

CHAPTER 1
 INTRODUCTION

Revisiting Delphi

As an ancient story has it, Zeus once aspired to find the centre of the earth.¹ He sent out two eagles from the poles, anticipating that they would meet in the middle. The eagles happened to meet above Delphi, where the Greeks erected a stone called the *omphalos* ('navel') of the earth.² In his treatise *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, Plutarch tells us of one Epimenides of Phaestus who decided to consult Apollo himself about the truth of this story.³ He received an unclear and ambiguous response (χρησμὸν ἄσαφῆ καὶ ἀμφίβολον) from which he concluded that there was no centre of the earth or sea, and even if there were, this information was not available to gods and humans. Plutarch interprets the episode thus: 'Now very likely the god kept him from his attempt to investigate an ancient myth as though it were a painting to be tested by the touch.'⁴

What is the point of the story? What does it reveal about the place of Delphi and its famous oracle in the real and imaginary landscape of ancient Greece? The focus is not so much on the prediction itself – indeed, we do not even hear the precise words of the oracle – but on questions of truth, narrative

¹ Str. 9.3.6.

² On the *omphalos* see Bousquet 1951; Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 48–9; Kindt 2012b.

³ On Plutarch and his works see Brenk 1977; Duff 1999. Epimenides variously features in the ancient evidence (see e.g. Str. 10.4.14; D.L. 1.110; Pl. *Lg.* 642D). He apparently had supernatural qualities himself. See in detail the entry on 'Epimenides' in the *RE*.

⁴ Plu. *Moralia* 410A (translation adapted from Babbitt 1936).

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and storytelling. Plutarch tells the story of a human attempt to verify a traditional narrative – an aetiological myth explaining the centrality of Delphi from a ‘global’ point of view – with the help of the gods.⁵ Yet, in this instance at least, we find the oracle turning down the human desire to know. Epimenides’ attempt to check the factual truth in the ancient story does not find divine approval. Indeed, to ask about the factual truth behind an ancient myth is said to be just as futile as trying to comprehend the quality of a painting by touching it. At the end of the day Epimenides’ question remains unanswered.

But does it really? There is some kind of insight at the end of Plutarch’s story, even though it does not come straight from the oracle’s mouth but is derived indirectly, through human interpretation. Both Epimenides (as character in the story) and Plutarch (as narrator) find some meaning in the ambiguous response to Epimenides’ enquiry. What insight do they take away from Delphi and the ambiguous response at the core of this story? We are probably not far off the mark if we assume that the answer to this question has to do with the issue of Delphi’s centrality itself.

It has become almost a commonplace to point out that, in a world shaped by the large number of independent poleis, the Delphic oracle was an important central institution. In a religious culture that featured few definite authorities, the oracle of Apollo at Delphi was regarded as a rare seat of authority, an authority that claimed to propagate divine knowledge and therefore served as an important source of truth and orientation. Yet the centrality of the Delphic oracle and of the divine voice at its core was not so much material or geographical – Delphi was located in a remote area of central Greece – but *symbolic*.⁶ The physical mark of the *omphalos* represented this symbolical centrality of Delphi in Greek thought and literature. It reminded all those visiting the sanctuary in order to consult the oracle, to watch the Pythian Games or to admire

⁵ See Burkert’s influential definition of myth as a ‘traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance’ in Burkert 1979: 23.

⁶ On Delphi’s remoteness see Morgan 1990: 183–4.

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the lavish temples and dedications, that Delphi was indeed central to the Greek enterprise.⁷ If there is a moral to Plutarch's story, then, it is that testing a foundation narrative of Delphi's centrality for its factual authenticity somewhat misses the point. Plutarch tells us that this question is the wrong way to seek out the truth in the ancient story. Instead, he interprets the unclear oracular response, which seems to preclude further communication, as an attempt by the god to discourage Epimenides from his misguided enquiry.

This book investigates 'Delphic oracle stories': accounts – like the one about Epimenides of Phaestus – which tell about a consultation of the Delphic oracle. Such accounts have come down to us in large numbers from a variety of different authors and in several genres: the two most comprehensive collections of prophecies from Delphi to date count 615 and 535 individual responses respectively, many of which are attested to in more than one source.⁸ While some of these sources only mention the oracle and its prophecies in passing, many embed the oracles in extensive tales of prediction and fulfilment.

Delphi and its oracle are mentioned (as 'Pytho') as early as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁹ Its prophecies feature prominently in the major genres of Greek thought and literature, most notably perhaps in historiography, Greek drama and philosophy: stories about consultations of the Delphic oracle are told in the *Histories* of Herodotus, in Xenophon's *Cyropaideia* and in Aristophanes' comedies as well as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (to mention just two examples of Greek tragedies featuring Delphic prophecies).¹⁰

The telling of oracle stories did not cease during the post-Classical periods. Indeed, numerous Delphic oracle stories

⁷ For a history of the institution of the Delphic oracle see now Scott 2014. On the centrality of Delphi see also Rosenberger 2001: 141–7.

