prophetic madness. This *meli maenomenon* (“mad” or “raving” honey) was known to the natural historian Pliny. Xenophon described how Anatolians used it to incapacitate a Persian army. Centuries later, they used it to poison Roman troops.

Modern Turks call the psychotropic honey *deli bal*. They take it in small doses as a tonic, and use it to punch up alcoholic drinks. In the Caucasus, too, people spiked their liquor with Pontic azalea honey. [Mayor, 33-40] However, Mayor's interpretation turns on her translation of the *Hymn to Hermes*. A more conventional rendition runs, “And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth; but if they be deprived of the gods' sweet food, then they speak falsely, as they swarm in and out together.”

Lucan's rather late Roman-era account says that the Pythia chewed laurel leaves to enter trance, but no early sources mention this. Lucan is also the often-quoted source for sensationalist claims that she went into a frenzy with incoherent cries. [Dempsey, 55 n.1; Fontenrose, 198 has Lucian] We've seen that the Greek name for bay laurel was *daphne*. Mayor points out that other species of daphne such as rhododaphne or rhododendron contain hallucinogenic grayanotoxins. So do oleander and azaleas, whose names the ancients often confused with laurel and rhododendron. The Romans may not have meant bay laurel, but another plant of the Daphne genus. Some of these plants are highly toxic, and chewing their leaves could easily be fatal. But it is possible that a lesser quantity of grayanotoxins contained in honey might have been used to attain trance states. [Mayor, 33-40; Fontenrose, 198, on Didyma.] Or it could be that seers attained religious ecstasies simply by eating the sacred food of the Moirae. But there is another explanation.

PROPHETIC BREATHS

Post-classical Greco-Roman authors speculated that the Pythias' trances were caused by fumes rising from a chasm deep in the earth. They describe them as “breaths,” “exhalations,” or “vapor.” Plutarch, himself a Delphic priest, saw these chthonic breaths as imbued with divine power and governed by daimonic guardians who regulated their flow. [Dempsey, 57, note 3, and 58] He described how sweet-smelling vapors occasionally emerged from rocks beneath the *adyton*, the holy of holies. [Moralia, 437c] These “exhalations” occurred irregularly and varied in intensity, and demanded careful oversight of the signs and of the Pythias' physical state. The prophecy can not take place unless a sign is given that the conditions are right. [*De Defectu Oraculorum*, in Wesley Smith, 414-417]

Plutarch's *De defectu oraculorum* looks for naturalistic reasons for the decline of the oracle's prophetic power in his time. He offers two explanations:

first, that it was caused by a decline in culture. Second, it was caused by changes in the terrestrial exhalations. Divine breaths from the earth were the original source of the prophecy, before Apollo. Plutarch is more concerned with Apollo, and he points to a Delphian belief that Apollo worked through the breaths. He says that “the prophetic current or breath is very divine and holy, whether it is sent through the air by itself or out of flowing water.” [*De def. orac.* 324d, in Smith, 418]

Our concept of “inspiration” means literally to “breathe in.” This divine in-breathing leads to *enthusiasm*, which originally meant “in the divine.” Plutarch invokes the metaphor of a whirlpool that causes a wood chip to move, while it resists sinking: “Thus, what we call *enthousiasmos* is a combining of two motive forces, the one to which the soul submits in being moved, and the other which is inherent in the soul itself.” [*De def. orac.* 404f] Wesley Smith adds, “The figure of the whirlpool comes out of time-honored conceptions of mania as a whirling of the soul or mind.” He offers as example the prophetess Cassandra, whose ordinary consciousness became submerged when the propetic state was upon her. [Smith, 422]

The ancient Greeks often spoke of deities or daimons (natural forces) breathing ideas, grace, courage, or madness into humans. In the most famous example, the goddess Demeter infuses her “sweet breath” into a child in order to confer immortality on him. The *Odyssey* shows Penelope casting about for a way to stave off a troop of aggressive suitors; a divine breath reveals to her how she can delay them by saying that she must first weave a shroud for her father-in-law (which she unravels by night). [Smith, 419-20]

Plutarch was not the only ancient writer to attribute the oracle's decline to the disappearance of these inspirational gases. [Frazer cites Diodorus Siculus, xvi, 26; Strabo ix, 3, 5; Pausanias, x, 5, 7; and Justin xxiv, 6, 6-9, in his notes on Apollodorus, p 10-11] For most of the 20th century, scholars scoffed at this idea, chalking it up to ancient superstition. But a recent study by geologist Jelle De Boer and archaeologist John Hale has corroborated the old theory of chthonic vapors. They found that two geological faults intersect beneath the Delphic sanctuary, and that the crushing of bituminous limestone in this highly active seismic zone could have caused emission of hydrocarbon gases such as methane and ethylene. The latter is sweet-smelling, corresponding to Plutarch's description, and it causes euphoria and a sensation of floating. [De Boer, J.Z., Hale, J.R. and Chanton, J., “New evidence of the geological origins of the ancient Delphic oracle (Greece),” *Geology*, #29, 2001, pp 707-710; see also Broad, William, “Greek Oracle Fueled by Vapors,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2002]

Large doses of these gases can be fatal, as borne out by ancient reports of occasional deaths of Pythias in the sacred chamber. Plutarch cited one case which he attributed to the priestess being forced to mount the tripod against her will. The *prophetes* Nikandros related to him how the sacrificial goat had not responded to the libation by shivering. The priests continued pouring, attempting against

temple law to force the animal to give the go-ahead. The Pythia refused to proceed, but was forced into the *adyton*. She was seized by an “incoherent and evil inspiration.” She became distraught, “and with a terrifying scream ran toward the exit and threw herself down.” Soon she was dead. [Dempsey, 68; Connelly, 78] Similar symptoms have been observed from ethylene gas overdoses.

What is missing from the writings about the female oracles is any female testimony or cultural context. Lisa Maurizio points out that the gaps in our knowledge are due to our male sources’ limited interest, “if not hostility” toward women’s activities—as well as their lack of access to women’s ritual life. But she brings forward a stunning fragment from a lost play of Euripides. The title character, Melanippe, asserts women’s superiority to men and bears witness to prophecy as a female sphere of power:

In regard to matters concerning the gods—and I judge these matters to be foremost—we women hold the greatest share. In the houses of Phoibus Apollo, women prophesy the mind of Loxias. Around the pure steps in Dodona by the holy oak, the female race reveals the thoughts of Zeus to those from Greece desiring to know his will. [Dione is already eclipsed here.] Rites in honor of the Moirai and the nameless goddesses are accomplished; these rites are not holy among men, but among women they prosper. All female rites are just in respect to the gods. How is it possible that the female race has an evil reputation? [Euripides, *Melanippe Fragment*, in Maurizio, 85]

That’s an impressive statement, put in the mouth of a female character by a male playwright. Melanippe’s protest is significant and raises still more questions for us: What was the culture of the women of Delphi, from whom all Pythias came? How did they grow up, how were they chosen, how instructed, where did they live and who did they associate with? The male sources, both ancient and modern, show a complete vacuum, but I consider this unlikely. As Maurizio shows with an impressive body of anthropological backup, inspired ritual behavior occurs in a cultural context. [Maurizio, 80ff] The speech of Melanippe reorients us toward female rites which modern scholars attempt to reconstruct with limited sources and even more limited success.

At some point women were barred from the sanctuary, but we know little about what the women of Delphi did. What were their traditions, what did they teach their daughters about becoming a Pythia, how did they prepare them? All the accounts we possess are written by a masculine elite, who by all accounts were kept far from the rites and stories of women. And the further back in time we go, the less Greek culture resembles anything we have been taught about it.