

THE ORACLES OF DELPHI

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Imagine a culture that celebrates women as fonts of wisdom.

Imagine a tradition that values more than just intellectual ways of knowing, such as synchronicities and dreams and intuition.

Imagine teachers who encourage their students to anticipate the path ahead, not to just look for an immediate solution.

Imagine a Sage who requires the Inquirer to participate in his or her inquiry, in order to evoke deeper learning.

Imagine Shamanesses who invite us to be all we can be.

These were the Oracles of Delphi.

For thousands of years the Oracles of Delphi were consulted before any major decision was made. Kings, generals, and philosophers all sought her advice.

The average person was only allowed to approach the Oracle once in their lifetime. The petitioner had to cleanse himself or herself in the nearby sacred spring before approaching her. Then they would ask their question.

When you visit the Temple of Apollo at Delphi today, you can see an underground chamber that goes beneath the adyton. This was where the Oracles entered. Ancient historians reported that there were fumes coming up

through a fissure in the ground in this area, and the Oracle would sit on a tripod above these fumes. She would hold a sprig of laurel and look into a bowl of water as she answered the petitioners' questions.

Recent research has shown that there are two major geological fault lines that cross like an X under the adyton in the temple of Apollo. There is evidence there of gases, such as ethylene, that could induce a borderline state.

The Oracle would prepare herself. She would fast and would only meet with petitioners on certain days. It's believed that this might have been when the gases were safe enough for her to be able to be seated above them.





Priestess of Delphi (1891)
by John Collier.

The women who served as Oracles were chosen for their natural abilities. They were called Oracles, and their prophecies were also called oracles. Sometimes the women were also called Pythias. Pythias were associated with the mythical python from this area. Serpents were associated with the Divine Feminine. Sometimes the Oracles were called Sibyls. In Greek, sibyl comes from theobule; theo, which is the deity, and bule, which means to sing. So, she's singing from the Divine.

The Oracles presented their oracles for thousands of years, possibly as early as 5000 BCE. The Oracle Tradition ended in the year 394 of our era, when the Roman Emperor Theodosius forbade any of the ancient traditions.

There was a special stone placed in the temple area at Delphi called the omphalos, which means navel or belly button. It was believed that Delphi was the center of the world and that it was connected, through its navel, to the mother goddess. What closer connection have any of us had to our mother than through our navel?

Now, let's look at how the Oracles were celebrated as fountains of wisdom.

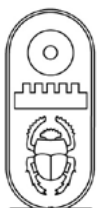
In ancient Greece, no major decision was made without first consulting the Oracle. On the path leading up to the Temple of Apollo there are stone treasuries. These are small buildings that were filled with riches given in thanks for the Oracles' advice.

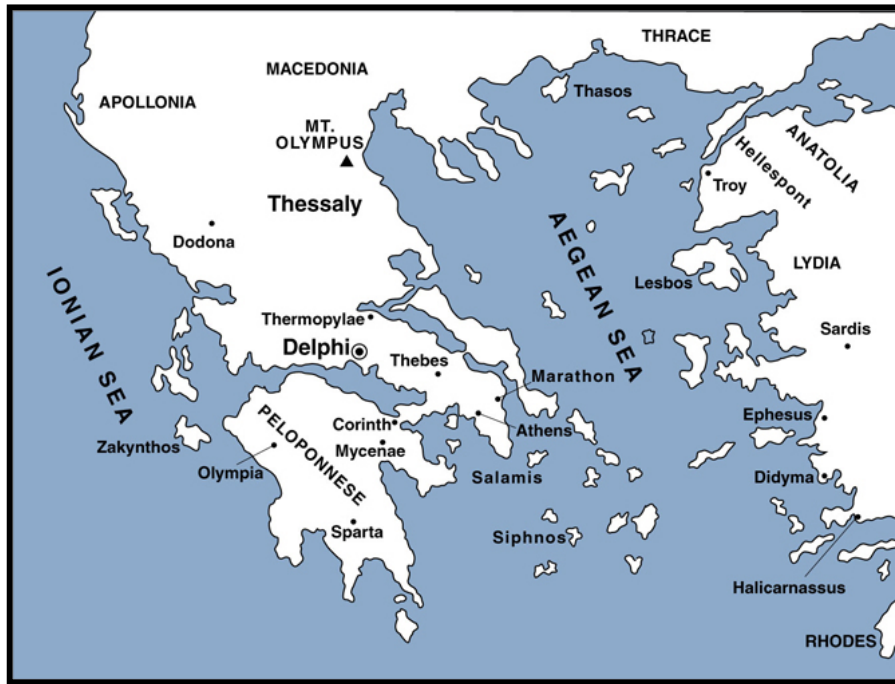
The Oracles were able to see beyond the usual limits of time and space, again, through synchronicities, intuition, and dreams. You may be familiar with one of the most famous oracles associated with Delphi, that of King Croesus and his request for war advice.

