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## Possession and *Pneuma*: The Essential Nature of the Delphic Oracle

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THE PERSISTENCE of myth (*mythos*) in the face of reason (*logos*) has to be one of the most fascinating phenomena in Greek history. They often got on quite well together, as can be seen not only from the political rhetoric of the fourth-century orators but, rather more surprisingly, from the medical literature. Hippocratic doctors might sound off about the rational nature of the so-called sacred disease, epilepsy (though they themselves gave a splendidly dotty explanation of it as phlegm descending from the brain); nevertheless, they worked in close cooperation with the Asclepiad priest-physicians at healing shrines such as that of Epidaurus, and exchanged both ideas and patients with them. But perhaps the most extraordinary example of *mythos* persisting, century after century, side by side with ever-more-refined *logos*, is the oracle of Delphi. At least from the eighth century BCE, and most strikingly from the days of Midas, Gyges, and Croesus, rich dedications testify to the belief, both public and private, that Apollo's Pythian priestesses gave voice to more-than-human knowledge: that they were in fact, in a very literal sense, the *Vox Dei*, the instrument through which divinity expressed itself on earth.

In what did this special knowledge consist, and how did the privileged win access to it? The desire to penetrate the veil of the future is deep-rooted in the human psyche, and various more or less magical rituals evolved over time to do so: the interpretation of dreams ("for a dream too comes from Zeus," as Homer's Achilles notes [*Il.* I.62]), divination by anything from the flight of birds to the state of sacrificial liv-

ers, oracular pronouncements. Yet what emerged from these operations was not so much predictions, in what we might call the Nostradamus sense, but rather advice, based on what was regarded as the will of the gods, channeled through their interpreters. At the same time, this advice's special value was directly conditioned by the fact that its giver, like the Homeric seer Calchas, was held to know "the present, that which was to come, and that which had been before" (τά τ' ἐόντα τά τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἐόντα, *Il.* 1.70). Certainly at least until the end of the Archaic Age—and in many respects well into the fifth century—human fear and ignorance of the unknown, faced with the gods' unpredictable jealousy (*phthonos*) and the dread of pollution (*miasma*, whether physical or spiritual), desperately needed the psychic lifeline of supernatural order and purpose, the feeling that there was a divine omniscience into which, with luck, mankind might occasionally be vouchsafed a privileged glimpse.

Delphi's knowledge of the present was famously vindicated by the Lydian monarch Croesus, who challenged the priests to state what he was doing on a certain day: "Boiling a lamb and a tortoise in a bronze cauldron," came the correct response, coupled with the claim to know "the number of sand-grains and the measure of the sea" (*Hdt.* 1.47.1-3). The future was another matter. Herakleitos (cited at *Plut. Mor.* 404e) put it succinctly: "The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives signs" (ὁ ἀναξ οὐ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει). Similarly, Theognis (805-10) reminded his young friend Kyrnos that "the man to whom the priestess at Pytho in her response gives signs (σημήνη) of the god's oracular voice (ὁμφήν) from her wealthy shrine (ἁδύτου)" had to tease out her utterance as meticulously as a carpenter with his rule and square; adding or subtracting from the sum of the message by wish-fulfillment made the consultant guilty in the god's eyes. This is also proof that—certainly by the mid-sixth century, and in all likelihood a hundred years earlier—the Pythia was in place, the famous oracular method

(complete with tripod and omphalos) well established, and the Delphic shrine already highly successful.

Hints and guesses, as T. S. Eliot said: hints followed by guesses. Men seek to reinforce their own mortal projections of the future through appeals to omniscient deities such as Zeus or Apollo, and eagerly follow such cryptic signs as the gods' inspired agents, and their *prophetai*—that is, originally, interpreters—may provide. Predictions, for obvious reasons, are very seldom specific. Delphi knew about the seven types of ambiguity long before William Empson popularized them: they form part of the randomizing devices, especially unusual language, common to divination worldwide. A trained diviner can decode them; no other human agent can manipulate them.<sup>1</sup> As Walter Burkert wisely observes, “the gain in confidence which the signs bring as an aid to decision-making is so considerable that occasional falsification through experience does not tell against them.”<sup>2</sup>

This is more true of private than of public prognostication. Delphi certainly saw through Croesus, just as Herodotos did later: “He was the millionaire who both believed wealth to be the summum bonum, and used it indiscriminately to bludgeon golden opinions out of the world,”<sup>3</sup> and could safely be relied upon to push ambiguous evidence in the direction he wanted. Told that if he crossed the Halys river he would destroy a great empire, he did just that. The empire was Lydian, and his own. But when it came to the Persian Wars, the forecast for Athens was, understandably, bleak: “Fly to the ends of the earth,” the consultants were told. Though they managed to get a slightly less bleak (and highly ambiguous) second oracle as a concession, no one could claim that Delphic prescience had foreseen a Greek victory from the start. The god, on the face of it, had simply advised what common sense dictated at the time.

