

ORACLES OF DELPHI

The Ancient Mystery Schools Working Group: Olga Deulofeu, S.R.C., M.A.; Jeannine Klos, S.R.C.; Ronda Mitchell, S.R.C.; Terry Orlikoski, S.R.C., B.S.; Rebecca Richards, S.R.C.; and Lisa Spencer, S.R.C., B.A., M.A.O.M.

This article was created as a special project in Grand Master Julie Scott's Ancient Mystery Schools Online RCUI Classes. Here we learn about the layers of tradition and history that are part of the tradition of Oracles at Delphi.

The origins of the site of the Delphic Oracle are shrouded in a mysterious cloud of history. The sacred women who gave the now-famous prophecies were called *Pythia*, named for the slain protector of the Oracle. According to legend, prior to historical times, a mythic sybil presided at Delphi. Her title, "Sibyl," means prophetess or "one who sees," and comes from the Greek word *sibylla*.

The sibyls were known throughout ancient Greece for their prophetic insights and profound knowledge. The divine source of prophecy and knowledge changed with each invasion that occurred in this area. As we peer through the veil of time, we see the struggle for power played out in the replacement of the original Earth Goddess

worship by the well-known Olympian gods of ancient Greece, with Dionysus and Apollo being the most popular at the site of Delphi.

Gaia/Earth Goddess Worship

Delphi has long been considered a sacred spot in Greece. Delphi was originally dedicated to the Earth Goddess, or Gaia, by the Mycenaeans, who settled in the Delphi area on Mount Parnassos, near the Gulf of Corinth. They maintained care of the shrine to Gaia for more than five hundred years.¹

Originally the site was called *Pytho*, being named after Python, the great serpent which guarded it. Python was the son of Gaia and highly revered in the goddess worship. This may be why serpents were used so prevalently at the shrines, temples, and effigies. The serpent was the symbol of rebirth and regeneration for early Gaia worshippers.

Gaia was highly revered during the pre-Olympian era. Stories of Gaia's creation of the world—along with other female goddesses such as Themis, Aphrodite, Artemis, Leto, Pandora, Selene, Hera, Athena, Demeter, Persephone, and Rhea—abound in the myths, prior to invasions from the north by rival groups. These goddesses were associated with order, wisdom, protection, and the life-giving processes of fertility, which were intimately tied to seasonal changes.²

The goddess myths were originally an oral teaching handed down through the creation myths of the goddesses. Many of the tales of the goddess worship were wiped out or retold, when patriarchal societies invaded and took over the sacred places of the local peoples. Because they had no written language, they were easily restructured, intermingled,



Olga Deulofeu, S.R.C., *Delphi Oracle*,



Michelangelo, *Delphic Sibyl*, Sistine Chapel.

and rewritten by the invading peoples' patriarchal creation myths and written language. The writings of Hesiod and Homer, in the ca. eighth-seventh century BCE, tell of the classical myths of Zeus and the other Olympian gods and goddesses, after the fall of the Gaia worship.³

Interpreters of the Gods

There is a legend that tells of the original founding of the site of Delphi. A shepherd noticed his goats jumping about and emitting strange sounds as they roamed through fumes arising from a fissure in the earth. He told his neighbors and friends about the behavior, and the stories spread. Hearing of the tales, people traveled from all around to see the spectacle.

As people would walk into the fumes, some would go into a trance and start talking strangely, even prophetically; while others were so overcome by the fumes that they threw themselves into the chasm to

their deaths.⁴ The deaths prompted priests to consecrate the site to Gaia and build a wall around the fissure. They appointed a young woman of honorable or noble birth to become the prophetess. She would act as the connection between the oracle and inquirers.

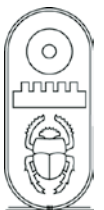
The priestesses appointed came to be known as the *Pytho*, after the sacred serpent Python. They did not inherit this appointed position through aristocratic birth as most other Greek priests and priestesses. They were appointed because of their prophetic abilities.⁵ What we know of the mythic sibyls of ancient times and the Pythia priestesses of Apollo comes from the writings of several well-known Greek authors, such as Heraclitus, Chryssippus, Pausanias, and Plutarch.⁶

Sibyls

The sibyls were mythic prophetesses who existed during legendary times and are believed to have been semi-Divine. Pausanias claimed that the sybil was "born between man and goddess, daughter of sea monsters and an immortal nymph."⁷ He also writes of the first sibyls in Greek history. The first sibyl to chant the oracles was said to be the daughter of Zeus by Lamia, who was the daughter of Poseidon. She was given the name Sibyl by the Libyans.

