Encounters at Delphi

Rosicrucian Library Research Staff

Over the millennium of its activity, the Oracle at Delphi gave advice to those from many walks of life, with sometimes surprising results. Collected here are some of these Oracular responses, as recorded by ancient historians and supplicants of the Oracle. [1]

μηδὲν ἄγαν
Nothing in Excess

Know Thyself

One of the great inscriptions at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi was *Gnothi Seauton* ("Know Thyself"). Sages have debated its meaning and achievability for the thousands of years since prophecy began at Delphi:

"When he was asked what was very difficult, Thales said, 'To know one's self.' And what was easy, 'To advise another.' What was most pleasant? 'To be successful.' To the question, 'What is the divinity?' he replied 'That which has neither beginning nor end.'"[2]

"There are two sentences inscribed upon the Delphic oracle, hugely accommodated to the usages of a human being's life, *Know thyself*, and *Nothing too much*; and upon these all other precepts depend. They themselves accord and harmonize with each other, and each seems to illustrate the energy of the other; for in *Know thyself* is included *Nothing too much*; and so again in the latter is comprised *Know thyself*. And Ion hath spoken of it thus: —

> 'This sentence, *Know thyself*, is
> but a word;
> But only Jove himself could do
> the thing.'

"And thus Pindar: —

> 'This sentence brief, *Do nothing*
> *to excess*,
> The Wise have always praised
> exceedingly.'

"They therefore that have impressed these upon their minds as the precepts of the Pythian oracle, can easily conform themselves to all the affairs of life, and bear them handsomely; considering their nature, so that they are neither lifted up to arrogance upon a prosperous event, nor when an adverse happens, are dejected into complaint through pusillanimity and that fear of death which is so congenial to us; both which proceed from the ignorance of those things which fall out in human life by necessity and fatal decree."[3]

"The maxim 'Know thyself' comes down to us from the skies; it should be imprinted in the heart, and stored in the memory."[4]

Take Council with the Majority

"In the city are graves of Megarians. They made one for those who died in the Persian invasion, and what is called the Aesymnium (Shrine of Aesymnus) was also a tomb of heroes. When Agamemnon's son Hyperion, the last king of Megara, was killed by Sandion for his greed and violence, they resolved no longer to be ruled by one king, but to have elected magistrates and to obey one another in turn.

"Then Aesymnus, who had a reputation second to none among the Megarians, came to the god in Delphi and asked in what way they could be prosperous. The oracle in its reply said that they would fare well if they took counsel with the majority. This utterance they took to refer to the dead, and built a council chamber in this place in order

that the grave of their heroes might be within it."[5]

The Sky Will Not Fall

"Podalirius went to Delphi and inquired of the oracle where he should settle; and on receiving an oracle that he should settle in the city where, if the encompassing heaven were to fall, he would suffer no harm, he settled in that place of the Carian Chersonnese which is encircled by mountains all round the horizon."[6]

The Reward for Hospitality (Sixth Century BCE)

"In the Chersonnese then the Phoenicians made themselves masters of all the other cities except the city of Cardia. Of these cities up to that time Miltiades the son of Kimon, the son of Stesagoras, had been despot, Miltiades the son of Kypselos having obtained this government in the manner which here follows:—

"The inhabitants of this Chersonnese were Dolonkian Thracians; and these Dolonkians, being hard pressed in war by the Apsinthians, sent their kings to Delphi to consult the Oracle about the war. And the Pythian prophetess answered them that they must bring into their land as founder of a settlement the man who should first offer them hospitality as they returned from the temple. The Dolonkians then passed along the Sacred Road through the land of the Phokians and of the Bœotians, and as no man invited them, they turned aside and came to Athens.

"Now at that time in Athens the government was held by Peisistratos, but Miltiades also the son of Kypselos had some power, who belonged to a family which kept four-horse chariot teams, and who was descended originally from Aiacos and Egina, though in more recent times his family was Athenian, Philaios the son of Ajax having been the first of his house who became an Athenian. This Miltiades was sitting in the entrance of his own dwelling, and seeing the Dolonkians going by with dress that was not of the native Athenian fashion and with spears, he shouted to them; and when they approached, he offered them lodging and hospitality. They then having accepted and having been entertained by him, proceeded to declare all the utterances of the Oracle; and having declared it they asked him to do as the god had said: and Miltiades when he heard it was at once disposed to agree, because he was vexed by the rule of Peisistratos and desired to be removed out of the way.