This may partially explain why civic, and especially politico-military, consultation of the oracle suffered a slow decline during the fifth century, and was virtually a dead letter by the middle of the fourth. Direct predictions regarding

public affairs—never the oracle’s most characteristic type of utterance—began to disappear from Delphi’s repertoire. Those that survived longest tended, not surprisingly, to have a religious angle; for example, the Pythia continued to be approached regularly to declare a site *asylon*, that is, a non-plunderable demilitarized zone protected by its sanctity. (Hence our term “asylum.”)

But the phenomenon was something more general, the change more linked to man’s slowly expanding control of his environment. Magic and experimental science share, often indistinguishably, in the slow dissipation of chaos and ignorance, but it is the latter that gradually gains the upper hand. All weather gods are diminished by meteorology. The more knowledge humans possess, the less need they feel to appeal to that overriding divine knowledge outside the workings of the natural world. By the nature of things, public, especially political and military, concerns, being dealt with by a more or less sophisticated minority, will diverge from supernatural reliance the soonest. Private individuals, on the other hand, are quite another matter, in Greece or anywhere else. Their need has never been wholly eradicated, as those who consult their daily horoscopes in the newspapers are well aware.

The interesting thing is that neither the Persian Wars nor the political falloff that followed during the next two centuries in any way affected the prestige of Delphi, or diminished its international standing. As Eric Dodds pointed out, “the rarity of open scepticism about Delphi before the Roman period is very striking.”<sup>4</sup> While diviners and seers in general became the targets of vigorous attack (no one had forgotten the prophecies predicting success for the ill-fated Sicilian Expedition), Aristophanic sneers about false oracle-mongers on the make left the Pythia severely alone. No one, not even the early church fathers, challenged the genuineness of Delphic utterances; they said they were the work of the Devil, something very different. Delphi was a serious rival, and treated as such. If the god was less consulted for the major problems of this world, his vatic pronouncements continued to be sought on

cult, worship, and the myriad imponderables of private life. Delphi even seems to have had a sense of humor. To one consultant who inquired, “O son of Zeus and Leto, how can I get rich?” the oracle responded, deadpan: “By acquiring the land between Corinth and Sikyon” (Athen. 5.219a).

A corollary of this, well supported by the evidence—Plutarch, among other things, was a Delphic priest for much of his life, which gives his evidence, if not objectivity, at least a claim to speak for the house—is that the operators of the oracle clearly believed in what they were doing, and took as a given the notion that Apollo channeled divine utterance through the Pythia. They were not, despite some modern rationalist assumptions, simply well-established scam artists. As is abundantly clear from numerous references in Plato (e.g., *Apol.* 22c, *Ion* 533c, *Phaedrus* 244a, and *Laws* 719c; cf. Maurizio, cited in note 1, 76–79), the influence and inspiration (πνεῦμα) of the divine on poets, as, identically, on seers or orgiastic worshippers, was a given in ancient Greek society; as Maurizio says, “the Pythia’s behaviour at Delphi falls comfortably into Plato’s typology about the effects of spirit possession on human behaviour” (79). In the *Laws* Plato even equates poetic inspiration directly with that of the Pythia: “Whenever a poet sits on the Muses’ tripod, he is not in his senses, he is like a spring which readily allows its waters to flow.” Conversely, fluency and poetry are among the Pythia’s gifts when possessed.

The Pythia was said to enter an ecstatic or trance-like state, during which she became the vehicle for the god’s utterances. In some way her function was linked to a mysterious inspirational vapor, or πνεῦμα. However that might be explained, the condition was accepted as what it purported to be: divine possession. It should be stressed at this point that such a trance—often self-generated, with no equivalent of πνεῦμα involved—features in oracular utterance worldwide. Modern rationalism, relying on *logos* alone, has tended to skew the evidence and misrepresent ancient attitudes (Maurizio, 69–71). I would like to take a closer look

at the conditions generating the Pythia's utterances, in connection with traditional accounts of the oracle's origins. We will find a tightly woven, and striking, nexus of physical, psychological, and emotional elements here, and this should not surprise us. Students of ancient miasma (ritual pollution) know how it was seen as an infection, a plague in the air that could attack body or soul indifferently, breaking down artificial distinctions between the corporeal and the spiritual. The same kind of teasing ambiguity clouds all discussions of Delphic *pneuma*. What I intend to show is that one major element supporting the faith in Delphic *enthousiasmos* was—as so often in similar cases worldwide involving ecstasy and possession—an identifiable physical phenomenon, and that the ancient world readily accepted this as a mode of facilitating utterances credited to divine inspiration.

THE MAIN ACCOUNT of the Delphic oracle's origins from antiquity is that by Diodorus Siculus (16.26), written in the first century BCE. There is no indication of his source, and little use in speculating on it (though that of course has never stopped scholars from doing so).