Pausanias also writes of a woman named Herophile and with the title Sibyl, who would stand on a rock rising above the ground and chant the oracles. Herophile, said to be born before the Trojan War, prophesized in her oracles that Helen would be raised up in Sparta and would be the ruin of Asia and Europe, and that the Greeks would capture Troy for her sake.

Delphians remember a hymn Herophile composed to Apollo. In her poem she calls herself Herophile, but also Artemis, and the wedded wife of Apollo. She also states that she is his sister, and sometimes his daughter. These statements were made in her poetry when in a frenzy and possessed



by the god. Elsewhere in her oracles, she states that her mother was an immortal, one of the nymphs of Ida, while her father was a human.⁸

The sibyls were thought to live nine hundred to one thousand years. Their long life is attributed to a legend about the Cumaean Sibyl who was granted a wish by Apollo. She took a handful of sand and asked to live for as many years as the grains of sand she held.

Because she refused to have sex with Apollo, he granted her wish, but allowed her body to wither with age. As she grew older, her body grew smaller, and eventually was kept in a jar called an *ampulla*, and only her voice was left.⁹ The writings of Heraclitus, a Greek writer during the fifth century BCE, tell how the voice of the sibyl would reach through a thousand years by aid of the god.¹⁰

The Pytho sibyls were renowned for their prophecy for more than five hundred years until the tale of their destruction comes to us through Greek legend when the Olympian god, Apollo, came down from the north and killed the sacred serpent, Python.¹¹ It is thought that this coincided with the invasion from the north by the Ionians, Achaeans, and Dorians, who are thought to have invaded Greece from around 2500-1000 BCE

Apollo at Delphi

We have no evidence for the worship of Apollo at Delphi before the eighth century BCE, when according to tradition the cult of Apollo Delphinios was introduced by priests from Knossos.¹² Delphi received its name from *Delphis*, which is the Greek word for dolphin, because Apollo is said to have appeared in the form of a dolphin.

Delphi is also the Greek word for womb, which distinguishes the dolphin as being a mammal and different from other sea creatures. In Crisa, the coastal port near Delphi, Apollo transformed himself into a handsome youth with long hair and various attributes including a wreath and branch of laurel, bow and quiver, raven and lyre.¹³

According to the Delian tradition, he was born on the seventh day of the month of Thargelion. The seventh and twentieth days of the month, the day of the new moon and the full moon, were held sacred to him. The receiving of an oracle was steeped in ceremony on these sacred days. Apollo was considered the god of sunlight, oracular prophecy and vision, as well as divination, healing, law, order, music, archery, sciences, medicine, moderation, writing, and the god of the Muses in the arts.¹⁴ Apollo is also associated with purification and truth.

After defeating the serpent at Mt. Parnassus, Apollo had to atone for his crime by spending eight years in menial service. After purifying himself, he returned to Delphi and erected his own oracular temple on the place where he had killed the serpent.

One legend says that a stone, called an *omphalos*, was set in the ground to mark the spot where the serpent was killed. The original stone was believed to be a large meteorite from deepest antiquity. The omphalos, which represented the center of the earth for the ancient Greeks, later became the center of the inner sanctum of the shrine of the Delphic oracle.¹⁵



Jeannine Klos, S.R.C., *Underground Oracle*.



Diana Bovée Salyer, *The Oracle of Delphi*, 1950s. Original watercolor painting, 11 x 16.5 in.

The Pythias of Apollo

Apollo thus claimed Delphi for himself and dispersed the Pytho priestesses, replacing them with his own oracles.¹⁶ They became known as *Pythia*, which comes from the Greek word *pythein* meaning “to rot.” This was thought to be from the stench of Python’s body as it decayed in the fissure Apollo had thrown the slain serpent into.

The Pythias are described as a historical caste of priestesses of Apollo at Delphi and were fully human. This is the main distinction between the sibyls and the Pythia. Originally they were young, virgin girls of honorable or noble birth. The Pythia was educated for a long and intense period to condition her, and the Pythia had a sisterhood of Delphi women who supported her and cared for the temple’s sacred area and eternal flame.¹⁷

After an incident of abduction, the young virginal Pythias were replaced by

older mature noble women who began their term of priestess at around the age of fifty. These women still wore the white robes and dressed in the tradition of the original virginal Pythia. Eventually, in later periods, the women chosen to be Pythias came from all social classes and were of all ages and levels of maturity. The one consistent requirement was that she had to be a citizen of Delphi.¹⁸

Apollo, Pneuma, and the Pythias

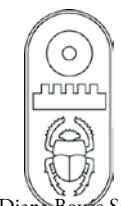
Plutarch (46-120 CE) left an extended eyewitness account of the workings of the Oracle. His writings are considered to be accurate, as he was an active member of the priesthood that oversaw the Oracle of Delphi.

