

CHAPTER 7
IN TOUCH WITH THE GODS:
APOLLO'S ORACLE AT DELPHI

MAIN POINTS

1. It is quite possible that worship of Apollo became prominent in Greece only during the Dark Age (1100–800 B.C.). No god of that name appears in the Linear B tablets, but he is central to the plot of the *Iliad*.
2. “Paeon” is the English term for a hymn of praise to a god, and its derivation is from “Paian,” a god attested at Knossos during the Late Bronze period.
3. Apollo, who kept his distance from humans, communicated in cryptic terms through the oracle, a term used to describe the gods’ prophetic shrines, the persons who conveyed the gods’ words to humans, and the messages thus conveyed. The most popular oracle was at Delphi, where a clairvoyant priestess gave predictions and advice. The sacred precinct of Delphi on Mount Parnassus included a theater, a stadium, and the temple.
4. Perhaps Apollo’s remoteness finds mythological emblem in his favorite weapon—the bow—from which derive his Homeric epithets “Far-Darter” and “Far-Worker.”
5. Like the other Olympians, Apollo has a dark side. Although he is associated with the civilized arts like music and philosophy and also with healing, he was famed and feared as bringer of plagues—as at the opening of the *Iliad*.
6. In many ways, Apollo seems to be associated with the education of young men. Some scholars derive his name from the Dorian term *apella*, denoting an annual assembly of adult males for the purpose of admitting newly tested youths into the responsibilities of adulthood.
7. The beautiful twin Olympians Apollo and Artemis both concerned themselves with a critical event in the life of the society—initiation of young women and men into their adult roles as wives/mothers and fathers/soldiers/citizens.
8. An *ephebe* was a young man just preparing to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. Some critics see in Achilles just such a youth, undergoing the scrutiny of his elders on the battlefield.
9. Apollo received the sacrifice of each *ephebe*’s long hair. Artemis was the focus of ceremonies in which young women acted out their “savage” state by dressing as bears before being “tamed” into the passive and secluded life that they would know as wives and mothers.
10. The myths that associate Apollo with Delphi and Delos are etiological in that they explain the existence of major cult sites of Apollo in those two locations in the historical period.
11. Delphi’s reputation reached its peak between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C. The facade of the temple was inscribed with maxims urging moderation in all things: “Nothing in Excess” and “Know Yourself.”
12. Delphi, which means “womb,” was believed to be the center of the earth’s surface; an *omphalos* (perhaps a meteor fragment), representing the navel, was kept at the temple. Some sources claimed that the *omphalos* stone was the same one that Cronus swallowed in place of Zeus.

NOTE: According to the mythologist Mircea Eliade, the phenomenon of pronouncing a place the center of the world is widespread in world religions. Not only does it generally signify the center of the world of humans, but it marks an axis going straight through the earth to heaven above and the Underworld below.

Through this axis, communication with the powers can take place. Interestingly, a culture may have several “centers”; it is thus often of more symbolic than geographic significance. Typical world axis places are temples and churches, large trees or posts erected in or outside the village, and mountaintops. The Maypole is probably a remnant of such a tradition.

13. Aeschylus mentions the prehistory of Delphi: after Gaea came Themis, her daughter and Zeus’s second wife, who taught Apollo the art of prophecy.
14. The origin of the Apollo worship at Delphi lies in the Olympic battle between male and female powers; according to the Hymn to Pythian Apollo, Hera, to spite Zeus, gives birth to the serpent Typhon (Typhoeus) parthenogenetically, entrusting his upbringing to the female dragon Python, guardian of the ancient sanctuary at Delphi. Apollo must kill Python to assume control of Delphi. (According to Hesiod, Gaea bore Typhoeus.)
15. Birth stories of heroes usually involve dangers for the child. Hera tries to prevent Leto from giving birth to Apollo and Artemis by refusing her a safe place for her delivery and the assistance of the goddess of childbirth, Eileithyia. Athene persuades Hera to reconsider, and Apollo and Artemis are born on a floating island, transformed by Apollo into Delos.
16. The tale functions etiologically as an explanation of the name of Delos (brilliant), referring to the birth of the sun god.
17. When only three days old, Apollo shoots an arrow through the dragon Python, who has been ravaging the countryside. In his honor the virgin prophetess at the oracle is called Pythia. The Pythian Games were celebrated every fourth year to commemorate Apollo’s victory.

NOTE: Apollo’s slaying of the monster Python reflects the mythological pattern mentioned in Chapter 4: the hero slaying the serpent or monster is a patriarchal perversion of an older theme. The serpent, which used to be one of the sacred symbols of the Great Goddess, has, within the patriarchal rule, become a monster that must be slain or tamed. Another common theme is incorporated in the story: the hero slaying monsters at a very early age. A similar story exists in American folklore, which claims (erroneously) that Davy Crockett killed a bear when he was three years old.