26. Having made mention of the tripod [he writes], I think it not inappropriate at this point to insert the traditional ancient account concerning it. The story goes that the shrine was discovered, long ago, by goats, and that is why to this day the Delphians make use of goats when they consult the oracle.

(Plutarch [*Mor.* 437a] explains that when a goat was sacrificed prior to consultation, water from the libation was poured over it, and only if it shivered or trembled was the occasion deemed auspicious and an oracular response given.)

[2] The manner of its discovery, we are told, was as follows. There is a chasm at the site of the present so-called *adyton* [inner sanctum] of the shrine, round which goats used to graze, this being before Delphi was inhabited.

(A Mycenaean village existed on the site of Delphi during the Bronze Age, in the area of the later temple of Athena Pronaia, but was destroyed [like so many others] in the twelfth century BCE.<sup>5</sup> Diodorus is referring to the period before the resettling of Delphi, ca. 875–860.)

Now any goat that got near the chasm, and peered into it, would caper about in an extraordinary manner and utter sounds quite different from its normal bleating. [3] The goatherd, surprised by this odd phenomenon, approached the chasm himself. When he looked down it to find out what was going on, he had the same reaction as the goats: they behaved as though possessed, and he began to prophesy future events. From then on, as the word spread locally about the experience of those who approached the chasm, people began to visit the site in increasing numbers. Because of its strange reputation every visitor made the experiment, and when he got near would invariably become inspired. It was for these reasons that the oracle gained its extraordinary reputation, and came to be regarded as Earth's prophetic shrine.

(Given the circumstances, the association of the site with Earth [Γῆ] is very natural; cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 1–8 and Eur. *IT* 1259–69. This explanation, hitherto dismissed as myth, is in fact, as we shall see, extremely plausible.)

[4] For some while those wishing to get a prophecy went to the chasm and uttered prophecies one to another; but later—since many people while possessed jumped into the chasm and were never seen again—the local inhabitants decided to eliminate such casualties by establishing one woman there as a prophet for all, and having any oracular utterance channeled through her. For her there was fashioned a device that she could mount and then become possessed without risk to herself, after which she would deliver prophecies to any who wanted them. [5] The device had three supports, which was how it came to be called a tripod. All the bronze tripods fashioned down to our own time (it seems probable) are copied from it.

(Diodorus shows doubt about this, and it is of course true that tripods existed far earlier [e.g., in Bronze Age Crete]; however, Diodorus' point may simply be that the style of

those bronze tripods known to him echoes that of the Delphic Pythia, and thus might be supposed to have imitated it.)

This, I think, is sufficient explanation for how the oracle came to be discovered, and why the tripod was devised.

[6] In ancient times, it is said, the business of prophetic utterance was entrusted to virgins, both because of the intact and uncorrupted quality of their nature, and through their resemblance in this respect to Artemis, since (it was argued) they possessed an innate skill for keeping the secrets of such oracles as were revealed to them. At a somewhat later period, however, they say that Echekrates the Thessalian came to the shrine, saw the virgin who delivered the oracles, fell in love with her because of her beauty, carried her off, and raped her. Because of this untoward event the Delphians made a law that in future oracles should no longer be delivered by a virgin, but by an older woman of at least fifty, who was to be dressed in a virgin's costume as a reminder of what the original prophetic agent had been.

(The Pythia's minimum age of fifty [i.e., post-menopausal] is supported by early sources which stress her elderly status; see, e.g., Aesch. *Eum.* 38 and Eur. *Ion* 1324. Her "virgin's costume" was clearly a symbolic reminder of her carefully maintained ritual purity; she was also [like a vestal or a nun] debarred from sexual relations, and [like some nuns again] led an "enclosed" existence [cf. Plut. *Mor.* 435d, 438c]. However, to pursue the parallel further, she does not appear to have been regarded as a "bride of Apollo." Echekrates was seemingly a historical person, a member of the cattlebaron dynasty of the Thessalian Echekratidai; it is tempting to identify him with the Echekrates of Larissa who, Pausanias claims [10.16.8], was the donor of Delphi's oldest extant ex-voto offering. At the same time Diodorus' anecdote about him reads suspiciously like an aetiological explanation of the Pythia's mode of dress.)

Such, then [Diodorus concludes], are the stories told regarding the discovery of the oracular shrine.



Shorter, but essentially identical, versions of Diodorus' excursus are to be found in Pausanias (10.5.5–13) and Plutarch (*Mor.* 433c and 435d). Both are late witnesses (first–second century CE), when the oracle was in decline; on the other hand, they had the advantage of detailed autopsy, while Plutarch, as I said earlier, was himself for thirty years a Delphic priest. This makes him a privileged source, but also of course a suspect, because *parti pris*, witness. Pausanias states that originally the oracle belonged to Earth (or to Earth and Poseidon in conjunction), a clear indication of its seismic /chthonian focus, and that shepherds “became divinely inspired by the vapor” (ἐνθεοὶ τε ἐγένοντο ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀτμοῦ). He also claims, inter alia, that from the beginning—shepherds notwithstanding—the Pythia was always a woman, and that one of the early temples “fell into a fissure of the earth” (ἐς χάσμα γῆς), which again suggests seismic activity—not surprisingly, since Delphi lies on a major fault line. Elsewhere (10.24.7) he refers to the Kassotis spring, uphill from the shrine, and cites a tradition (“they say,” λέγουσι) that its waters sink underground and “make the women in the god’s *adyton* mantic” (ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ τοῦ θεοῦ τὰς γυναῖκας μαντικὰς ποιεῖν).