He described the relationships among god, woman, and the gas by likening Apollo to a musician, the woman to his instrument, and the *pneuma* to the plectrum with which he touched her to make her speak. *Pneuma* is translated to mean breath, but is also understood in Greek to be a metaphor describing a non-material being or influence, in this case being Divine.¹⁹

However Plutarch emphasized that the *pneuma* was only a trigger. It was really the preconditioning and purification, which included sexual abstinence and fasting, which made her capable of responding to the exposure of the *pneuma*. An ordinary person could detect the smell of the gas without passing into an oracular trance.²⁰

The Pythia priestess would sit on a tripod situated over the vent above the vapors from below while she inhaled burning bay leaves. She responded to the questions of visitors while in trance. She is said to have spoken in a way that could only be understood and interpreted by the Pythian priests.²¹

In earlier times, her replies would be interpreted and written in hexameter verse, and later they were written in prose.²² These writings were then given to the inquirer to ponder their meaning, and to consider the



creed inscribed on the wall of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, which announced, “Know Thyself.” This phrase has been contemplated and its meaning disputed throughout time by many inquirers and seekers.

Oracles were originally given only on the seventh day of the month as per tradition.²³ Eventually, oracles were given every day, to fulfill the increasing pressure and numbers of inquiries. The exception would be if a bad omen were received during purification by the inquirer or during the purification and sacrificing of the animal prior to the prophetic session.²⁴

The number of priestesses was also increased from one to three to accommodate the increased inquiries. Two of the priestesses would alternate receiving the oracle, while the third was to fill in as needed. In the traditions associated with Apollo, the oracle gave prophecies only between spring and autumn. During the winter months, Apollo was said to have deserted his temple, his place being taken by his divine half-brother, Dionysus.²⁵

The Origins of Dionysus

The most common story-myth of Dionysus, as found in the eighth- through fifth-century BCE writings of Homer and Euripedes, states that he was the son of Zeus and Semele, the daughter of Cadmus of Thebes, who was a mortal woman.²⁶ Semele was another name for Gaia.

Dionysus was born on December 25 in the calendar we use today. Hera, Zeus’s wife, was jealous and discovered Zeus’s affair with Semele while she was still pregnant with Dionysus. Hera appears to Semele as either an old crone or as a nurse (depending on which story is being told) and befriends Semele. Hera plants seeds of doubt in Semele that Zeus is not a god, and Semele demands that Zeus prove himself to be a god. Zeus eventually comes to Semele clothed in lightning bolts, and since mortals cannot look upon a god without dying, Semele dies in the blazing fire that surrounds Zeus.

Zeus then rescues the fetal Dionysus by sewing him into his thigh. Dionysus is born a few months later. Dionysus is, in essence, borne by two mothers—Semele and Zeus. The epithet of being “twice-born”—*dimetor* meaning two mothers—is connected with Dionysus.

Multiple versions of the early life of Dionysus exist. A legend says that Zeus gave the infant Dionysus to Hermes, who took the boy to King Athamas and his wife Ino, Dionysus’s aunt. Hermes told the couple to raise Dionysus as a girl in order to shield him from Hera’s anger.

Another version says that Dionysus was taken to the rain-nymphs of Nysa, who raised him through childhood and were rewarded by Zeus by placing them as the Hyades among the star clusters. Other variations of the tale say that Zeus gave Dionysus to Rhea, or to Persephone to raise in the Underworld, away from the wrath of Hera.

Characteristics of Dionysus

Dionysus discovered the culture of the vine and the manner to extract the precious juice as he grew up. At this time, Hera found him and struck him with madness, which made him a wanderer through the many lands of Earth. In Phrygia, the goddess Cybele (Rhea) cured him and taught him her religious traditions, which Dionysus carried with him and shared through Asia, teaching



Dionysus and a Panther, second century CE. Ancient Roman mosaic. Domus dell’Ortaglia, Brescia, Italy. Photo by Stefano Bolognini.

these people how to cultivate the vine. Dionysus's expedition to India lasted several years, from which he returned to Greece and began sharing this worship there.²⁷

Much diversity of opinion exists regarding the native place of Dionysus. According to the common myth, Thebes is said to be where he originated. In the many traditions, ancient writers were driven to the supposition that there were originally several divinities, which were afterward identified under the one name of Dionysus.²⁸