⁸ Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 2; Fontenrose 1978: 244–416. The discrepancy between the totals is mostly due to differing attitudes towards what should count as an individual response.

⁹ See Hom. *Il.* 2.519, 9.405; Hom. *Od.* 8.79–81, 11.580f.

¹⁰ See the respective entries on these authors and texts in the *index locorum* of Fontenrose 1978: 453–4 (Herodotus), 457 (Xenophon), 452 (Aristophanes) 451–2 (Aeschylus) and 457 (Sophocles).

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can still be found in the rich literature of Hellenistic and Roman Greece. They are included in substantial numbers in works such as Pausanias' *Periegesis*, Plutarch's *Moralia* and *Vitae* and in the *Library* of Diodorus.¹¹ Even though the oracular institution was closed down by the Roman emperor Theodosius I in 390/391 CE, references to Delphi continue to feature in storytelling up to this day.¹² We may, for example, think of William Golding's unfinished last novel *The Double Tongue*, which is narrated from the point of view of a Pythia at Delphi.¹³ Or we may recall the oracle in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Matrix*, featuring a female oracle stubbornly refusing to speak straight: 'Sorry kid. You got the gift, but it looks like you are waiting for something.'¹⁴ Oracle stories, it seems, have never really fallen out of fashion.

Many of our sources on Delphi do not just report the prophecy itself but also enlighten us as to the kind of questions that were allegedly put to the oracle.¹⁵ Indeed, oracle stories are fantastic sources to find out what kind of concerns troubled people in the ancient world and what problems prompted them to resort to oracular divination. To what god shall we sacrifice? Is it better to do X or Y?¹⁶

These accounts typically also tell us about human success or failure in 'making sense' of the divine words. Moreover, with one noticeable exception (which is in itself meaningful – see chapter 3), all these stories confirm the belief in the divine capacity to survey the past, present and future, because the divine

¹¹ For a complete list of all references to Delphi and its prophecies in these (and other) ancient authors see Fontenrose 1978, in particular 456 (Plutarch), 455 (Pausanias) and 453 (Diodorus).

¹² Numerous examples could be listed here. They include merely coincidental references (e.g. Tsoukalis and Emmanouilidis 2011) as well as allusions in popular literature (e.g. MacGregor 1991). See Wood 2003: 211–28, 229–50 for a discussion of Delphic themes outside of classical literature. On the decline and end of the institution of the Delphic oracle in antiquity see Thompson 1946; Gregory 1983; Levin 1989; and, more recently, Scott 2014: 223–44, 245–9.

¹³ Golding 1995.

¹⁴ A quote from the oracle in the first film of the Matrix trilogy.

¹⁵ On this point see in detail Bowden 2005: 109–33.

¹⁶ See Fontenrose 1978: 35–9 on the different ways in which questions to the oracle were framed. On the questions allegedly put to the oracle by the Athenians see Bowden 2005: 109–33.

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prediction at the core of these narratives *always* and *inevitably* is fulfilled in the end.

More frequently than not, of course, this fulfilment occurs in wholly unexpected ways, as in the case of one Phalanthus of Sparta, who consulted the Pythia about a military enterprise.¹⁷ He received the response that he would gain both a territory and a city when he saw rain falling from a cloudless sky. After several failed attempts, he finally remembered the prophecy. He realised that the prediction featured an *adynaton* ('an impossibility') set out as a condition for his success – and despaired. Surely his plans would not succeed as it cannot possibly rain from a blue sky? Yet the prophecy was fulfilled when Phalanthus puts his head down in his wife's lap and bemoaned his fate. She felt such sympathy for her husband's misery that she began to cry. Her name, we learn, is Aethra ('Clear Sky'); her tears were the drops of rain that fell seemingly out of the blue. It will come as no surprise that the very same night Phalanthus is said to have taken the city of Tarentum.

The focus of this story is certainly on the unlikely and marvellous ways in which the oracle becomes true. There is a profound sense of anticipation in the beginning of the story, when we hear about the seemingly impossible prediction, matched by the equally distinct sense of surprise about the way in which events turn out. The oracle and its eventual fulfilment frame the narrative and direct the reader's attention to what happens in between. It is exactly this 'in-between' that we will focus on in the following chapters of this book.

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How have oracle stories been studied in the past? Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the nineteenth-century preoccupation with 'what really happened', older scholarship has shared Epimenides' concern with realism. At first, the only kind of truth scholars were interested in was the literal one,

¹⁷ Paus. 10.10.6; Plu. *Moralia* 408A. For an excellent interpretation of this story see Dougherty 1992.

