

DELPHI, GREECE: A MYSTERY

In antiquity, Delphi was a sacred location dedicated to the Greek god Apollo. The Oracle of Delphi and the priestess Pythia, who was famed throughout the ancient world for her ability to predict the future and was consulted before all important initiatives, were housed in the sanctuary, which was built in the 8th century B.C.¹ These factors contributed to the site's mystique in many ways. It is possible to discover the civilization and lifestyle that exists beneath those ancient stones when these mysteries are unraveled. This paper explains the mystery that pervades the site, starting with a general mystery and progressing to specific mysteries. It progresses from discussing Delphi as a mysterious region, then to the secret of the oracle and how it functioned, and finally to the enigmatic letter E's and money found on the site.

To comprehend the mystery of the area, it is necessary to begin at the inception. This is the most difficult mystery to solve because it dates to the 8th century B.C. where there are not many reliable sources of evidence. The evidence we have is mysterious and almost story-like in nature. Yet, looking at the actual site and conducting a spatial analysis is one way to solve this mystery and obtain the most reliable sources. In many ways, Delphi and its various cults attract a level of curiosity that no other Hellenic site can match. "The lofty precipices, the dark deeply-cleft ravines, the mysterious caves, and the bubbling springs of pure water, combine to give the place a romantic charm and a fearfulness of aspect which no description can adequately depict."²

Nature's wrath stamped itself on the dwellers' imaginations in prehistoric times. As a result, a place's nature, as well as its religion and beliefs, reveals much about it. In terms of Delphi this can be seen from Man's mind inclined to gloomy types of religion at an early stage of development: his ignorance of science tends to fill his head with spiritual terrors and

¹ History.com Editors. (2018, May 9). *Delphi*. History.com. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-greece/delphi#:~:text=Delphi%20was%20an%20ancient%20religious,consulted%20before%20all%20major%20undertakings.>

² Middleton, J. Henry. "The Temple of Apollo at Delphi." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 9 (1888): 282–322.

forebodings. Thus, the chasm-rending Poseidon, and the Chthonian Dionysus, who, like Osiris, was a victim of Nature's malevolent forces, were the primary deities worshiped at Delphi³. The temple's namesake, Apollo, was actually a late addition to the site. The dazzling Phoebus Apollo did not come to Delphi until later to slaughter the earth-born Python⁴. This clearly shows that the enigma did not arrive at the site with Apollo, as is commonly assumed, but rather existed much earlier, and Apollo's Temple was simply a continuation of it. Not only Delphi, but its surrounding areas added to this mystery from the sixth century BC onwards. A Corycian cave high above Delphi (see figure 1) became an increasingly famous cult destination for the deity Pan and the Muses and a key part of the "Delphic" itinerary and setting⁵.

This mystery of the site adds much to a more specific reading of the mystery of the Oracle of Delphi. A way to enlighten this mystery is through understanding the process and analyzing the specific area of the oracle. The oracle was connected to the Temple of Apollo, in the middle of the site of Delphi, and it can be seen as number 1 on the figure two map. The oracle specifically happened from the Adyton, a unique restricted access place within the temple, where the Pythia was claimed to prophesy. This space held numerous sacred items: the Omphalos (the stone representing the center of the world), two statues of Apollo (one in wood and one in gold), Apollo's lyre and sacred armor, the tomb of Dionysus (although this may have also been the Omphalos), and the Pythia sitting on her tripod alongside a laurel tree⁶. The tripod is the sturdiest

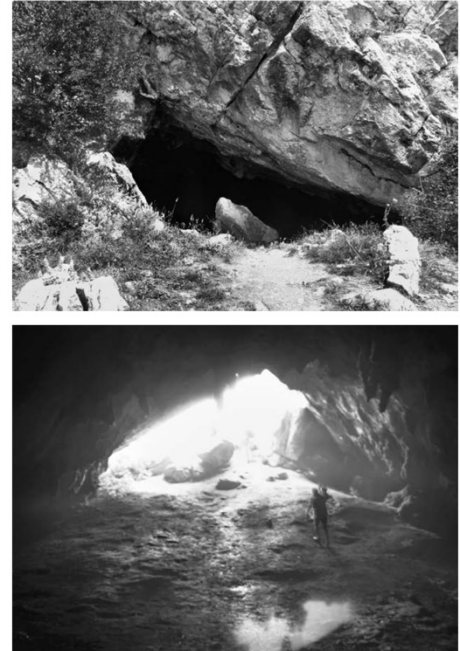


Fig. 1. The Corycian cave from the outside (*top*) and inside (*bottom*) (high above Delphi on a plateau of the Parnassian mountains: Michael Scott, 2014)