Maria Gimbutas continues this theory in *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, by stating that Dionysus is a god of great antiquity in the pre-Indo-European cultures—Dionysus was “the God” to “the Goddess” in ancient myth. Dionysus's origin is immaterial, since all of the lands making claim to him belonged to the same Mother Culture.²⁹ The Greek Dionysian cult can be traced back to the fifteenth century BCE on the island of Keos.³⁰

According to the Orphic tradition, Dionysus was killed and dismembered where he remained as a seed in the dark earth. This seed was the Omphalos stone that was placed in the Delphic Temple of Apollo. Women found the seed and reawakened Dionysus with Zeus, then placing Dionysus in the care of Apollo at Delphi. The Omphalos marked the holy place where Dionysus rested at Delphi, the center of the Greek world, until Apollo—the light bringer—revived Dionysus by using his healing ability.³¹

The temples and statues of Dionysus were numerous in the ancient world. Many ancient writers have tried to put the mythology of Dionysus into a timeline of chronological order. The stories were a loose collection of localized cult myths, which still remain today, and the more ancient the writing, the closer to the meaning and truth it is said to be.³²

Ancient Greek writers such as Homer (850 BCE), Euripides, Heraclitus, and Herodotus (fifth century BCE), Apollodorus

(second century BCE), and Plutarch (first century CE) all wrote of the myth of Dionysus.

From the fifth century BCE, Euripides tells of a Dionysus that is a productive power of nature while Apollo is an ethical god. Wine is called the “fruit of Dionysus” that can carry a person away from the usual sober manner of living. Ancient worshippers claimed that Dionysus affected miracles with wine on holy days.³³ Dionysus was the god of wine, the instructor of plants and cultivation, along with the giver of joy, and of grief and sorrow.³⁴

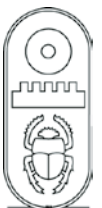
Dionysus at Delphi

Dionysus had as great a share in the Delphic Oracle as Apollo, according to the accounts of Euripides, by sharing prophetic power and the healing arts attributed to Delphi.³⁵ He is the protector of trees in general, which is alluded to in the various names given him by the priests of antiquity.³⁶

Euripides continued the character description of Dionysus by including the qualities of being the promoter of civilization, a lawgiver, and a lover of peace.³⁷ His area of influence is extended to be the god of tragic art and the protector of theaters, since the Greek drama grew out of the festivals of Dionysus.³⁸

William J. Broad's research in *The Oracle* states that Apollo was at Delphi from March till November, and Dionysus was at Delphi alone from November through February each year. The coexistence of these two deities and their cults was unique to Delphi. Apollo was the god of order with daytime worship by his followers, while Dionysus loosened the bonds of order with night devotions by his followers.

It is not clear when the duality of worship at Delphi began, but Plutarch indicates that this had existed since at least the fifth century BCE.³⁹ In the first century CE, Plutarch's friend, Clea, was both a high priestess of Apollo, while also being a leader of the Dionysiac rituals.⁴⁰



The dual existence of these two brother deities—Apollo representing light and reason and life, while Dionysus was darkness, ecstasy, and rebirth—was very powerful, both in ancient and even in modern times.⁴¹ Euripedes' *The Bacchae*, tells of the horror when Apollonian restraint denies the primal urges of Dionysian human nature.

The recent discovery by archeologists of iconography at Delphi indicates that the Greeks saw Dionysus as the alter ego of Apollo—his other half; the two gods were actually one.

Great importance was placed on the design and layout of the temple. The temple's surviving parts faced eastward, so the rays of the rising sun could illuminate the entrance, which is the part of the temple dedicated to Apollo, the god of prophecy and the sun.

The west area of the temple was dedicated to Dionysus, a god who in some ways was the antithesis of Apollo. Dionysus devoted himself to wine, animal impulses, and demanded his followers perform acts of worship that centered on orgiastic frenzies. The Dionysiac side of the temple faced the setting sun, welcoming the night.⁴²

The Pythia served both gods and gave prophecy from Dionysus during Apollo's absence. The festivals celebrated in honor of Dionysus were also called the Bacchic festivals, in which the orgiastic celebrations would last through the night.

The aspects of day and night, light and dark were highly celebrated and symbolized by the dual ruling gods Apollo and Dionysus at Delphi. The ceremonies and rituals were steeped in symbolic meaning.

The duality of day and night is prevalent in religions, rituals, and ceremonies around the world, even today. We do not celebrate or re-enact these ceremonies today as was once done in ancient Greece. However, it is by coming to know the aspects of each that we come to know them within ourselves. In

learning to balance and accept these internal aspects and urges, we come to develop our own sense of identity.