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and questions of historical narrative and storytelling did not feature at all on the agenda of scholarly endeavours. And like Epimenides, classical scholars first turned to Delphi itself to ‘make sense’ of oracles claiming Delphic origins. Could the Pythia really deliver prophecies like these? Was she influenced by ominous vapours coming out of the ground? Did priests put her incoherent babble into meaningful form?

Unfortunately, however, these questions are harder to answer than one might think. The problem is that the ancient evidence falls silent as soon as the enquirer enters the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Either the ancient Greeks knew exactly what happened during the consultation of the Pythia and so deemed it unnecessary to comment on it, or (more likely) deemed it religiously improper to comment on the nuts and bolts of the oracular procedure. Whatever the case, the result of this silence is that there is very little evidence on Delphic ritual.¹⁸

The evidence we do have famously seems to attribute the nature of the Pythia’s inspiration to vapours emerging from the ground.¹⁹ Yet this evidence is late (dating mostly from the Roman period) and unreliable. Moreover, the scholarly perception of the Pythia’s state of ecstatic inspiration is itself based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the point these sources make about the nature of mantic inspiration.²⁰ In the end, there is little if any conclusive information in the literary evidence about what really happened during the consultation of the Pythia; unfortunately the material evidence has not been able to improve this situation significantly (see below).²¹

In the absence of any straightforward ancient accounts of how the Pythia came to deliver the prophecies, some scholars have resorted to the means of practical experimentation.

¹⁸ See Fontenrose 1978: 196–228; Bowden 2005: 12–39 for a critical discussion of the evidence.

¹⁹ See e.g. Diod. 16.26.2–4; Plu. *Moralia* 402B; Str. 9.3.5 with Fontenrose 1978: 197–203, 204–12.

²⁰ As Fontenrose 1978: 204 has rightly pointed out, ‘the conception of the Pythia’s madness, found in a few late writers, has its origins in Plato’s conception of prophetic *mania* ..., based on the word play *mantikē/manikē* and parallel to teletic, poetic, and amorous *mania*’. On the nature of divine inspiration see also Dietrich 1990; Holzhausen 1993. On the vapour theory see Oppé 1904; Littleton 1986.

²¹ See Scott 2014: 22.

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Occasionally, efforts to get to the core of the matter took on a fairly amusing twist: Richard Chandler, a British antiquary and member of the Society of Dilettanti, visited Delphi in 1766 and believed he had found the nature of the Pythia's inspiration in the juxtaposition of cold water and wine. He writes about his visit to the oracle:

I began to wash my hands in it [the Castalian spring], but was instantly chilled, and seized with a tremor, which rendered me unable to stand or walk without support. On reaching the monastery, I was wrapped in a garment lined with warm fur, and, drinking freely of wine, fell into a most profuse perspiration. This incident, when Apollo was dreaded, might have been embellished with a superstitious interpretation. Perhaps the Pythia, who bathed in this icy fluid, mistook her shivering for the god.²²

Another classical scholar by the (itself auspicious) name of Traugott Oesterreicher, author of *Inspiration: Demonic and Other*, even went so far as to chew on a bunch of laurel leaves to see whether this would allow him to utter predictions – laurel is variously mentioned in our sources as a key ingredient of oracular divination as practised at Delphi.²³ Unfortunately, his efforts did not seem to have the desired effect. In the words of E. R. Dodds, Oesterreicher ‘was disappointed to find himself no more inspired than usual’.²⁴

In the face of such futile attempts, scholarly attention soon shifted from Delphic ritual to the responses claiming Delphic origins. The vapours were still going strong, in particular in the popular conception of Delphi outside academic circles. The debate was fuelled by new geological surveys carried out at the site in the late 1990s, which seemed to suggest the existence of hydrocarbon gases, which are known to have hallucinogenic effects.²⁵ Yet already before Joseph Fontenrose published his important corrective of what we really know about the mantic session at Delphi (see below), the question of the meaning and interpretation of the oracles themselves had taken centre

²² Chandler 1817, vol. 2: 302.

²³ See e.g. Call. *Iamb.* 4.26–7; Ar. *Pl.* 213 with Fontenrose 1978: 224, n. 38 with further references.

²⁴ Dodds 1951: 73; Oesterreicher 1930: 319, n. 3 as discussed by Dodds 1951: 73.

²⁵ See de Boer, Hale and Chanton 2001.

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stage. Classical scholars soon realised that the question of the nature of the Pythia's inspiration does not get us very far in understanding the oracles themselves. The reason for this is that many of the more memorable responses and the stories that contain them are carefully crafted and obviously not the product of some drug-induced state of mind: they are more like poetry in their capacity to refer to the world through figurative language.