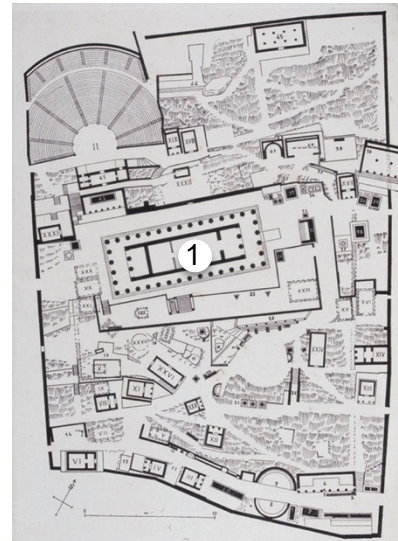


Fig. 2. Delphi: Sanctuary of Apollo Plan (Delphi (Extinct city): 6th C. B.C.) Data from: University of California, San Diego

³ Middleton, J. Henry. "The Temple of Apollo at Delphi." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 9 (1888): 282–322.

⁴ Middleton, J. Henry. "The Temple of Apollo at Delphi." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 9 (1888): 282–322.

⁵ Scott Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014:13.

⁶ Scott, Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014:18.

furniture construction for uneven ground as a seat or a stand, which is why it has been used for centuries⁷. The fact that it was a "unique restricted access" adds to the mystery of the oracle, while the Omphalos makes the Temple the center of Ancient Greek world. The laurel tree is also significant in terms of the event's sanctity because it was a plant with many symbolic meanings in Greek culture. We know this from the story of Daphne and Apollo, in which Daphne becomes the center of Apollo's world. So, these oracles were important because they occurred literally and metaphorically in the center of the world on many levels.

Delphi's mystery goes beyond the site itself to influence works of art more than 2,000 years later. In the allegorical composition *The Oracle of the Pythia at Delphi*, 1680 AD, the oracle's ongoing mystery is also shown (Fig. 3). This anonymous black chalk sketch depicts the scene as it occurs, highlighting the people, places, and objects involved. It is not the best source



Fig. 3. Allegorical Composition: *The Oracle of the Pythia at Delphi*. (Anonymous, 1680) *Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco*.

for a specific response because it is a chalk drawing of the event that is open to interpretation. The event can be viewed as the total opposite of what I previously suggested, as evidenced by the illustration, which depicts a packed site that is not restricted to only a few people. However, the figures in the rear of the chalk sketch, who are in a much lighter hue, could be a symbol of

⁷ Apollo and Hercules Tripod. Court Circle. (2021, September 20). Retrieved May 4, 2022, from <http://courtcircle.com/hbej/apollo-and-hercules-tripod>

what Pythia is revealing, the story itself but not the actual individuals, thereby removing the crowded environment and making the oracle a more private event. The "center of the world" concept may still be found in the picture's center, where the Pythia is highlighted as she stands in the middle illustrated with darker strokes. Also visible were features such as laurel tree leaves, which helped to make the enigma clearer as they show the significance of this event within the culture.

Many of the sources that discuss how the oracle worked in detail are from Roman times from first century BC to fourth century AD, and thus can only tell us what people in this later period thought. These ancient writers often contradicted each other about a religious process that, as all the writers agreed, had passed its heyday⁸. The Pythia would burn laurel tree leaves and barley meal, offered to Apollo, which was likely followed by a song to all the local gods⁹. This was also seen in the Allegorical Composition: *The Oracle of the Pythia at Delphi*¹⁰. We can find specific details like that about the event. However, the actual description of the event changes from source to source. For instance, Strabo, a first-century AD geographer of the ancient world, depicts the Pythia as sitting on the tripod, and uttering oracles in both prose and verse. However, in the first century AD, another writer, Lucan, paints a totally different picture of the Pythia, in which the deity takes over her body by inhalation of the vapor, and she raves as a result¹¹. In Strabo's writings she is calm and collected while in Lucan's, a near lunatic.

So, it is impossible to end up with one clear answer that reveals the whole mystery of the Oracle. Yet, it is possible to come up with a general conclusion about what this process was. All sources suggests that we should think of the Pythia at Delphi as a "sense-making mechanism" for ancient Greek people, towns, and communities, rather than a "fortune-telling service."¹² Heraclitus, a late 6th century B.C. Author, says, "the oracle neither conceals nor reveals, but indicates, Delphi was somewhat of an ancient management consultant. It was an adviser, but one who wielded considerable power"¹³. It can be concluded that people would seek life

⁸ Scott Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014: 11.