18. Apollo acknowledges guilt at having killed Python and exiles himself from Olympus to work as a shepherd. Hereby he creates a paradigm of expiation for mortals who seek to cleanse themselves of wrongdoing. The Delphic rites thus represent a new order in which guilt can be atoned for rather than paid for in blood.
19. After his purification, Apollo returns to Delphi and inaugurates the first Pythia, who foretells the Trojan War.
20. Every eight years the slaying of Python was reenacted in a religious drama, the Stepterion, by priests at Delphi.
21. The procedures at Delphi required ritual cleansing both of the questioners and of the Pythia. An animal without imperfections was sacrificed, and the priestess entered an underground chamber where, seated upon a tripod, she inhaled sacred vapors from underground, drank sacred water, and chewed bay or laurel leaves. Then, in a trance, she uttered unintelligible words that a priest took down and translated into Greek verse.
22. The oracles are typically ambiguous. Many oracles have been preserved, such as the one advising King Croesus, planning to go to war with the Persians, that a great nation would fall if he crossed the Persian border. Believing that the oracle had promised him victory, Croesus attacked, but the great nation that fell was his own. This oracle, like many others, may be more legendary than historical.

23. During the two Persian invasions of Greece (490 and 480–479 B.C.), the oracle advised surrender in the beginning but ended up supporting the defense of Greece with a “wooden wall,” interpreted by the leader Themistocles to mean warships. Employing the fleet, the Greeks sank most of the Persian armada at the Battle of Salamis.
24. Sophocles uses the myth of Oedipus to confirm that no one can escape divine prophecies.
25. Delphi’s prestige declined after the fifth century B.C. with first the demise of the city-state under Alexander the Great and later the Roman occupation of Greece.
26. Despite his beauty, Apollo was unlucky in love: the mountain nymph Daphne asked Zeus to save her from Apollo’s pursuit and was changed into a bay or laurel tree. The Greek word for laurel is daphne.
27. The youth Cyparissus loves his pet stag so much that when he accidentally kills it, he wants to die and ignores Apollo’s pleas to transfer his affection to the god. Drained by weeping, Cyparissus is transformed into a cyprus.
28. The handsome boy Hyacinthus returns Apollo’s affection but is fatally hit in the head by Apollo’s hurtling discus. Apollo transforms the boy’s body into a hyacinth flower.
29. Coronis, a princess of Thessaly, was already pregnant by Apollo when she fell in love with a mortal man. Although Apollo sent Artemis to kill Coronis, her unborn child was saved and was reared by Chiron, a centaur. The child, Asclepius, became the first physician.
30. When Asclepius learned to revive the dead and thus threatened to overstep the limits of mortality, Zeus killed him with a thunderbolt; Apollo retaliated by killing the Cyclops who forged Zeus’s lightning bolt.
31. The worship of Asclepius at Epidaurus involved reptilian symbols such as the caduceus, variously interpreted as either a phallic symbol or as the Tree of Life, symbol of the Goddess.
32. Employing sympathetic magic, the physicians at Epidaurus applied the ancient Delphic practice of cleansing to their individual human patients.
33. As late as the mid-fourth century A.D., a Roman Emperor, Julian, who wanted to revive paganism, tried to consult the Oracle at Delphi. The melancholy Pythia allegedly responded that “no longer has Phoebus a hut, nor a prophetic laurel, nor a spring that speaks.”

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Hymn to Pythian Apollo

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Apollo

Paian, a god whose name appears at Knossos on Crete in a context dated to the Late Bronze period

Pythia, the priestess at the Oracle at Delphi

Themis, the goddess of eternal law, Gaea’s daughter

Typhon (Typhoeus), the serpent son of Hera (Hesiod: Gaea’s son)

Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis

Artemis, the virgin goddess of the hunt who was involved in initiation rites of young women

Python, the female dragon guardian of Gaea's sanctuary at Delphi, the foster mother of Typhon

Themistocles, Athens's leader during the Persian wars

Daphne, a mountain nymph transformed into a bay or laurel tree

Cyparissus, a young man transformed into a cyprus

Hyacinthus, Apollo's lover killed by his discus and transformed into a flower

Coronis, the mother of Asclepius

Chiron, the wisest of centaurs

Asclepius, son of Coronis and Apollo, the first physician

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Aeschylus (c. 525–456 B.C.)

Sophocles (c. 495–406 B.C.)