"He set out therefore forthwith to Delphi to inquire of the Oracle whether he should do that which the Dolonkians asked of him, and as the Pythian prophetess also bade him do so, Miltiades the son of Kypselos, who had before this been victor at Olympia with a four-horse chariot, now taking with him of the Athenians everyone who desired to share in the expedition, sailed with the Dolonkians and took possession of the land: and they who had invited him to come to them made him despot over them."[7]

Dead or Alive: Aesop's Delphi Tale (Sixth Century BCE)

"A Rogue laid a wager that he would prove the Oracle at Delphi to be untrustworthy by procuring from it a false reply to an inquiry by himself. So he went to the temple on the appointed day with a small bird in his hand, which he concealed under the folds of his cloak, and asked whether what he held in his hand were alive or dead. If the Oracle said 'dead,' he meant to produce the bird alive: if the reply was 'alive,' he intended to wring its neck and show it to be dead. But the Oracle was too much for him, for the answer he got was this:

. . . the Oracles
declared to Croesus
that if he should march
against the Persians
he would destroy
a great empire . . .

'Stranger, whether the thing that you hold in your hand be alive or dead is a matter that depends entirely on your own will.'"[8]

Croesus (595-547 BCE)

"And to the Lydians whom he sent to make trial of the Oracles he gave charge as follows,—that from the day on which they set out from Sardis they should reckon up the number of the days following and on the hundredth day they should consult the Oracles, asking what Crœsus the son of Alyattes king of the Lydians chanced then to be doing: and whatever the Oracles severally should prophesy, this they should cause to be written down and bear it back to him.

"Now what the other Oracles prophesied is not by any reported, but at Delphi, so soon as the Lydians entered the sanctuary of the temple to consult the god and asked that which they were commanded to ask, the Pythian prophetess spoke thus in hexameter measure:

"'But the number of sand I know, and the measure of drops in the ocean;
The dumb man I understand, and I hear the speech of the speechless:
And there hath come to my soul the smell of a strong-shelled tortoise
Boiling in caldron of bronze, and the flesh of a lamb mingled with it;
Under it bronze is laid, it hath bronze as a clothing upon it.'

"When the Pythian prophetess had uttered this oracle, the Lydians caused the prophecy to be written down, and went away at once to Sardis. And when the rest also who had been sent round were there arrived with the answers of the Oracles, then Crœsus unfolded the writings one by one and looked upon them: and at first none of them pleased him, but when he heard that from Delphi, forthwith he did worship to the god and accepted the answer, judging that the Oracle at Delphi was the only true one, because it had found out what he himself had done.

"For when he had sent to the several Oracles his messengers to consult the gods, keeping well in mind the appointed day he contrived the following device, he thought of something which it would be impossible to discover or to conceive of, and cutting up a tortoise and a lamb he boiled them together himself in a cauldron of bronze, laying a cover of bronze over them."

[On another occasion] "Crœsus gave charge that they should ask the Oracles this question also,—whether Crœsus should march against the Persians . . . They inquired thus, and the answers of both the Oracles agreed in one, declaring to Crœsus that if he should march against the Persians he would destroy a great empire . . . ."

[When Croesus does attack the Persians, he is defeated, and it is his Empire that is destroyed. The Persian King Cyrus then asks him:] " 'Crœsus, tell me who of all was it who persuaded thee to march upon my land and so to become an enemy to me instead of a friend?'

"And he said: 'O king, I did this to thy felicity and to my own misfortune, and the cause of this was the god of the Hellenes, who incited me to march with my army. For

no one is so senseless as to choose of his own will war rather than peace, since in peace the sons bury their fathers, but in war the fathers bury their sons. But it was pleasing, I suppose, to the divine powers that these things should come to pass thus.'

"Crœsus sent certain of the Lydians to Delphi, enjoining them to lay the fetters upon the threshold of the temple and to ask the god whether he felt no shame that he had incited Crœsus by his prophecies to march upon the Persians, persuading him that he should bring to an end the empire of Cyrus, seeing that these were the first-fruits of spoil which he had won from it—at the same time displaying the fetters. This they were to ask, and moreover also whether it was thought right by the gods of the Hellenes to practice ingratitude.

