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Delphi

The Center of the Ancient World

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Name: Period: Date:

Delphi: The Center of the Ancient World

The Navel of the Earth

On the steep southern slopes of Mount Parnassus, in a dramatic landscape of cliffs, ravines, and the shimmer of the Gulf of Corinth far below, the ancient Greeks built what they believed to be the most sacred place in the world. Delphi was the home of the Oracle of Apollo — the most important and influential prophetic center in the ancient Greek world. According to myth, Zeus released two eagles from the opposite ends of the earth to find its center; they met at Delphi. The Greeks marked the spot with a sacred stone called the omphalos (Greek for 'navel'), declaring Delphi the literal center of the universe. A carved marble omphalos stone, found in excavations, is now in the Delphi Museum. Delphi was not just a religious site. It was a political institution, a financial center, a diplomatic meeting ground, and the repository of the ancient world's accumulated wisdom and information about distant lands. City-states, kings, and emperors from across the Greek world and beyond — Croesus of Lydia, Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar —

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The Oracle and the Pythia

The Oracle of Delphi spoke through a human medium called the Pythia, a woman chosen from the local community who served as Apollo's mouthpiece. Ancient sources describe the Pythia sitting on a tripod over a chasm in the earth, breathing vapors that rose from below, and entering a trance state in which she spoke Apollo's words in a frenzy of inspired speech. Her words were then interpreted by priests called the Prophetes, who translated her utterances into the formal hexameter

verse responses delivered to consulting parties. Modern geological research has confirmed that Delphi sits at the intersection of two geological fault lines, and that the sanctuary is positioned directly over fissures through which sweet-smelling ethylene gas, a mild hallucinogenic, could have risen from the earth. This does not prove that the Oracle was a fraud. The Pythia and her priests genuinely believed in Apollo's inspiration, and ethylene in low concentrations can produce altered states of consciousness without causing full hallucination. The Oracle's responses were famously ambiguous, deliberately so, allowing them to be interpreted as correct regardless of the outcome. The most famous example: Croesus of Lydia was told that if he attacked Persia, he would destroy a great empire. He attacked. He was conquered. The Oracle had been technically correct. It just never said which empire.

The Treasuries and the Wealth of Delphi

The Sacred Way (the winding path that ancient visitors climbed from Delphi's lower entrance to the Temple of Apollo) was lined on both sides with treasury buildings, victory monuments, and bronze statues. City-states competed to erect the most impressive dedications, using Delphi as a stage for interstate rivalry expressed in marble and bronze. The Treasury of the Athenians, built after the Athenian victory at Marathon (490 BCE), is one of the best-preserved structures at Delphi. Its sculpted metopes show scenes of Heracles and Theseus, both Athenian heroes, in an explicit declaration of Athenian power and piety. The accumulated wealth at Delphi was eventually its downfall. Various ancient states plundered the sanctuary's treasuries over the centuries. The Romans stripped Delphi of its most valuable bronze statues to decorate Rome and Constantinople. By the time the Roman emperor Theodosius I banned pagan worship in 391 CE and formally closed the sanctuary, Delphi had already been significantly stripped of its riches. What remained was uncovered by French archaeologists beginning in 1892, in one of the most important excavation programs of the nineteenth century.

What Archaeology Has Revealed

The French excavation at Delphi — which required demolishing the entire modern village of Kastri that had been built over the ancient sanctuary — recovered thousands of inscriptions, sculptures, bronze objects, and architectural fragments that have transformed our understanding of the site. Key finds include: the Charioteer of Delphi (a life-size bronze sculpture of exceptional quality, one of the

finest surviving examples of Greek bronze work), inscriptions recording the Oracle's responses to consulting states, the omphalos stone, and the well-preserved remains of the stadium where the Pythian Games were held every four years. One of the most important categories of evidence at Delphi is the surviving oracular responses inscribed on stone or preserved in ancient texts. These responses allow historians to reconstruct the kinds of questions ancient rulers asked the Oracle — questions about war, colonization, plagues, and succession — and the political role Delphi played in shaping Greek history. The Oracle was consulted before every major Greek colonization effort, for example, giving religious authority to decisions about where new cities would be founded. Delphi thus influenced the geography of the Greek world directly, sanctifying the expansion that spread Greek culture across the Mediterranean.