Croesus was the richest man in that part of the world and was very powerful. He was the King of Lydia and had everything he wanted. The Persians were not threatening Croesus, but he felt that they could in the future, so, he asked his representative to



The omphalos or navel of the world at Delphi.
Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.





ask the Oracle if he should wage war on the Persians. The Oracle replied that if he did, he would destroy a mighty empire.

Croesus interpreted this to mean that he would destroy the mighty Persian Empire, but it didn't turn out that way. The Persians soundly defeated Croesus's army and captured him.

After his defeat and eventual release, Croesus sent his representative back to the Oracle to ask where her error had been. She pointed out that when he had previously asked if Croesus should wage war on the Persians, she had said – if you do, you will destroy a mighty empire. She said that this was true, but he never asked the second, and more important question, which would have been – which empire? It proved to be Croesus's.

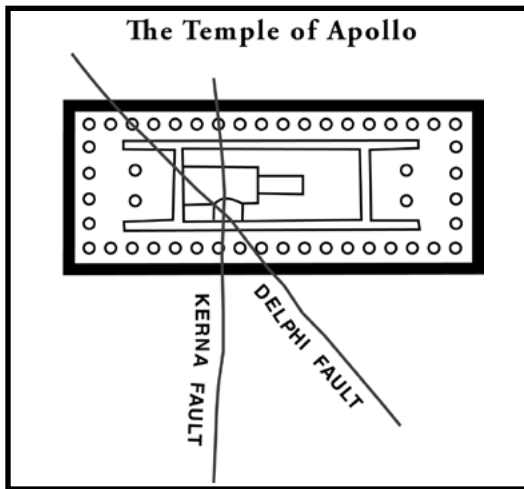
The Oracles expected inquirers to participate in their own learning. They often responded in riddles so that the person would have to participate in the response themselves, not just have it handed to them.

You may be familiar with the Oracle's connection with Socrates, as related to us by
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Plato. Before his famous trial that involved the Oracle, Socrates said that if we can understand something through learning, we should learn it, and if something is common knowledge, don't ask the Oracle. In the same way if there is something we can do in our own lives with the powers that are already available to us to improve our lot, we should do it. He said we should not count on the deities or some magical formula to do it for us.



Aegeus, the mythical king who founded Athens, consults the Oracle.



The Stoic Epictetus said that inquirers of the Oracle should consider whether they are motivated by fear and desire or by a detached wish for truth. When someone asked the Oracle a question, Epictetus wondered, were they expecting a certain answer and did they just want her to confirm it for them, or were they really looking for the truth? Epictetus said that we should treat the Oracle's response like we treat the perception that we get from our eyes. We don't tell our eyes: "I want you to see this." We look at and perceive what the eyes send to our brain. In the same way, Epictetus said, people should look at what the Oracle said to them very impersonally and, whatever it is that they are told, they should put it to good use, even if it's not the response that they wanted.

The Oracles also invited people to be all they could be to embrace their destiny. Before Pythagoras was born, his father (or in some versions of the story, his mother) visited the Oracle of Delphi. She knew that Pythagoras's mother was pregnant and said that she would give birth to a man who was supremely beautiful, wise, and beneficial to humankind. This is how Pythagoras got his name; he was named after the Pythia, the Oracle who predicted his birth.

Later, when he had established his famous school, Pythagoras taught in three degrees. The second degree included moral and political laws. He said that he learned what he taught about moral laws from the Oracle at Delphi.

