

die Wahrheit ihrer Triumphrede um so strahlender hervortreten ließ, so hat auch Psaumis durch seinen Sieg bei den Olympien das Lob des Dichters vollauf verdient und damit alle (hypothetischen) Tadler oder Neider widerlegt.

Kiel

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## THE HERODOTEAN MANTIC SESSION AT DELPHI

As one reads through important treatments of the operation of the Delphic oracle, disparities in interpretation are striking<sup>1</sup>). Descriptions range from the bizarrely fantastic – with raving Pythia, shouting babbled obscurities in hexameter, intoxicated by subterranean fumes rising from a cavern beneath her tripod – to the prosaically dull: a cool, collected Pythia, mildly inspired by a distant Apollo, sanctioning or discouraging projects submitted by her consultants, who often write out and versify her response beforehand<sup>2</sup>).

Farnell wrote a quintessentially romantic description of the “first” Pythia: “. . . the Pythoness ascended into the tripod, and, filled with the divine afflatus which at least the later ages believed to ascend in vapour from a fissure in the ground, burst forth into wild utterance, which was probably some kind of articulate speech, and which the . . . ‘holy ones,’ who with the prophet sat around the tripod, knew well how to interpret . . . What was essential to Delphic divination, then, was the frenzy of the Pythoness

1) For an introduction to the extensive literature on the Delphic oracle, see W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan (Cambridge, Mass. 1985, orig. 1977), 115–17, notes. My use of this literature will be selective, not exhaustive. As Nilsson notes, French and English writers seem to have written most of the literature on the subject, M. Nilsson, *Das delphische Orakel in der neuesten Literatur*, *Historia* 7 (1958) 237–50. On the oracle’s social functions, see R. Parker, *Greek States and Greek Oracles*, in: Crux, *Essays in Greek History* presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, ed. P. Cartledge and F. Harvey (London 1985), 298–326.

2) See P. Amandry, *La mantique Apollinienne à Delphes* (Paris 1950).

and the sounds which she uttered in this state which were interpreted by the 'holy ones' and the 'prophet' according to some conventional code of their own"<sup>3</sup>).

Fontenrose writes of this passage, "This account is [almost] wholly fanciful"<sup>4</sup>). In Farnell's defence, we should point out that his description has considerable support in ancient, if comparatively late, sources – Lucan (5.169–218), Plutarch (*De Def. Orac.* 46–51, 435b–438c; *De Pyth. Orac.* 6–8, 397a–398a), the Stoics.

The "second" Pythia has been championed by Amandry, followed by Fontenrose. The latter writes, "... she speaks rationally and normally, perhaps with some excitement ... she speaks with her own voice ... After a session on the tripod ... the Pythia feels calm and peaceful ... The Pythia spoke directly and coherently to the consultants with a simple, clear response, generally in prose"<sup>5</sup>).

Much of the evidence for the mantic session at Delphi is late – we are especially dependent upon Plutarch, who wrote during a period of Delphic decline. This late evidence can be simply misleading (Lucan's classic portrait of a raving Pythia is probably modeled on the sibyl of *Aeneid* 6)<sup>6</sup>), though it clearly must be considered and evaluated. The temptation to generalize from late evidence has often been difficult for scholars to resist.

An examination of what Herodotus has to say on the Delphic mantic session might be a valuable corrective to this tendency. His *Histories*, used only sporadically by Parke and Fontenrose, are one of the earliest major bodies of Delphic lore; they predate Plutarch's treatments by approximately half a millenium, and were written when the Delphic oracle was still widely influential and maintained its vitality. This paper will attempt to collect Herodotus' evidence on the mantic session at Delphi, and point out where the historian sides on controversial aspects of the mantic session. The picture thus outlined will necessarily be somewhat incomplete, as Herodotus takes a knowledge of how the oracle works as a given, and thus does not fill in all details; nevertheless, it will still provide a reasonably detailed portrait of the Pythia

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3) L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* (Oxford 1907), IV.189. In the same school, to a large extent, are E. Rohde, *Psyche*, tr. W. Hillis (London 1925), 287–91, and H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle I: the History; II: the Oracular Responses* (Oxford 1956), I.12–13, 33–38. (Hereafter: Parke, referring to volume I, unless volume II is indicated.)

4) J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley 1978), 196. Hereafter, DO.