Thus the creed "Know Thyself" above the entrance to the temple of Apollo in Delphi reaches through time, and shows us our greatest gift and also our greatest obstacle.

Demise of the Pythia

For almost two thousand years, from 1500 BCE to the fourth century CE, the power of prophecy from Delphi guided the societies and cultures of Mycenaeans and Greeks—serving first a goddess- and then a god-based religion equally.

The *Delphic Oracle* was established in the eighth century BCE. Its last recorded response was given in 393 CE with the imposition of Christianity. During the period of Christianity after Constantine, the Oracle finally became silent, when in 392 CE, the emperor Theodosius I ordered pagan temples to cease operation and prohibited the cult of Apollo and the celebration of the Pythian games in honor of Apollo.⁴³

Renewed Interest

The prestige and mystery of the Delphic Oracles continues today, especially with the new discovery of converging fault lines directly under the temple of Apollo and the gases that can be found within. This has prompted a renewed interest, with expanded and updated information in many websites and books.

You can even find the power and popularity of the Oracle of Delphi in computer software called *Oracle* and another called *Delphi*.

Conclusion

History is written by the conquerors. Virtually all of the information we have about Delphi comes from the writings of the Greek conquerors that destroyed many of the temples and writings of preceding cultures at Delphi. The sibyls were mythic

semi-divine women of pre-Olympian times, and the Pythia priestesses held an important role during the Apollonian/Dionysian worship. Both were the voice that spoke of the future as determined by the gods and brought wealth and power to Delphi. During its height of popularity the

Delphic Oracle was the most prestigious and authoritative oracle in the Greek world. While the Pythias were silenced in 394 CE, their voices and messages still reverberate in ancient memories, calling to us even in the twenty-first century. They have taken on a new form, yet the message is the same.

Endnotes

- ¹ W.J. Broad, *The Oracle: The Lost Secrets and Hidden Message of Ancient Delphi* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 24.
- ² Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of pre-Hellenic Myths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 17.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁴ Broad, *Oracle*, 21.
- ⁵ Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses*, 18.
- ⁶ Broad, *Oracle*, 10.
- ⁷ <http://www.crystalinks.com/delphi.html>.
- ⁸ <http://students.ou.edu/M/Carmen.D.Miller-1/>.
- ⁹ <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/LX/CumeanSibyl.html>.
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- ¹¹ Roger Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 60-61.
- ¹² Broad, *Oracle*, 25.
- ¹³ Joseph Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
- ¹⁴ Lipsey, *Delphi*, 43.
- ¹⁵ Broad, *Oracle*, 25-28.
- ¹⁶ Lipsey, *Delphi*, 19.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/booktalk/stories/s1091403.htm>.
- ¹⁸ Broad, *Oracle*, 32-33.
- ¹⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pneuma>.
- ²⁰ http://geology.about.com/cs/odds_and_ends/a/aa081901a.htm.
- ²¹ <http://www.ancient-greece.org/history/delphi.html>.
- ²² Lipsey, *Delphi*, 77-78.
- ²³ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/ark/stories/s1266794.htm>.
- ²⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/ark/stories/s1266794.htm>.
- ²⁵ Broad, *Oracle*, 40-43.
- ²⁶ *Homeric Hymns*, 56.6. 8th-4th cent., BCE.
- ²⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus>.
- ²⁸ Lipsey, *Delphi*, 27.
- ²⁹ Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 227.
- ³⁰ Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods*, 228.
- ³¹ Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2001), 162.
- ³² <http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Dionysos.html>.
- ³³ Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 94-95.
- ³⁴ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, 403 BCE; see also the works of Pindar.
- ³⁵ Euripides. *The Bacchae*, 300.
- ³⁶ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 2nd cent. CE. Euripides, *Bacchae*. 420.
- ³⁸ <http://www.hermetic.com/sabazius/dionysus.htm>.
- ³⁹ Broad, *Oracle*, 40-43.
- ⁴⁰ Lipsey, *Delphi*, 68-69.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ⁴² Broad, *Oracle*, 5.
- ⁴³ T. Dempsey, *The Delphic Oracle: Its Early History, Influence and Fall* (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc, 1972).
- ⁴⁴ A review of Broad's *Oracle* may be found in the *Rose Croix Journal*: Julie Scott, "Review of *The Oracle: The Lost Secrets and Hidden Message of Ancient Delphi* by William J. Broad" *Rose+Croix Journal* 3 (2006): 139-140. http://www.rosecroixjournal.org/issues/2006/book_reviews/vol3_139_140_review_scott.pdf.