Plutarch's evidence is contained in two discussions, “On the Pythia not now prophesying in verse” (394d–409d) and “On the eclipse of the oracles” (περὶ τῶν ἐκλελοιπῶτων χρηστηρίων, 409e–438e). He too speaks of the shrine as Earth's (402c–d), and associates it with a spring or stream (νῆμα). Though Earth emits many effluvia (ρέυματα), he declares, at the end of a long discussion of various analogies to the “prophetic exhalation” (μαντικὴν ἀναθυμίασιν, 433a; cf. 433e), only the rare sort that has “some affinity to souls” (οἰκεῖόν το ταῖς ψύχαις) can “render them capable of inspiration and the reception of images of the future” (ἐνθουσιαστικῶς διατίθησι καὶ φαντασιαστικῶς τοῦ μέλλοντος). Legend agrees with such a finding: the “power located in this spot” (τὴν περὶ τὸν τόπον δύναμιν) was first revealed by the incident of the shepherd (whom he names as Koretas).

He also goes on to suggest, interestingly (433f–434a), that such emissions may weaken, change, or even dry up with time, specifically (434c) as the result of an earthquake, such as the great one that leveled the city (i.e., that of 373 BCE).

At this point in the debate (435a; cf. 436f–437a) the fear is articulated that by “reducing the origin, indeed the very essence and power of mantic art to winds and vapors and exhalations” (εἰς πνεύματα καὶ ἀτμοὺς καὶ ἀναθυμιάσεις τὴν τῆς μαντικῆς ἀρχὴν μᾶλλον δὲ τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτὴν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν ἀναλύοντες), the oracular tripod is being stripped of its divinity, i.e., the religious status of the mantic procedure is being called into question. The word I have here translated as “winds,” πνεύματα, could of course also be used to indicate divine inspiration (*pneuma*). Pausanias too seems uneasy on this point. If (435d) the exhalation has its effect regardless, this proto-modern argument goes, what need of a god? To which the traditional answer (436f), based on that essential non-differentiation between physical and spiritual which for so long characterized Greek thinking (e.g., as regards *miasma*), is that earth and sun and their issues, exhalation included, are themselves divine (cf. 432d–e). Plutarch also notes here that these emanations can emerge either as an airborne vapor or in combination with flowing water, ῥεῦμα καὶ πνεῦμα, a claim that at once calls to mind Pausanias’ statement regarding the effect on the Pythia of the Kassotis spring. In this context we should also recall that in the famous response (ca. 360 CE)<sup>6</sup> to Julian the Apostate—often, but in my opinion wrongly, regarded as spurious (e.g., by J. Fontenrose)<sup>7</sup>—Apollo is said to no longer possess “his speaking spring” (παγὰν λαλέουσαν).

Further, Plutarch’s summing-up contains several extremely interesting pieces of evidence. First, we have the recurrent observation (437c) that “the exhalation is not always the same, but has periods of decline and increase” (μητε τὴν ἀναθυμίασιν ὡσαυτως ἔχειν ἀεὶ διὰ πάντος, ἀνέσεις τέ τινες ἴσχειν καὶ πάλιν σφοδρότητας). Witnesses to this include both staff and visitors, who report that intermittently a deli-

cious sweet smell, like that of expensive perfume, is wafted into the waiting room from the direction of the *adyton*. There follows a lengthy excursus (437d–438e) on the differing symptoms displayed at various times by the Pythia, which are attributed to these variations of the “exhalation,” the ἀναθυμίασις. The special regime to which she must submit (including chastity and seclusion from the outside world) is justified by reference to the various malign influences that can filter into her body and thence to her soul. The “imaginative faculty of the soul” (τὸ φανταστικὸν . . . τῆς ψυχῆς) is held to be especially vulnerable to “bodily changes” (τοῦ σώματος ἀλλοιουμένου), e.g., those produced by wine or food. On such occasions the Pythia is debarred from “giving herself over to the god” (παρέχειν ἑαυτὴν τῷ θεῷ). Disregard of these restraints can be fatal, Plutarch says, as a notorious recent case proves. A foreign deputation wished to consult the oracle; but the omens were bad, and the priestess herself, for whatever reason, was reluctant. After she took her seat on the tripod, her voice became harsh, she shook like “a ship laboring in a storm” (νεῶς ἐπειγομένης), was full of “bad *pneuma*,” and finally, completely beside herself, gave an inarticulate shriek, rushed out, and threw herself down. She was still conscious when picked up, but died a few days later.