5) DO 206, 211, 228.

6) DO 209.

prophesying. Though the historian tends to support the “second” Pythia, sometimes aspects of the “first” Pythia seem to appear in his pages.

First, however, we should consider how much Herodotus can be relied upon in his descriptions of Delphi’s working. Fontenrose spends much of his book relegating Herodotean oracle accounts to the realm of legend, though he is willing to accept the historian as a reasonably good authority on the mantic session. “These are not genuine responses, but Herodotus and his informants knew how consultations were conducted”<sup>7</sup>). The elaborate descriptions of the offerings of Croesus at Delphi show that Herodotus had been to Delphi (1.50–51), which one might easily accept even without such evidence. One would suppose that he almost certainly had witnessed a Pythian session. “To the Greeks of the classical period, Delphi and its methods were taken for granted.” Herodotus “knew that his readers would understand how the Pythia acted . . .”<sup>8</sup>).

Following are selected points of controversy related to the Delphic session that will be considered briefly: (1) Almost no one takes the vapors rising from the chasm in the consultation chamber seriously now, especially since the French excavations at Delphi, but it was popular among Stoics and nineteenth century rationalists. I list it for the record<sup>9</sup>). – (2) It is uncertain whether the *προφήτης* acted as a go-between for the Pythia and inquirer. Some writers have him writing a coherent statement from an entirely incoherent shriek uttered by the Pythia; others would have him versifying the Pythia’s prose responses<sup>10</sup>). Others almost remove him from the mantic session<sup>11</sup>). – (3) Some writers have the Pythia incoherent and frenzied<sup>12</sup>); others portray her as rather calm<sup>13</sup>). –

7) DO 226, cf. 212: Plutarch and Herodotus “knew Delphic procedures; and the manner in which they present the conduct of a consultation must be reliable”. Cf. J. Hart, *Herodotus and Greek History* (London 1982), 183–86, for the reliability of oracles reported by Herodotus.

8) Parke 17.

9) See Amandry 215–30; R. Flacelière, *Greek Oracles*, tr. D. Garman (New York 1965), 50; DO 197–203.

10) See Parke, 33, 39; H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Delphic Oracle, Greece and Rome* 23 (1976) 67; Burkert, *Greek Religion* 116, “the utterances of the Pythia are then fixed by the priests in the normal Greek literary form, the homeric hexameter.”

11) E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951), 212, 218–19; DO 212, 218–19.

12) Lloyd-Jones 60–73, esp. 67.

13) Amandry 41–56; DO 228, 204–212.

(4) Rohde, following the Nietzschean Apollo-Dionysus duality, portrayed the Pythia's ecstasy as Dionysian<sup>14</sup>). Others have denied significant Dionysiac influence in the Pythian trance<sup>15</sup>). – (5) Some see the god “entering” into the Pythia and speaking<sup>16</sup>). Others would deny such “possession”<sup>17</sup>). – (6) Most writers deny that the Pythia spoke in hexameters<sup>18</sup>). However, some would allow the possibility<sup>19</sup>).

We now turn to Herodotus. In translations, I frequently make use of Powell; my citations are representative, not exhaustive<sup>20</sup>).

Consultants performed rites before entering the temple (7.140). “And when they have done the customary rituals around the temple . . . the Pythia prophesied . . .”<sup>21</sup>).

The consultation took place in an inner room, hall (μέγαρον, 1.47, 8.37) in a temple (νηός, ἱερόν, 8.37). In 8.37, Persians approach a mostly deserted Delphi. “When . . . the barbarians . . . were viewing the temple [ἱερόν] . . . the prophet . . . saw sacred weapons lying before the temple [νηοῦ] brought out from within the inner hall [μέγαρον] . . . (8.37).

There is also an ἄδυτον, 7.141.2, which appears to be an inner chamber, perhaps the same as the μέγαρον, or an especially sacred part of it<sup>22</sup>).

The inquirers entered (ἔσηλθον, 1.47.2) and were seated, 7.140: “. . . having entered into the hall, they were seated”<sup>23</sup>).

14) Rohde 287–91; cf. Parke 11–12.

15) Amandry 42, 196–200; DO 207; Dodds 68–69; K. Latte, *The Coming of the Pythia*, *Harvard Theological Review* 33 (1940) 9–18; M. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion I* (Munich<sup>2</sup>1967), 536–37.