"When the Lydians came and repeated that which they were enjoined to say, it is related that the Pythian prophetess spoke as follows: 'The fated destiny it is impossible even for a god to escape . . . And as to the oracle which was given, Crœsus finds fault with good ground: for Loxias told him beforehand that if he should march upon the Persians he should destroy a great empire: and he upon hearing this, if he wished to take counsel well, ought to have sent and asked further whether the god meant his own empire or that of Cyrus: but as he did not comprehend that which was uttered and did not ask again, let him pronounce himself to be the cause of that which followed . . . . '

"Thus the Pythian prophetess replied to the Lydians, and they brought the answer back to Sardis and repeated it to Crœsus; and he, when he heard it, acknowledged that the fault was his own and not that of the god."[9]

Solon (ca. 590 BCE)

"Thus, there being great hopes on both sides, the chief men pressed Solon to take the government into his own hands, and, when he was once settled, manage the business freely and according to his pleasure; and many of the commons, perceiving it would be a difficult change to be effected by law and reason, were willing to have one wise and just man set over the affairs; and some say that Solon had this oracle from Apollo:

" 'Take the mid-seat, and be the vessel's guide;
Many in Athens are upon your side.' "[10]

Solon then chose to institute a series of even-handed reforms in Athens that would be the eventual basis of the city's democracy. He preserved the landowners' holdings, while cancelling the debts of the poor. He outlawed debtors' enslavement. He increased the power of the citizens' legislature, and abolished the severe laws of Draco. Thus he obeyed the oracle, for his own good, and that of Athens.[11]

Athens Seeks the Oracle's Aid (480 BCE)

When an Athenian delegation asked how to defend against Persian attacks, the Oracle gave dire warnings, but also some glimmer of hope:

" 'Athena cannot prevail to appease great Zeus in Olympus,
Though she with words very many and wiles close-woven entreat him.
But I will tell thee this more, and will clench it with steel adamantine:
Then when all else shall be taken, whatever the boundary of Kecrops
Holds within, and the dark ravines of divinest Kithairon,
A bulwark of wood at the last Zeus grants to the Trito-born goddess (Athena)
Sole to remain unwasted, which thee and thy children shall profit . . . .'

[and later, as Herodotus explains:]

". . . Meanwhile the citizens of Delphi consulted the Oracle of the god on behalf of themselves and on behalf of Hellas, being struck with dread; and a reply was given them that they should pray to the Winds, for these would be powerful helpers of Hellas in fight."[12]

During the Persian attacks, it was the "bulwark" of wooden ships, and the great winds at the Battle of Artemesium which were credited with the weakening of the Persian forces and their eventual defeat at Salamis.

The God, Called or Uncalled (Fifth Century BCE)

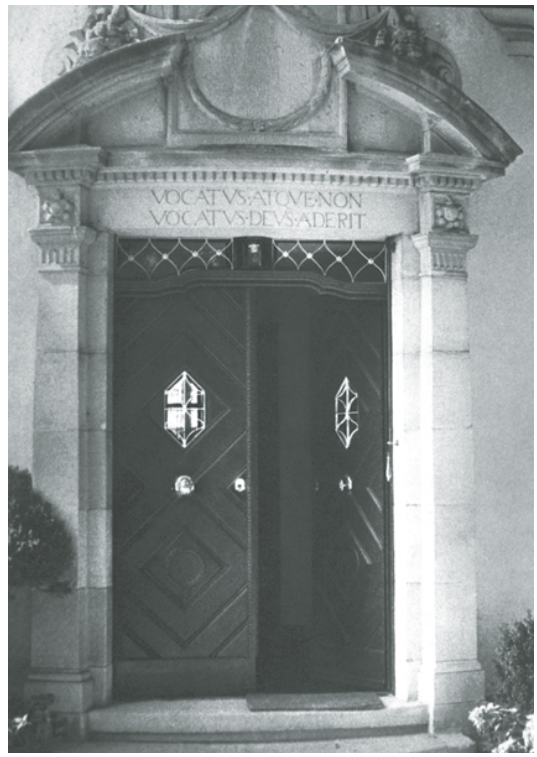
In the preparations for the Peloponnesian War, the Lacedaemonians (Spartans) made inquiry with Delphi as to their cause:

"And though the Lacedaemonians had made up their own minds on the fact of the breach of the treaty and the guilt of the Athenians, yet they sent to Delphi and inquired of the God whether it would be well with them if they went to war; and, as it is reported, received from him the answer that if they put their whole strength into the war, victory would be theirs, and the promise that he himself would be with them, whether invoked or uninvoked." [13]

This expression of the Oracle made a lasting impression on history. The Emperor Julian II wrote to his friend, the historian Sallust:

"God on his side will not fail us, but in the words of the Oracle once given of old, 'Invoked or uninvoked, God will be present with us.'"[14]

And in the twentieth century, the psychologist and mystic Carl Gustav Jung had the Latin version of this Delphic statement engraved above the doorway of his home:



Jung's Doors with the Delphic maxim "Vocatus atque non Vocatus, Deus Aderit" inscribed above. Photo ©Tim Gidal. Every effort has been made to find the rights holder.