Lastly, we have the slightly earlier and very specific evidence of the Augustan geographer Strabo (9.3.5, C.419), who cites unnamed sources (“they say”) for the notion of “a hollow cavern deep in the earth” (ἄντρον κοῖλον κατὰ βάθους), which nevertheless has (here autopsy would seem to take over) “a not very wide mouth” (οὐ μάλα εὐρύστομον), i.e., a fissure in the rock, from which arises “inspirational *pneuma*.” Over this fissure is set a high tripod, onto which the Pythia climbs, and, ingesting the *pneuma*, makes oracular utterance (ἀποθεσπίζει).

Modern scholars have, with great unanimity, dismissed as myth just about every detail of these statements on origins by our ancient sources. A characteristic explanation is that by Catherine Morgan: “Oracular divination at Delphi was

instituted towards the end of the eighth century as a tool to help the authorities of emerging states to deal with unprecedented problems; divination thus served as a means of legitimizing the gradual introduction of social change while apparently maintaining basic community values.”<sup>8</sup> As a not wholly logical corollary of this attitude, the most robustly rationalist writer on Delphi, Joseph Fontenrose, has also dismissed the vast majority of recorded Delphic responses in the period of the shrine’s greatest ascendancy as *ex post facto* forgeries, leaving nothing intact except the mundane, the explicable, the trite, the commonplace: an improbable attraction for the munificent offerings by Croesus and the Greek cities. Scientific rationalism, of course, takes it as a given that Delphic oracular responses were not only hocus-pocus but a conscious and vastly profitable scam, the products of a well-informed and sophisticated political think tank—thus imputing, to knowledgeable Greeks at least, their own strictly materialistic criteria. In fact, of course, genuine belief is perfectly compatible with subconscious manipulation, and any political chicanery would very quickly have become public knowledge, something that the enormous respect in which Delphi continued to be held, century after century, makes improbable in the extreme. As late as Athenaeus’ day, in the early third century CE, it was still said of truth-tellers that they “spoke from the tripod,” ἐκ τρίποδος λέγειν φάμεν τοὺς ἀληθεύοντας (Athen. 2.37–38).

With a rather charming inconsistency, the same scholars are also quick to dismiss what we may call the “stoned goat theory”—highly rationalistic though that is—even while theorizing, in one case, that Diodorus’ story “was evidently concocted by someone . . . who wished to account for [Delphic procedure] without recourse to religious explanations.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the myth of Diodorus’ alleged stupidity has been fed into what is seen as the superstitious nonsense enveloping Delphi, producing a critical cocktail powerful enough to override any effort to make historical sense of the ancient evidence. The essential criterion of what was believed in

antiquity has been eclipsed by irrelevant modern skeptical arguments attacking the validity of mantic procedures and the folklore traditions so uncritically swallowed by Diodorus.

Reinforcing—if not inducing—such a judgment has been, till very recently, the agreement of archaeologists and geologists alike, repeated in standard works of reference, that there was no “chasm” under the *adyton*, and that there were not, and could never have been, any toxic gaseous emissions from the site.<sup>10</sup> It was assumed, erroneously, by archaeologists (e.g., Amandry, note 5, 215–30) that for mephitic vapors of this sort volcanic activity was a necessary precondition. Even those—e.g., A. P. Oppe<sup>11</sup> and, most recently, L. Piccardi<sup>12</sup>—who did hope to find vapors were constrained to hunt for them further afield: at the Kastalian gorge, by the Korykian cave, or along the south side of Parnassos. They were thus compelled to posit an implausibly awkward transfer of tradition from one site to another. E. I. McQueen sums up the conventional wisdom on this question: “Diodorus’ account . . . is totally at variance with the archaeological evidence and amounts to little more than a rationalistic invention by his source.”<sup>13</sup>

Recent groundbreaking research by de Boer and Hale, begun in 1996, has destroyed virtually every aspect of these findings overnight.<sup>14</sup> The team’s most important discoveries are as follows:

A. In addition to the known fault line passing through Delphi, the seismic activity of which has destroyed Apollo’s temple at least twice, inspection revealed a cross-fault running NW-SE, directly under the *adyton*.

B. The assumption that seismic activity alone could not produce gaseous emissions is mistaken. Petrochemicals in the strata of bituminous limestone underlying the shrine are vaporized (by frictional heating along the faces of the faults) into light hydrocarbon gases, in particular ethylene.

C. Above bedrock in the fault region, including the temple foundation, lies a stratum of heavy clay. The intersection of faults produces fissures in the clay through which both

groundwater and gases can rise to the surface. Analysis shows that such emissions are peculiar to the cross-fault under the *adyton*, and not duplicated elsewhere, e.g., at the Kastalian spring.