At first, classical scholars pursued the same quest for realism they applied to Delphic ritual by focusing on the responses themselves. That is to say that in looking at these responses, classical scholarship has for a long time followed Epimenides in attempting to separate fact from fiction. Was a particular response really delivered at Delphi? Who may have circulated it after the event, and for what reason? These questions preoccupy much historically oriented scholarship on Delphi to this day. In order to write a history from these accounts, many scholars have subjected them to a form of historical criticism, which remains deeply committed to the idea of *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*.

Questions about the historicity of oracles, for example, prevail in what remains the most comprehensive collection of Delphic prophecies to date. In many ways, the critical approach taken by Joseph Fontenrose in his study *The Delphic Oracles* (1978) – with all its undeniable merits and despite its obvious problems – has remained paradigmatic up until today. Fontenrose suggested an elaborate classification of responses according to the time that had passed between their alleged delivery at Delphi and the time when they were first recorded by an ancient author.²⁶ While his classification of responses does not allow for absolute statements about the historicity of individual oracles, Fontenrose states that it does provide some indication of their origins: predictions that were recorded relatively soon after their alleged delivery at Delphi were, frequently, straightforward statements about past and present events. The famous ambiguous predictions

²⁶ See Fontenrose 1978: 7–9 for a succinct introduction to his system of classification.

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anticipating future events, in contrast, turned out to feature mostly in texts describing events that (allegedly) occurred long before the lifetime of their respective authors.²⁷

When it was first published, Fontenrose's study was an important milestone in the history of scholarship on Delphic prophecies. While earlier assessments of authenticity and authorship were mainly driven by subjective judgement, it was the major achievement of Fontenrose's book to establish a more scholarly and systematic approach towards the responses allegedly delivered at this institution.²⁸ His research also put Delphic scholarship on a more scholarly by correcting many fantastic assumptions about the nature of the Pythia's inspiration and the procedures at Delphi.²⁹ Ultimately, however, his study has been unable to move the questions scholars have asked about Delphi and its prophecies beyond issues of authenticity and authorship.

Such questions are, however, problematic not only because in many instances we can no longer say with certainty where exactly the boundary between fact and fiction was drawn. Perhaps more fundamentally, these questions also misunderstand the nature of the oracular discourse in the ancient world: more frequently than not, the ancients were not able – or even inclined – to separate the real from the imaginary in these accounts. Indeed, there are a number of Delphic oracle stories which themselves tell of (inevitably negative) consequences that befall all human beings who attempt to prove the oracle wrong.³⁰ The bottom line is that in dealing with Delphi and its prophecies we should not subject them to a modernist and ultimately anachronistic kind of realism, which does not do justice to the place of Delphi in Greek thought and literature.

We have already learned with Epimenides of Phaestus that the truthfulness of the Delphic tradition can be found on the symbolic rather than the literal plane. To the Greeks, it seems,

²⁷ Fontenrose 1978: 13–24.

²⁸ In particular if compared to Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1.

²⁹ Fontenrose 1978: 169–228. But see now de Boer, Hale and Chanton 2001.

³⁰ These oracle stories are discussed in detail in Kindt forthcoming.

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Delphi was a source of true divine knowledge and orientation – even if insights into the meaning of the divine words were notoriously difficult to obtain. After all, oracles rarely, if ever, provide easy answers to easy questions, and what may look like a straightforward response will all too frequently turn out to have a different meaning.

New Questions for the Ancient Oracle

Rather than try to separate fact from fiction in Delphic oracle stories we should appreciate them for what they are: accounts of prediction and fulfilment that reveal something interesting and meaningful about those human beings who are trying to ‘make sense’ of the world with the help of the gods. What I propose is a change in focus: rather than asking whether a certain response was really delivered at Delphi in the form it came down to us, I suggest we ask how a particular author, writing at a particular point in time and for a particular purpose, told Delphic oracle stories within his work. Rather than test these narratives for a factual authenticity they never claimed to have, we should examine the way in which these sources present the success or failure of human efforts to interpret them. Rather than speculate about who invented a particular response and for what reason, we may want to enquire into the world view and outlook contained in these responses and the narratives that surround them.

At this stage it may be worth emphasising that this does not mean that we need to relegate oracle stories to the realm of literary fiction-making. Indeed, the focus on the storytelling aspect of the oracular tradition is not meant to turn these sources into ‘mere literature’ (whatever that may mean). After all, history, too, draws on the medium of narrative. Storytelling is key to the way in which the past becomes tangible as history.³¹ Historiography relies on narrative to ‘makes sense’ of past events, by establishing connections (and thereby relationships)

³¹ Storytelling turns the past into history by singling out a small sample from the confusing array of past events and by presenting them as part of a coherent narrative arc with a beginning, a middle and an end. On this point see also Mautner 1994: 172.