Key Information: Delphi

Detail	Information
Location	Southern slopes of Mount Parnassus, central Greece
Sacred To	Apollo; considered the center of the world (omphalos)
The Pythia	Female oracle who served as Apollo's mouthpiece; possibly influenced by ethylene gas
Major Clients	City-states, kings, and emperors including Croesus, Philip II, Alexander, Julius Caesar
Treasury of the Athenians	Built after Marathon (490 BCE); one of the best-preserved structures at Delphi
Charioteer of Delphi	Life-size bronze sculpture of exceptional quality found during French excavations
Excavating Institution	French School of Athens, beginning 1892; required demolishing the village of Kastri
Closure	Theodosius I banned pagan worship in 391 CE, formally ending Delphi's function

Case Study: The Spartan Messenger

Lysander had ridden for six days to reach Delphi. His horse was exhausted and his back ached from the mountain roads. He was a mid-ranking officer in the Spartan army, not important enough to travel with an embassy but senior enough to be trusted with the question his commander did not want to ask through official channels. The question was simple: Should we attack before winter? They had an opportunity — the Athenian supply lines were stretched, the season was turning, and the generals believed a strike now could shorten the war by years. But Sparta was cautious. Caution had kept Sparta powerful for three centuries. He stood now in the sanctuary, watching smoke rise from the altar of Apollo. The Pythia would not see him today — there were supplicants ahead of him, and the Oracle consulted only on certain days. He would wait. What bothered him, in the cold of the mountain night, was not the waiting. It was what he would do if the Oracle's answer was no. His commanders believed in the Oracle's authority absolutely. But Lysander had spoken to a merchant on the road who claimed the priests at Delphi sometimes sold favorable answers to the highest bidder. He did not know if it was true. He did not know what he would do with the information if it was. He wrapped his cloak tighter and waited for morning.

1. Lysander is troubled by the possibility that Delphi's answers could be purchased. Based on the reading, why would the Oracle's credibility have been essential to its political power across the Greek world?

2. The reading describes the Oracle's famous response to Croesus as 'technically correct' but deliberately ambiguous. What does this reveal about how the Oracle maintained its reputation even when outcomes were unfavorable?

Multiple Choice

1. Modern geologists have confirmed that Delphi sits over geological faults that release what gas, and what might this explain?

    a) Ethylene, a mild hallucinogenic that may have contributed to the Pythia's altered states of consciousness

    b) Carbon dioxide, which caused the Pythia to fall into a deep sleep for extended periods during consultations

    c) Sulfur dioxide, which ancient Greeks interpreted as the breath of the god Apollo

    d) Methane, which was burned as a sacred flame kept lit throughout the Oracle's sessions

2. Why did city-states compete to build the most impressive treasury buildings along Delphi's Sacred Way?

    a) Because the treasuries had to store enough wealth to pay for the Oracle's responses

    b) Because Delphi's sanctuary was a stage for interstate rivalry, and impressive dedications demonstrated power and piety

    c) Because the treasuries housed weapons and military resources that could be used if war ever broke out at the sanctuary

    d) Because only city-states that built treasuries were permitted to consult the Oracle

3. What role did Delphi play in Greek colonization efforts, according to the reading?

a) The Oracle was consulted before every major colonization effort, giving religious authority to decisions about new city locations

b) Delphi trained the priests who would establish religious institutions in new Greek colonies

c) The Pythian Games were held in new colonies to legitimize their membership in the Greek world

d) Delphi provided financial support to colonists by lending them large amounts of gold from the sanctuary's treasuries and reserves

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Pythia	A) A life-size bronze sculpture of exceptional quality found during French excavations, one of the finest surviving Greek bronzes
2. ___ omphalos	B) The winding path that ancient visitors climbed through the sanctuary toward the Temple of Apollo
3. ___ Sacred Way	C) The female oracle at Delphi who served as Apollo's mouthpiece and delivered prophetic responses
4. ___ treasury	D) A sacred stone marking Delphi as the center of the world, a carved example of which is now in the Delphi Museum
5. ___ Charioteer of Delphi	E) A small temple-like building erected by a city-state at Delphi to house offerings and demonstrate wealth

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Delphi is located on the slopes of Mount _____, where Apollo was worshipped and where the Pythia delivered oracular prophecies for nearly a thousand years.

2. The Treasury of the _____, built after their victory at Marathon in 490 BCE, is one of the best-preserved buildings at Delphi and displays sculpted scenes of Heracles and Theseus.

3. The Roman emperor _____ formally ended Delphi's function in 391 CE by banning pagan worship throughout the empire.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The Oracle's responses were deliberately ambiguous, meaning they could be interpreted as correct regardless of what happened. Is this evidence that the Oracle was fraudulent, or is there another way to understand it? Use evidence from the reading in your answer.

_____

_____

_____

2. Delphi was described as simultaneously a religious site, a political institution, a financial center, and a diplomatic meeting ground. How could a single place serve all of these functions at once?

_____

_____

_____

3. The French excavation of Delphi required demolishing an entire modern village. What does this tell us about the trade-offs involved in major archaeological excavations, and how does it relate to the challenges of modern urban archaeology described in other readings?