⁹ Scott Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014: 15.

¹⁰ Anonymous. *Allegorical Composition: The Oracle of the Pythia at Delphi*. 1680. Images, 48.1 x 67.8 cm (image). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; San Francisco, California, USA; Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; 1963.24.388; <http://www.thinker.org/>. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.15041613>.

¹¹ Scott Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014: 21.

¹² Scott Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014: 30.

¹³ Scott Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014: 30.

guidance from the oracle, while kings would seek advice on what political action to take. Thus, in ancient Greece, the oracle's mysterious process served a practical purpose in that it told people what to do, how to live their lives, what actions to take during important events, and so on.

Another mysterious object on the site was three letter E's formed like coins, which gave us an idea of the culture's concept in value and money. Also, connected to the oracle, indicating whether this was a straightforward event with good intentions, or whether the mystery was just a ruse to hide a scheme of money. Three large models of the letter E existed in the pronaos (the outer part of an ancient Greek temple- vestibule) of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in the first century AD. One was made of wood, another of metal, and the third was made of an undetermined material. Plutarch describes it as "gilded."¹⁴ We can't fathom it being made of gold. The oldest of the three is claimed to be the wooden E, which was consecrated by the seven Wise Men of Greece. The Athenians donated the bronze E, but it is unknown when or for what reason.

The golden E was an offering made by Livia, Augustus's wife, and we are

not told what event it was dedicated to¹⁵. In a historical context it is suggested that the golden E was dedicated to the Oracle, to the Pythia, again showing the significance of the event since gold was the most precious.

Looking from a visual perspective, these coin shaped objects were placed in such an area that they were also hidden, as now the place cannot be specifically told, adding to the mystery. One idea is that the maxims may have been carved into the east portico's columns or the walls of the front porch, but one thing is certain: the E's were not far away... The east facade of the temple of Apollo is depicted on certain coins from imperial times, along with a huge E between the middle columns (Fig. 4 & 5). This shows the physical relationship between the E and the oracle from the uncertain location that they were found.



Fig. 4 & 5. Delphic E on coin of empress Faustina the Elder, 2nd c. AD (left). Delphic E on a coin of Faustina's uncle emperor Hadrian, 2nd c. AD (right) (William Bates: after 141 CE.)

¹⁴ Bates, William Nickerson. "The E of the Temple at Delphi." *American Journal of Archaeology* 29, no. 3 (1925): 239.

¹⁵ Bates, William Nickerson. "The E of the Temple at Delphi." *American Journal of Archaeology* 29, no. 3 (1925): 239.

In a more figurative sense, the mystery of these coins connects to the oracle in terms of their money-like feature. The importance and mystery of these coins shows that there was an understanding of value and money within the culture. As explained above, the fact that they were found around the site of the Oracle ties them together, making us question whether these belonged to Pythia or were money visitors paid for Pythia's services. Different classes and people paid different prices as the price for a "state" inquiry (i.e., by the city) was seven Aeginetan drachmas and two obols. The price for a "private" inquiry by an individual Phaselite, was four obols¹⁶. The interesting points here are not only the difference in price between official and personal business - which was ten times greater for official business matters - but that such individual agreements could be made¹⁷. This ties the oracle to a more commercial event rather than simply a spiritual event. Thus, this Oracle's mystery was perhaps just a way to lure more people to this business, preying on people's ancient religious beliefs and naivety. Herodotus, a dramatist who most embodied the Athenian people's spirit and was a significant source, mentions two cases in which the Oracle at Delphi was reputed to have been bribed with money¹⁸. Is the entire idea of mystery just a ploy to grab attention for the Oracle's keeper to become richer? Perhaps the E coins cut through all mystery thus stated to show the Oracle's true motivations.

For its natural state, physical attributes, world-famous oracle, and even artifacts discovered on the site, the location of Delphi is steeped in mystery. The picturesque appearance of the site, the attention and significance accorded to the location, and the Oracle in the site representing the world's center all contribute to the mystery. Yet, the mystery of another site object, the letter E's, dispels the wonder within the site – or at least shows the reasoning behind it - that the whole mystery and attention to the site might just be a bait to boost business, thus creating a vicious circle of mystery that was the ancient Oracle at Delphi, Greece.

¹⁶ Scott Michael. *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World*. Princeton University Press, 2014: 17.

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

¹⁸ Fairbanks, Arthur. "Herodotus and the Oracle at Delphi." *The Classical Journal* 1, no. 2 (1906): 40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3287085>.

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