D. In an archaeological paper, de Boer has strengthened the case for mantic *pneuma* having been ethylene gas.<sup>15</sup> The small omphalos found in the *adyton* in 1913 (de Boer, figs. 1–4, 9), and shown as a feature of it in more than one vase-painting, had a mysterious metal-lined, funnel-shaped hole drilled through it axially, narrowing from base to crown. L. B. Holland guessed, over seventy years ago, that this omphalos was aligned with a vent in the floor and funneled *pneuma* to the Pythia during mantic sessions.<sup>16</sup> De Boer both identifies the nature of the *pneuma* and shows where the omphalos could have been situated, stoppered to accumulate lighter-than-air ethylene, and then opened during the Pythia's session, allowing the gas to rise to the roof of the *adyton*, occasionally spreading a little so that its sweet scent reached those waiting in the antechamber.

The application of these findings by de Boer and Hale to our ancient evidence produces some very striking congruences. Their studies on the effects of ethylene gas are of particular interest. It gives off a sweetish fragrance, which “can be detected in the atmosphere in concentrations as low as 700 parts per million.” This corresponds exactly to the delightful scent (εὐὸδία) “resembling the odor of the most exquisite and expensive perfume” noted by Plutarch (437c–d) as being wafted on occasion from the *adyton* to the waiting area. It is lighter than air, which would at once explain the Pythia's being mounted on a high tripod in an enclosed area to get the maximum benefit from it. Even in small quantities, ethylene works twice as fast as nitrous oxide (the “laughing gas” thought by William James to explain some early religious “revelations”), and needs only half the concentration to do so. It has no dangerous side effects, and recovery is rapid.

At the restricted level of emission to which the Pythia would be exposed, there are two possible reactions, one far

more common than the other. The first, and most usual, is “a state of floating or disembodied euphoria,” a condition of mild trance during which “the subject appears conscious and can answer questions . . . the sense of inhibition is reduced, and hallucinations may be experienced.” The voice may be deepened. On recovery there is amnesia of what was said or done while in the tranced state. All this is exactly compatible with the condition of the Pythia as described by our sources.

In a minority of cases, however, a highly adverse reaction may take place: delirium accompanied by excitement violent enough to warrant forcible physical restraint. Incoherence and terrified anxiety are common, together with nausea. There is a danger of the unconscious subject choking on vomit. “Even when only a small amount of regurgitated material enters the lungs the subject is at risk of developing pneumonia, in which case death will almost inevitably occur within a few days.” The recent case history described by Plutarch (438a–b, discussed above) might have been expressly designed to illustrate these symptoms—including the modern proviso (which Plutarch elsewhere seems to have in mind, 437b–c, d–e) regarding the dangers of inhaling ethylene on a full stomach. It may well be that this was why the priestess was reluctant to function.

A reasonable conclusion from these discoveries is that our ancient evidence regarding Delphic procedure is substantially accurate, and that the discovery of the “miraculous” and mildly mind-bending emissions, leading to the establishment of an oracular shrine on the spot, may well have taken place more or less as Diodorus and others describe it. However, as I have discovered to my bemused enlightenment during online discussions of the de Boer-Hale findings, there is strong, if not entirely logical, traditional resistance, mostly by soi-disant rationalizers, to considering Delphic prophecy as anything but a clever political con-game, reinforced over time with an assortment of patently ridiculous mythic attachments, and to interpreting the Pythia’s “intoxication” as anything other than mere vulgar and incoherent drunken-

ness. Since I regard this attitude as seriously obfuscating the probable *modus operandi* of the oracle, through being based *ab initio* on false psychological and historiographical assumptions, it may be advisable to reassert here what would otherwise be a mere string of unexceptionable platitudes:

A. The temptation to suppose that reasonable and intelligent people in ancient Greece were reasonable and intelligent, by definition, in precisely the same way as their modern counterparts should be firmly resisted. It should not be taken as self-evident that Delphi was the equivalent of a political think tank, with smart pols controlling the Pythia's every utterance. As Maurizio reminds us, "Not one ancient source suggests that anyone other than the Pythia issued oracular responses" (69). This includes Euripides (*Mel. Capt.* 494k: "In the shrines of Phoebus it is women who prophesy"). A think tank can be set up by anyone with resources. Croesus did not lay out gold by the hundredweight in order to discover what his own council of state or hired political consultants, Greek or other, could have told him. Delphi was firmly believed to offer precisely that which no human agency could provide: a more-than-human insight into what was either advisable or destined to happen, the two things being, as Greeks then saw it, closely linked. That modern skepticism dismisses the possibility of such communication is wholly irrelevant. Delphi's extraordinarily rich offerings tell a very different story.