16) Parke 39; Dodds 70.

17) Amandry 234; DO 206–7, 238.

18) W. MacLeod, *Oral Bards at Delphi*, *TAPA* 92 (1961) 317–25; Parke 34 (the prophet supplies the prose or poetic form of the oracle); R. Crahay, *La littérature oraculaire chez Hérodote* (Paris 1956), in a thoroughgoing way denies the historicity of most verse oracles; H. W. Parke, *A Note on the Delphic Priesthood*, *CQ* 34 (1940) 85–89.

19) O. Todd, *An Inelegant Greek Verse*, *CQ* 33 (1939) 163–65, esp. 164. n. 3; DO 223; H. Chadwick and N. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge 1932–40), 1.624.

20) J. E. Powell, *A Lexicon to Herodotus* (Hildesheim<sup>2</sup>1960).

21) Καί σφι ποιήσασι περὶ τὸ ἱερόν τὰ νομιζόμενα . . . χρῆ ἢ Πυθίη . . . Cf. Amandry 104–14.

22) See Burkert 115: the ἄδυτον “the sunken area at the end of the temple interior”; Eur. *Iph. Taur.* 1256; Paus. 10.24.5. Powell, s.v., translates “temple”, probably incorrectly. Cf. Parke, “Note”, 85 n. 6.

23) . . . ὡς εἰς τὸ μέγαρον ἐσελθόντες ἕζοντο . . .

The Pythia was already there (1.47, and *passim*). “But at Delphi, as soon as the Lydians entered into the hall . . . and asked that which they had been ordered to ask, the Pythia . . . spoke these things . . .”<sup>24</sup>).

Typically, the inquirer questioned and the Pythia gave a response (1.47, and *passim*).

Occasionally, there was limited conversational give and take between the Pythia and inquirer (6.86; cf. 7.140–41; 4.150.3). The story of Battus (4.155) presents an interesting exchange between Pythia and inquirer. Battus travels to Delphi to find out why he has a speech defect; however, to his dismay, the Pythia ignores his question and, seemingly apropos of nothing, instructs him to found a city in Libya! Reasonably upset by such an unexpected oracular response, Battus protests to the Pythia; however, “he did not persuade her to reveal other things”; she continues to repeat the same response; and he leaves while she is still repeating the response. Depending on one’s perspective, this could indicate a Pythia who had memorized only one oracular response, and so could only repeat it; or a stubborn prophetess who refused to change an oracle under pressure; or a prophetess who refused to give two oracles for the price of one. But at the very least, it appears that Battus felt that conversational give and take with the Pythia was possible.

Thus, the picture given is that the Pythia is always readily comprehensible, though the content of the oracles is often enigmatic<sup>25</sup>). There is no evidence at all of Pythia raving<sup>26</sup>).

Occasionally, the Pythia seems to speak first, as soon as the inquirers arrived (1.65.2; 5.92.2; 7.140). “When he entered into the hall, the Pythia immediately spoke the following . . .”<sup>27</sup>). Thus, apparently, she knew the question, by natural (a shrewd προφήτης briefing her, perhaps) or purportedly supernatural means. Fontenrose takes this as evidence that the Pythia and inquirers saw each other<sup>28</sup>).

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24) ἐν δὲ Δελφοῖσι ὡς ἐσηλθον τάχιστα ἐς τὸ μέγαρον οἱ Λυδοὶ . . . καὶ ἐπειρώτων τὸ ἐντεταλμένον, ἢ Πυθίη . . . λέγει τάδε.

25) Fontenrose 236, rejects riddling oracles, but Parker 301, and Hart 183–6 would accept them as genuine.

26) Thus our earliest reference to the Pythia’s madness, Plato, *Phdr.* 244a, *μανεῖσαι*, perhaps refers to a kind of possession rather than to melodramatically visible manifestations.

27) . . . ὡς ἐσήμει ἐς τὸ μέγαρον, εὐθὺς . . . ἢ Πυθίη λέγει τάδε (1.65.2).

28) DO 226.

The Pythia usually spoke in hexameter (1.47; 1.65, and generally)<sup>29</sup>).

The Pythia is almost invariably referred to as ἡ Πυθίη (1.47 and generally); she is also called πρόμαντις, “prophet, prophetess” (7.141; 6.66.2).

