

Delphi and Discord

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The ancient site of Delphi is one shrouded in mystery. Located on the slopes of Mount Parnassos in the region of Phocis, the sanctuary has been the subject of much attention in both ancient and modern times. The *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo*¹ and Alcaeus' *Hymn to Apollo* narrate the mythical origins of the site.² It is clear from these accounts and others that Delphi is shrouded in mystery; yet when one looks past these myths, one can examine the role of Delphi as a place for interaction among *poleis*. Oracular consultations were not the only activity that took place at the site. A considerable number of activities took place at the Delphi: rich offerings and sanctuaries were dedicated, Panhellenic games were held, and alliances were formed. In some ways Delphi served to smooth over discord between states; in others, however, the site and its institutions may have fostered conflict.

It is unlikely that the actual oracles delivered by the Pythia, the priestess of the Temple of Apollo³, constrained interstate discord. Fontenrose has collected a considerable number of purported oracular responses, preserved in a variety of sources.⁴ Whether these responses are legendary or accurately reflect the pronouncements of the Pythia is not particularly important, as they serve a narrative role.

1. The Homeric Hymns and Homerica, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

2. Denys Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 144.

3. Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 333.

4. See Jose Eddy Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).



Attic red-figure kylix of the Pythia, 440–430 BCE.

5. Michael Stahl and Uwe Walter, "Athens," in *A Companion to Archaic Greece*, ed. Kurt Raaflaub (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 144.

6. Herbert William Parke and Donald Ernest Wilson Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle: Volume II The Oracular Responses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 16.

7. Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernodette Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 8.1–8.3.8.8. 8.

Individuals or communities could use oracular responses to drum up popular support for their actions or strengthen ties between poleis. Solon, seeking to spur Athens into recapturing Salamis, wrote poems that may have included oracular elements.⁵ Preserved by Plutarch is one such verse that Solon may have intended to present as an oracular response: "Happy is the city that hearkens to one herald."⁶ In this way Solon's appeal was strengthened when, feigning madness and pronouncing verses, he persuaded the Athenians to fight to regain control of Salamis.⁷ Thus Delphi could play a role in the fomenting of conflict.

Conversely, oracular responses could be used to strengthen ties between communities. As Herodotus relates, the city of Thera offered an account of colonization different than that of its settlement Cyrene. Thera's account emphasizes the great pains that a polis took in preparing a

settlement expedition; it does not place particular emphasis on the role of Battos, the oikistes, or founder, of Cyrene.⁸ The Cyrenean account, on the other hand, de-emphasizes the role of Thera, emphasizing rather Battos' "royal ancestry" in his duty to found a settlement.⁹ Each account makes reference to oracular consultation at Delphi; however, the consultation stories are different, serving the different purposes of each account. As Osborne argues, Thera sought to "[keep] alive links" with the wealthy Cyrene, and thus it highlighted its role in settlement.¹⁰ Ultimately, the two poleis affirmed their ties in a fourth century decree concerning citizenship rights. It is telling the decree, according to its own language, was to be placed "in the ancestral temple of Pythian Apollo."¹¹ Delphi could serve some role in smoothing over discord, as Thera and Cyrene show, but one cannot conclude that Delphi always did so. Individuals and groups could politicize the oracle for their own ends, sometimes with discord as a result.

Oracular consultations undertaken by tyrant families certainly demonstrate the potential for Delphi to be politicized. Sometime in the late sixth century, Herodotus relates, the Alcmeonidai, an elite Athenian family seeking to unseat the more dominant Peisistratidai, "bribed the Pythia to tell any Spartiates who came to consult the oracle...to liberate Athens."¹² This use of the oracle hardly smoothed over interstate discord; learning of the bribe, the Spartans sought to restore Hippias as tyrant of Athens.¹³ Not long after the expulsion of the Peisistratidai, Kleisthenes gained power, himself the grandson of Kleisthenes of Sicyon.¹⁴ This elder Kleisthenes was also involved with the politicization of the oracle at Delphi. Inquiring whether he might expel from Sicyon his rival Adrastus, Kleisthenes gets a stark and insulting response: 'Adrastus is ruler of the city, you but a stone thrower'.¹⁵ This oracular response is nothing but a fabrication, argues Parker, the "blunt rebuke...but another fiber in the skein of later anti-Kleisthenic propaganda."¹⁶ Thus individuals could use the institution of oracles to further

8. Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin, 2003), 2.29.

9. Osborne, 10-11.

10. Osborne, 10-11.

11. Hdt. 2.28.

12. Hdt. 9.36.

13. Hdt. 6.59.

14. Hdt. 10.1.

15. Parke and Wormell (1956), 24.

16. Victor Parker, "Some Aspects of the Foreign and Domestic Policy of Kleisthenes of Sicyon," *Hermes* 122, no. 4 (1994): 415.

their political ends, as some unknown individual did to belittle Kleisthenes as a leuster. And politicization of Delphi could contribute to interstate discord, as the expulsion of the Peisistratidai illustrates.