In other words, what consultants paid, and understandably paid very well, for was the unique chance to gain privileged access to that divine pattern universally assumed to govern human affairs. In historical terms, as we have seen, public belief, great in the Archaic Age, survived the tergiversations of the Persian Wars, came under attack in the fifth century BCE, and fell off altogether by the mid-fourth century. During the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 4.9) a truce between Athens and Sparta included this clause: "As regards the shrine and oracle of Pythian Apollo, we agree that those who so desire should be entitled to consult the oracle without fraud or fear, in ac-



cordance with the established laws of each man's country." In 371 the Thebans consulted Delphi (and other oracles) before finally coming out against Sparta in the campaign that gave them their great and unlooked-for victory at Leuktra. The last sure political consultation seems to have been that by Philip II and the Chalcidic League in 357–56, on the question of making peace (cf. Green, note 3, 91–111, esp. 109), and even here Philip had one eye on ingratiating himself with the religious-based Amphictyonic Council. The unseemly struggle over the control of Delphi that followed, with the Third Sacred War, may have accelerated the decline. It is worth noting that the accumulated dedications of Delphi paid for Phokian mercenaries over a ten-year period; and private belief was, not surprisingly, quite unaffected by the decline in public/political recourse to oracular insights.

B. The precise (and often beneficent) impact of specific toxic substances on the workings of the mind should not be subsumed—least of all today, when we have abundant clinical studies available—under a general dismissive rubric of mindless babbling and common or garden-variety drunkenness. We possess just such clinical studies (used by de Boer and Hale) with which to judge the role of the Pythia, and so we can, with confidence, disregard the rationalist picture of wild, gibbering, uncontrollable pronouncements. Here was a medium trained from early youth, subjected to restrictions (chastity, isolation) not unlike those imposed on modern members of an enclosed order of nuns, specially inured to the mental enhancement of mild toxicity (compare the effect of controlled amphetamines), and prepared in some sense to pronounce or prophesy (Parke [note 9] 73). There was a corps of *prophetai*, a control group in one restricted sense only, that is, specially trained to interpret the Pythia's sometimes obscure pronouncements. It should not be assumed (and it is unlikely in the extreme) that they habitually manipulated her utterances in any conscious political sense, or indeed were responsible for "rewriting" them as poetry.

c. In this connection it is important to bear in mind that the procedure at Delphi, far from being unique, or even restricted to Greece, reveals a number of features found in oracles worldwide. Maurizio (74–76) has collected a number of striking parallels adduced by anthropologists which involve some kind of spirit possession, with women, more often than not, as the agent. As a striking example of parallelism, from an oracle that was still active in the twentieth century, I would like also to adduce some details from the (now defunct) Chief State Oracle of Tibet.<sup>17</sup> The oracular priest (himself also known, confusingly, as the Chief State Oracle) would regularly go into a trance in order to answer questions, a state from which it sometimes took him an hour to recover. Indeed, trance-like visitations would be a sign that a particular monk had been chosen as a medium. The questions, as at Delphi, were framed so as to solicit advice. The questioners included government officials on matters of public policy regarding the well-being of the country. The Chief State Oracle frequently gave poetic responses; the quality of these would vary according to the individual medium. The messages contained symbolic and metaphorical ambiguities. The medium was required to lead a pure and spiritual life.

d. This brings us to the equally important matter of belief among the oracle's priestly staff. We can dismiss *ab initio* any scenario of systematic, cynical, conscious fraud, especially during the early period. It is significant, and striking, that we know one authentic case only of the Pythia actually being corrupted, by Kleomenes of Sparta (Hdt. 6.66.3), and that isolated incident caused immense shock and scandal: six centuries later Pausanias, who also tells the story (3.4.3–6), can assert that “as to the suborning of the oracle, we know of no other person at all, except for Kleomenes, who dared to try it.” The Spartans and Athenians might exchange accusations of doing so (Hdt. 5.63.1, 90.1), but this simply reflected reactions to pronouncements that favored one side at the expense of the other. Not even the Christians imputed fraud to the Pythia; Delphi, powerful still, was one of their

major rivals, and the shrine shows signs of late deliberate destruction as well as of seismic disturbance. All this implies a very high degree of popular belief, based on a steady impression of faith, rigorous training (in, among other things, poetic techniques), unswerving honesty, and divine inspiration in Delphi's oracular personnel as a whole, and above all in the Pythia herself.

We can take it for granted, then, that as a general rule the Pythia was neither a purchasable propagandist nor a puppet dictated to by a conclave of cynical political experts. As for the putative think tank, any conscious and manipulative network of intelligence-gathering—such as the carrier-pigeon service postulated by William Golding in his posthumous Delphic novel *The Double Tongue*—would have become public knowledge in a matter of days, and a public scandal soon afterwards. No such accusation was ever noised in the long course of the oracle's history, a remarkable testimonial to its reputation for inspired utterance and unswerving religious honesty. The Delphic priests must themselves have believed in the divinely privileged nature of the communications made under their guardianship.