A Delphic προφήτης (“prophet”, “spokesman”, “representative”, “interpreter”) is mentioned (8.36–37), but is not shown as taking part in the consultation at any point. Thus, this official seems to be merely a presiding Delphic priest in Herodotus, i.e., “representative”. However, in 9.93.4, προφήτης seems to be synonymous with μάντις<sup>30</sup>). To make matters more confusing, Plato (Phdr. 244a) and Euripides (Ion 42, 321) referred to the Pythia as προφήτης<sup>31</sup>). But we can conclude that Herodotus gives us no evidence that the presiding male Delphic priest played any great part in the mantic session.

Inquirers would come on private (5.63; 6.86) or public (7.169; 8.122; 5.63.1) business, in person (6.86) or through messengers, θεοπόπος, “messenger sent to consult an oracle”<sup>32</sup>) (1.19.2; 6.135). Often messengers write down the response (1.48).

The Pythia is not infrequently referred to as “the god”. After an unwise question, Glaucus “. . . sought the god to pardon him” (6.86). When the Persians are approaching Delphi (8.36), “The god did not allow them [the Delphians] to move [the treasures], saying that he was able to stand guard over his own possessions”<sup>33</sup>). Naturally, these are references to the god indwelling in the prophetess. Thus, inquirers often address the Pythia directly as Lord, ἄναξ (“only in crisis, ὄναξ, addressing Apollo”)<sup>34</sup>); 4.150.3; 4.155.4; 7.141.2).

The Pythia can be swayed by dishonest means (5.90; 5.63; 6.123 – all recording instances of bribery; 6.66) and dismissed

29) See Parke 2. viii; W. Parke, *The Use of Other than Hexameter Verse in Delphic Oracles*, *Hermathena* 65 (1945) 58–66, esp. 66; W. Parke, *Apollo and the Muses, or Prophecy in Greek Verse*, *Hermathena* 130/31 (1981) 99–112. Cf. Euripides, *Ion* 92, αἰίδουσ’ Ἑλλήσι βούς. Pausanias reports that the first Pythia invented the hexameter, 10.5.7–8, though he also mentions a tradition that the first Delphian προφήτης invented it; see also Strabo 9.3.5.

30) Cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 18–19, Pindar *Nem.* 1.60–61; Amandry 120 n. 2.

31) See Amandry 118–123; cf. H. W. Parke, *A Note on the Delphic Priesthood*, *CQ* 34 (1940) 85–89. Nilsson writes, “Das Problem ist nicht zu lösen” (*Historia* 7 [1958] 244).

32) Powell, s.v.

33) ὁ δὲ θεός σφραγὸς οὐκ ἔα κινεῖν, φὰς αὐτὸς ἰκανὸς εἶναι τῶν ἑωυτοῦ προκατήσθαι.

34) Powell, s.v.

(6.66): “Cobon persuaded [perhaps, “bribed”] Perialla the prophetess to say the things which Cleomenes wished to be said”<sup>35</sup>). Once again, this would indicate that responses actually came from the Pythia, not merely from the προφήτης.

Thus, we return to our two Pythias. Generally, Herodotus supports the “second” Pythia. By Herodotus’ evidence, there are no vapors rising from chasms; the Pythia does not shriek or rave; her responses are instantly comprehensible to the inquirer; she does not exhibit a Dionysian madness.

But in some ways, the prosaic Pythia of Amandry and Fontenrose is shown to be a somewhat hypercritical construct, if Herodotus can be admitted as a generally reliable witness. He definitely shows her possessed by Apollo; such a relatively calm, “Apolline” possession might be more unnerving to witness than the romantic shrieking Pythia. The historian portrays her as always speaking for herself, rather than merely being the tool of a chief priest. When Cobon wants to influence Delphic responses, it is the Pythia that he has to bribe. Moreover, she often speaks in verse; once again, in Herodotus, there is no hint of an intermediary to versify for her. The picture derived from Herodotus agrees essentially with the oldest received portrait of the Pythia in Greek literature, the entrance of the Pythia at the beginning of the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, who defines her connection with Apollo thus: μαντεύομαι γὰρ ὡς ἂν ἡγήται θεός (v. 33).

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35) ... ὁ δὲ Κόβων Περιάλλαν τὴν πρόμαντιν ἀναπέθει τὰ Κλεομένης ἐβούλετο λέγεσθαι λέγειν.