Oracular consultation, though, was not the only significant activity associated with Delphi. Stephanitic games—in which victors were awarded crowns—were first held at Delphi in the early sixth century. The games celebrated either Apollo's slaying of the dragon; alternatively, they may have commemorated the victory of the Amphictyony—the league that controlled Delphi from the sixth century on—in the First Sacred War.¹⁷ Thus one function of games such as these may have been memory-building; that is, the preservation of stories or events deemed important to identity. Stephanitic games may have served other functions as well. Artistic and athletic contests like the Pythian Games provided the opportunity for “informal meetings between [aristocratic] individuals from different states.”¹⁸ These elite interactions could take on a number of forms. Kleisthenes of Sicyon, for example, as Herodotus relates, used the occasion of the Olympic Games to announce to

17. Michael Scott, *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 73.

18. Catherine Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 136, 204.

Modern remains of the stadium used for Pythian Games.



aristocrats from around the Mediterranean that he sought to marry off his daughter.¹⁹ One can speculate, then, that this festival aspect of Delphi may have served to mollify interstate discord. At the Pythian Games, powerful members of different poleis could cultivate relationships; or, as Neer puts it, they could symbolically “[mediate] their conflicts over athla”.²⁰ Indeed, Delphi may have smoothed over discord by acting as a place where elites could build solidarity between poleis and strengthen their own position within the polis. Morris discusses such in his monograph on archaic social paradigms. “Elitist poetry” allowed elites to construct an elite identity, “an imagined community” between poleis. Among other themes, this poetry drew on elite experiences and interactions at interstate games held at sites such as Delphi.²¹

The framing of relations as between states may even be inaccurate, as Morgan suggests. One can see a pattern common to activities at Delphi in the archaic period—it is elites who consult the oracle, elites who participate in contests, and elites who build dedications.²² Elites, then, may have been the central actors in interstate relations in the archaic period. It was not until the classical period that the coalescence of the state as a unit occurred; this transition may have been tied to practices at Delphi, as the nature of dedication practices changed over time.²³ One might speculate that at some point in the archaic period, middling groups gained more sway as a stronger civic identity emerged.²⁴ For much of the archaic period, examination of the role Delphi played in interstate relations is, more accurately, an examination of how elite interactions at Delphi shaped the relations between the poleis those elites represented.

The shift toward a stronger civic identity can perhaps be seen in the emergence in the Amphiictyonic League. The Delphic Amphiictyony, members of which included Sicyon, Athens, and other prominent poleis, may have arisen out of the First Sacred War. That conflict,

19. Hdt. 7.6.

20. Richard Neer, “Framing the Gift: The Politics of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi,” *Classical Antiquity* 20, no. 2 (2001): 328.

21. Ian Morris, “The Strong Principle of Equality and the Archaic Origins of Greek Democracy” in *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*, eds. Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 35–36.

22. Neer, 328.

23. Morgan, 204.

24. Morgan, 204.

25. Michael Scott, *Delphi and Olympia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 71, 74-75.

26. Scott, 79.

27. Polly Low, *Interstate Relations in Classical Greece: Morality and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 69.

Also Demosthenes, *Demosthenis Orationes*, ed. Samuel Henry Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 14.32.

28. Low, 69.

29. Hdt. 2.18

30. Hdt. 9.36

its particular details obscured by legend, was fought the local city Crisa against several poleis from around Greece, each side hoping to control the sanctuary.²⁵ Such an event illustrates how Delphi could both foster and check interstate conflict. Out of war over the site emerged a cooperative association that sought to mollify discord and protect what its members had in Delphi “as a successful node on an important trade network.”²⁶ As Low argues in her application of international relations theory to classical Greece, the Delphic Amphictyony was key in the coalescence of an interstate system. Through the Amphictyony, member poleis were “united by the fundamental ties of *chôras kai biou kai ethôn kai eleutherias*, ‘territory and life and customs and freedom.’”²⁷ One might consider these—territory et al.—as norms that informed the behavior of member poleis with one another, norms originating from sacred sites like Delphi. One might speculate as well that these norms began to crystallize near the end of the archaic period.

Over the archaic period, from the eighth century down to the fifth, Delphi played somewhat of a varied role in interstate relations. Delphic oracles themselves certainly had the potential to sanction interstate strife. Other activities at Delphi, however, seem to have minimized interstate strife, fostering elite solidarity in the middle of the archaic period and interstate cooperation in the late archaic as stronger civic identities emerged.²⁸ Perhaps the late sixth century reconstruction of the Temple of Apollo by the Alcmeonidai best illustrates this increasing cooperation associated with Delphi. Such was a joint effort, funded by several Greek sources, and a “political statement” as well, the Alcmeonidai intending to “gain favor amongst participant states.”²⁹ But the Alcmeonidai purportedly bribed the Pythia at the same time, an act that brought about bad blood between Athens and Sparta.³⁰ Thus there was potential for both conflict and cooperation to arise from activities at Delphi.

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