I have avoided till now what most modern scholars begin with, generally in a contemptuous dismissal: the validity of the Pythia's utterances, and the faith sustaining the dialogue between priestess and consultant. The psychology of such belief is extremely interesting. Eric Dodds, who was in a good position to know about such things, once remarked that "anyone familiar with the history of modern spiritualism will realize what an amazing amount of virtual cheating can be done in perfectly good faith by convinced believers."<sup>18</sup> This is undoubtedly true. We can also, I think, adduce the traditional accumulated wisdom regarding worldly affairs passed down from each generation of priests to the next, in the firm belief that this knowledge was generated by the inspired utterance of the god, to which they, at one remove from the Pythia, simply served as mouthpiece. An illuminating parallel, *mutatis mutandis*, is the systematic use, by the poet James

Merrill and his friend David Jackson, of the Ouija board, whose messages provided material for Merrill's long poem *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Their practice was well and sharply analyzed by their friend Alison Lurie in chapter 7 of her memoir of them, *Familiar Spirits*. At Delphi as on the planchette, genuine belief is perfectly compatible with sub-conscious psychological or other manipulation.

As the history of political consultation suggests, belief must have faded with time, just as the gaseous emissions did (Hale has suggested to me, *per litt.*, that Apollo's traditional absence from Delphi during the winter months may be connected with the suppression at that time of *pneuma*, i.e., ethylene gas, by groundwater). But that the operation was based on belief, in both consultants and operators, seems indisputable: Plutarch's speaker, in the second century CE, reveals a desire to believe that is obviously as strong as ever. As an instrument in facilitating divine intimations, physical *pneuma* was perfectly acceptable. Its power, Plutarch concludes (438e-d), is indeed divinely derived (ἔστι δὲ θεία μὲν ὄντως καὶ δαιμόνιος), but is neither unfailing nor indestructible, neither ageless nor eternal (οὐ μὴν ἀνέκλειπτος οὐδ' ἄφθαρτος οὐδ' ἀγήρως καὶ διαρκῆς εἰς τὸν ἄπειρον χρόνον). It is in that context, of temporal and mortal phenomena serving as agents of divine enlightenment, that we need to approach the Delphic oracle. Here our own beliefs are immaterial. What matters is to understand the perceptions, over a long millennium, of the Greeks themselves: of both those who sought a response and those who—acting as the voice of a present deity—gave them what they sought.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. L. Maurizio, "Anthropology and Spirit Possession: A Reconsideration of the Pythia's Role at Delphi," *JHS* 115 (1995), 82-83.
2. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA 1985), III.
3. P. Green, *Classical Bearings* (London 1989), 96.
4. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951), 74.
5. P. Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes* (Paris 1950),

- 204–11; G. Roux, *Delphes: son oracle et ses dieux* (Paris 1976), 35–51.
6. H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford 1956), vol. 2, no. 476.
  7. J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley 1978), 353.
  8. C. Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles* (Cambridge 1990), 184–85.
  9. H. W. Parke, *Greek Oracles* (London 1967), 77.
  10. F. Courby, “Topographie et architecture: la terrasse du temple,” *Fouilles de Delphes* 11 (1927), 65–66; for a typical general account based on these premises see Parke (note 9), 77–89.
  11. A. P. Oppe, “The Chasm at Delphi,” *JHS* 24 (1904), 214–40.
  12. L. Piccardi, “Active Faulting at Delphi, Greece: Seismotechnic Remarks and a Hypothesis for the Geologic Environment of a Myth,” *Geology* 28 (2000), 651–54.
  13. E. I. McQueen, *Diodorus Siculus: The Reign of Philip II* (Bristol 1995), 89.
  14. J. Z. de Boer and J. R. Hale, “The Geological Origins of the Oracle at Delphi, Greece,” in *The Archaeology of Geological Catastrophes*, B. McGuire, D. Griffiths, and I. Stewart, eds. (London 2000), 399–412; “New Evidence for the Geological Origins of the Ancient Delphic Oracle (Greece),” *Geology* 29.8 (2001), 707–10, together with extensive personal communication.
  15. J. Z. de Boer, “Delphi’s Small ‘Omphalos’: An Enigma,” *SyllClass* 18 (2007), 81–104.
  16. L. B. Holland, “The Mantic Mechanism at Delphi,” *AJA* 37 (1933), 201–14.
  17. R. Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* (Albany, NY 2000), 259–76; dialogue with Lobsang Llalunpa.
  18. E. R. Dodds (note 4), 74.
  19. This essay began its life as a contribution to the symposium “Mythos with Logos: Dialogues on the Essence and Timeless Value of Ancient Greek Myths,” held on the Greek island of Ikaria in June 2005, under the direction of Professor Kostas Buraselis of the University of Athens. That contribution appeared in the *Proceedings* of the symposium, privately published (variously in Greek and English) in Athens in 2007. Since then it has been much revised and developed, not least as the result of being presented as a lecture at the Universities of Virginia and Iowa, at St. Anselm’s College, and, most recently, at Xavier University. For the sharply intelligent comments of the audiences at these institutions I am most grateful: my final text owes much to them.