VOCATUS ATQUE NON
VOCATUS DEUS ADERIT

When questioned, Jung gave his reasons for this inscription:

". . . it is cut in stone over the door of my house in Küsnacht near Zurich and otherwise found in Erasmus's collection of the Adagia[15] (XVIth cent.). It is a Delphic Oracle though. It says: yes, the god will be on the spot, but in what form and to what purpose? I have put the inscription there to remind my patients and myself: *Timor dei initium sapientiae* (Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom). Here another not less important road begins, not the approach to 'Christianity' but to God himself and this seems to be the ultimate question."[16]

Socrates (469 - 399 BCE)

In addition to his own life-changing encounter with Delphi related in "Socrates

Impoverished and Enriched" elsewhere in this issue, Socrates also highly valued the divine state reached by the Pythias at Delphi:

"It might be so if madness were simply an evil; but there is also a madness which is a divine gift, and the source of the greatest blessings granted to humanity. For prophecy is a madness, and the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona when out of their senses have conferred great benefits on Greece, both in public and private life, but when in their senses few or none. And I might also tell you how the Sibyl and other inspired persons have given to many a one many an intimation of the future which has saved them from falling."[17]

Cicero (106-43 BCE)

"And now when Cicero, full of expectation, was again bent upon political affairs, a certain oracle blunted the edge of his inclination; for consulting the god of Delphi how he should attain most glory, the Pythoness answered, by making his own genius and not the opinion of the people the guide of his life.

"Therefore at first he passed his time in Rome cautiously, and was very backward in pretending to public offices, so that he was at that time in little esteem, and had got the names, so readily given by low and ignorant people in Rome, of Greek and Scholar. But when his own desire of fame and the eagerness of his father and relations had made him take in earnest to pleading, he made no slow or gentle advance to the first place, but shone out in full luster at once, and far surpassed all the advocates of the bar."[18]

Dio Chrysostom (ca. 40-120 CE)

"I decided to go to the god's temple myself and consult him, as a competent adviser, according to the ancient custom of the Greeks. For surely, thought I, if he gives competent advice about sickness and, if children are not born to a person, about childlessness, and about harvests, he will not show any less ability about such a case as mine.

"And then when I consulted him, he gave me a strange sort of reply and one not easy to interpret. For he bade me to keep on doing with all zeal the very thing wherein I am engaged, as being a most honorable and useful activity, 'until you come,' said he, 'to the uttermost parts of the earth.' And yet lying is a harsh thing to impute and not consistent with even a human being's standards, to say nothing of a god's.

"Accordingly I reflected that Odysseus after all his wanderings did not hesitate to roam once more, when he carried an oar as Teiresias, a man dead and gone, had advised him, until he should fall in with people who knew not the sea, even by hearsay; and should not I follow his example if God so bade?

"So after exhorting myself in this way neither to fear nor be ashamed of my action, and putting on humble attire and otherwise chastening myself, I proceeded to roam everywhere. And those whom I met, on catching sight of me, would sometimes call me a tramp and sometimes a beggar, though some did call me a philosopher.

"From this it came about gradually and without any planning or any self-conceit on my part that I acquired this name. Now the great majority of those styled philosophers proclaim themselves such, just as the Olympian heralds proclaim the victors; but in my case, when the other folk applied this name to me, I was not able always and in all instances to have the matter out with them. And very likely, as it turned out, I did profit somewhat by the general report about me. For many would approach me and ask what was my opinion about good and evil. As a result I was forced to think

. . . there is also a madness which is a divine gift,

and the source of the greatest blessings granted to humanity.

Socrates speaking of the Oracles at Delphi

about these matters that I might be able to answer my questioners."[19]

A Tale from Aelian (175 - 235 CE)

"Three young men of the same city, having been sent to Delphi to consult the Oracle, fell among thieves. One of them ran away and escaped; the second having killed all the thieves but one, missed the last, and ran his sword through his companion by accident. To him that ran away the Pythia gave this Oracle:

"'You allowed your companion to be slain: I will not answer you, leave my Temple.'

"To the other requesting an answer, the Pythia gave this:

"'You slew your friend by accident in his defense: Clearer than ever is your Innocence.'"[20]

The End of the Oracle (Fourth-Fifth Centuries CE)

It is said that the Emperor Diocletian sent an emissary to Delphi in 302 CE to ask about his proposed persecution of the Christian sect, as he had earlier persecuted the Manichaeans. The Oracle's response is reported in Eusebius:

"About that time it is said that Apollo spoke from a deep and gloomy cavern, and through the medium of no human voice, and declared that the righteous ones on earth were a bar to his speaking the truth, and accordingly that the oracles from the tripod were fallacious. Hence it was that he suffered his tresses to droop in token of grief, and mourned the evils which the loss of the oracular spirit would entail for humanity."[21]

Diocletian then proceeded with his campaign against the Christians. It was so severe in Egypt that Coptic Christians still today number their calendar from the "Era of Diocletian." Nevertheless, Christianity was tolerated in the Empire by Emperor Constantine I, and then grew rapidly in power and influence.