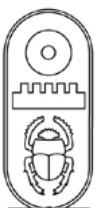
Socrates's advice regarding approaching the Oracle was previously mentioned. You may also be familiar with the story of Socrates and his famous trial that involved the Oracle.

Socrates was put on trial for corrupting the youth of Athens and introducing false deities. However, when Socrates chose to defend himself at his trial, he said that this wasn't really the reason he was on trial. He then shared why he believed he was on trial.

He said that his childhood friend went to the Oracle at Delphi and asked if there was any man wiser than Socrates. She said no. Socrates then said that he was sure that this couldn't be correct, so he started interviewing people whom he was sure were wiser than he was.

First, he interviewed a politician with a reputation for wisdom. He wanted to prove that the politician was wiser than him but after speaking with the politician he said that he was not wiser than Socrates because he thinks he knows something when he does not know it.

Then Socrates spoke with poets, dramatists, and musicians and found that they didn't really understand the sublime messages of their creations, so they weren't wiser than Socrates either. Finally, he spoke with craftspeople and found that, based on the strength of their technical proficiency, they claimed knowledge of all other subjects which they didn't really possess. As Socrates interviewed people to prove that he wasn't the wisest person, he created enmity from those whom he had



interviewed, which led to the false charges against him.

Finally, Socrates said that the Oracle might be right because he alone seemed to be prepared to admit his own ignorance rather than pretend to know something he did not know. More than 2,400 years later this is reflected in the “Rosicrucian Code of Life” – “If someone asks you for advice on a subject you do not know well, humbly admit your ignorance.”

Now let’s participate in a meditation related to the Oracles of Delphi. Please close your eyes and take three deep breaths.

Visualize the culture that you live in celebrating women as fonts of wisdom.

What does that look like?

Who are these women?

What are their roles in your society and your culture, and in your neighborhood?

What is your relationship with them?

Now, see your tradition valuing more than just intellectual ways of knowing, for example, seeing beyond the usual limits of time and space through intuition or dreams or synchronicities.

How can that manifest in your world?

How can it manifest in your life?

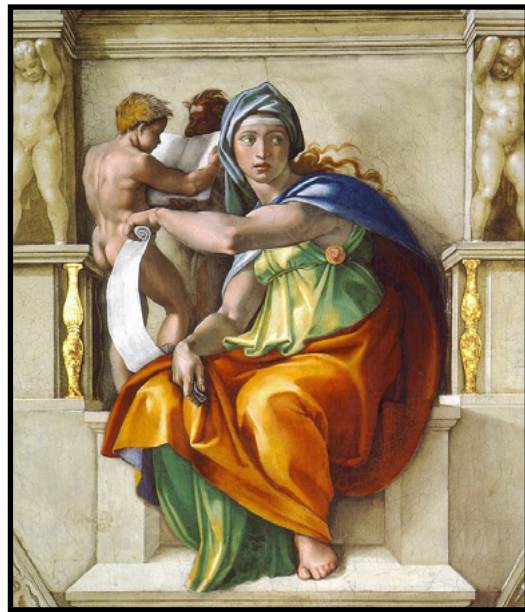
Now imagine teachers who encourage foresight to see not just an immediate solution, but to see the greater path ahead.

Consider some questions in your life that you hope to receive answers to.

How can you see beyond just the immediate situation?

Can you see how it fits with the full course of your lifetime?

For the most important activities that you participate in, how can you see that they fit with the full course of your country’s history or the future of our planet – beyond just the immediate solution?



Michelangelo's Delphic Sibyl (1509).

How can your actions have a greater impact further down the path?

Now imagine a sage, either in your life or in your society, who expects inquirers to participate in their own learning. They don't just hand you the answer and, if it's something that you can do on your own, you do it. You don't expect someone to magically produce a result.

What is some action that you can take to be of service to others right now?

Imagine shamanesses who invite us to be all we can be, to step into our destiny.

What do you want to know about your destiny?

If you could speak with the Divine in order to live at your highest potential, what would you ask?

Open yourself to messages from the Oracles of Delphi, from your inner self, from your subconscious, from the Master Within to help you fulfill your destiny.

This can happen at any time, in any place.

So Mote It Be!