In 361 and 362, the Emperor Julian II, the last Imperial practitioner of the Old Religion, attempted a restoration, and is said to have consulted Delphi about reviving the Oracle. By legend, Delphi's response was:

"Say to the King: My beautifully built house has fallen.

"No longer does Phoebus (Apollo) have his dwelling, his prophetic Daimon, or his oracular spring. The water is now dry."[22]

In 389, persecutions of the Old Religion began under the Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius I. In 391, Christianity was made the exclusive state religion, and older temples were closed. Delphi's Pythia was silent; however, her tradition has survived the centuries.

Endnotes

[1] There are several excellent modern collections of the Delphic Oracles, and commentaries on them, including William J. Broad, *The Oracle: The Lost Secrets and Hidden Message of Ancient Delphi* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Joseph Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Roger Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle*, 2 vv. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956); Myron Stagman, *100 Prophecies of the Delphic Oracle* (San Francisco: City State Press, 1999). Parke and Wormell contain the Greek texts, the others have English translations.

[2] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers,* 1.36 (Thales), trans. by C.D. Yonge (London, H. G. Bohn, 1853), http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes/dlthales.htm.

[3] Plutarch, "Consolation to Appolonius" 116D, in *Plutarch's Morals, Translated from the Greek by Several Hands. Corrected and Revised by William W. Goodwin, with an Introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson;* 5 vols., (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1870), http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1211&layout=html#chapter_91420

[4] Juvenal, *Satire* 11.1.28, trans. in G.G. Ramsey, *Juvenal and Persius* (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1918), http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/juvenal_satires_11.htm.

[5] Pausanias, *Description of Greece: Book 1, Attica,* 1.43.3, trans. W.H.S. Jones, Litt.D.; and H.A. Ormerod, M.A.; 4 vols., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Paus.+1.43.1.

[6] Apollodorus, *The Library: Epitome,* 6.18., trans. Sir James George Frazer, Loeb Classical Library, vols. 121-122, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), http://www.theoi.com/Text/ApollodorusE.html#6.

[7] Herodotus, *The Histories*, Translated by G. C. Macaulay, (London and New York: Macmillan, 1890), 6.34-36, http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/hh1040.htm.

[8] *Aesop's Fables: A New Translation by V.S. Vernon Jones, with an introduction by G.K. Chesterton and illustrations by Arthur Rackham* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1912), http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/11339.

[9] Herodotus, *Histories,* 1.47, 53, 87, 90-91.

[10] Plutarch, *Lives,* trans. A.H. Clough, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1902), 14.4, http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext96/plivs10.txt.

[11] Stagman, *100 Prophecies*, 47-48.

[12] Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.141, 178, http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/.

[13] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, book 1, chapter. 5, trans. in Richard Crawley, *The History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1876), http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/plpwr10.txt.

[14] Julian, "To Sallust," from W.C. Wright (trans.), *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, 3vv, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), vol. 2, 250C.

[15] "The Collectanea adagiorum of Erasmus (1466-1536) is a collection of analects from the classical authors. Jung had acquired a 1563 edn. when he was 19." (Note from Jung letter source; see note 16.)

[16] Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé, eds., *C.G. Jung: Letters 1951-1961*, Bollingen Series, vol. 2, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973-75), 611.

[17] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244B, from *The Dialogues of Plato*, 5vv, translated into English with analyses and introductions by B. Jowett, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1871), http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plato/phaedrus.htm.

[18] Plutarch, *Lives*, 7:3.3-5, 5.1-3.

[19] Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses: Discourse Thirteen*, "In Athens, about his Banishment," 13.9-12, trans. J.W. Cohoon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 97-99, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dio_Chrysostom/Discourses/13*.html.

[20] Claudius Aelianus, *Various Histories* 3.44 (trans. in Thomas Stanley, *Claudius Aelianus, His Various History* (London: Thomas Dring ,1665), 63-99. This translation has been adapted for modern readers.

[21] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.50, translated in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, vol. 1, Philip Schaff & Henry Wace, eds., (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886), 512, http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/ecf/201/index.htm.

22 Parke & Wormell, *Delphic Oracle*, vol. II, 194#476.