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Final Paper

Ancient Greece

The Center of the Greek World: The Myth and Reality of Delphi

The legend goes that Zeus took two eagles and released them at different ends of the world, one in the east and one in the west. When they met again, it was in Delphi, which was thus declared the center of the world. As in many mythical stories, which attempt to explain a given phenomena through acts of the gods, there was surely some reason behind this story. In other words, in some way the Greeks must have seen Delphi as the center of the world. Looking back through history, ways in which this mythical claim was true can be examined. To begin, Delphi was certainly a great and important religious center. People from all over Greece came to visit the oracle, and the temple of Apollo was built through contributions from city-states throughout Greece. The Pythian Games in Delphi, held every four years, was an event which brought together all of Greece. Many Greek city-states also set up treasuries in Delphi which represented a more peaceful method of competition than the wars were parallel. Much Greek history passed through and was influenced by Delphi, and Delphi certainly represents and symbolizes the panhellenism of Greece. In Delphi, the independent nature of each individual city-state was represented through the individual treasuries. At the same time, these treasuries were all located in the same sacred ground and all the city-states collectively supported the temple and Delphi's public buildings. Delphi's independence as a panhellenic site was also protected by all Greek city-states. Delphi sits at the center of Greek religion,

politics, and history, and is certainly worthy of the claim that it was the center of the Greek world.

Other myths point to Delphi as the center of Greece as well as the story of the two eagles. One myth tells that Apollo came down from Mt. Olympus to destroy Python, the serpent who guarded the original shrine to the earth-mother Gaia. As Homer told the story, "he killed the fearsome dragon Python, piercing it with his darts" (<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/d/delphi.html>, 12/08/2004). Then, after killing Python, Apollo left for a time to make amends for this deed. Upon his return, Apollo set up his temple, and at the place where the serpent was killed, an omphalos stone was set in the ground. The omphalos stone represented the "center of the earth," or "navel of the world." Again here is a reference to Delphi as the center of the earth.

There is also a legend that says Apollo jumped aboard a Cretan ship in the form of a dolphin and brought the sailors to Delphi. Upon arrival, he turned into a handsome young man and asked the sailors to stay and be priests in his temple. This myth explains how the location came to be called Delphi, because the Greek word for dolphin was delphis. The word delphis was also Greek for womb, (connected to dolphins, since they were mammals, not fish, and thus had wombs) which may also have been connected to the idea that Delphi was the center of the world. (http://iam.classics.unc.edu/loci/del/16_hist.html, 12/08/2002). Whatever the myth, it is clear that Delphi was regarded as a central city to the whole of the Greek society throughout much of its history.

Truly, the Delphic oracle played a central role through many centuries of Greek history. It is hard to pick up a history book on ancient Greece without reading about a decision which was made based on consultation of the Delphic oracle. In the first book of *The Peloponnesian War*, for example, Thucydides tells a story about the Epidamnians. In the story, the Epidamnians were hard pressed at war, and when the Corcyraeans refused to help them, they "were in a

quandary about what to do next. So they sent to Delphi and inquired of the god” (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.25). The oracle gave an answer, and they then proceeded to follow its advice. Such inquiry of the oracle in political matters was common to city-states from all over Greece and was found in much of Greek history. In Plutarch’s *Lycurgus*, one story goes that Lycurgus had his people swear an oath that they would abide by his laws until he returned from Delphi. Traveling to Delphi, he “sacrificed to the god, and then asked whether the laws he had made were in fact good enough to guarantee the material and moral welfare of the state. The god replied that the legislative measures that he had taken were good, and that by keeping to Lycurgus’ constitution the state would continue to be held in highest honor” (Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 29). In order to keep his people abiding by his laws, he killed himself and thus never returned to Sparta to free his people from their oath. The oracle’s response, history revealed as quite accurate, as the Spartans were the most powerful Greek city-state for a long time afterwards.

The accuracy of the oracle in the case above was not an anomaly. Often, in fact, the Delphic oracle (also called the Pythian oracle) was quite accurate. This only increased Delphi’s prominence, leading it towards becoming “the center of the world.” In Herodotus’ account of Croesus, the idea that the Delphic oracle was truly the best oracle, and therefore the only one worth consulting is laid out clearly. Croesus sends men to many different oracles and instructs them to go to the respective oracle at a specific time and ask what Croesus was doing at that very moment. According to the story, only the Delphic oracle gave an answer which was correct, and thus Croesus declared “that the oracle at Delphi was the only genuine one in the world, because it had succeeded in finding out what he had been doing” (Herodotus, *The Histories* 1.48). This reputation was supported by many other cases, and kept people coming back for hundreds of years to follow.

This is not to say that the Delphic oracle was always clear. According to Heraclitus, a philosopher around 500 BC, the Pythia never gave a straight answer. The oracle “neither conceals nor reveals the truth, but only hints at it” (<http://www.aroundparnassos.com/history/>, 12/8/2004), Heraclitus said. Yet even ambiguous answers or unclear answers could be interpreted after the fact as being valid, and thus the fame of the Delphic oracle was not marred. The oracle’s response to the Athenians that “...*the wooden wall only shall not fall, but help you and your children...*” (Herod., *The Histories* 7.141) was not clear at all, and the Athenians had many ways to interpret it. Themistocles interpreted it as meaning they should put their effort towards their navy and their wooden ships were what the oracle meant by wooden walls. When the Athenians were victorious at sea, it was declared that the oracle was correct and that this had indeed been the meaning. One could go on and on about how correct or valid these oracular messages actually were. Yet, without going into a discussion about the oracle’s methods or methods of fortune telling, let it simply be said that the Greeks believed that these prophesies held some truth. The point is that due to its success, people came from all over Greece. Thus, one can imagine that if they were in Delphi in ancient times, they would run into people from all over Greece and could learn quite a lot about the current affairs of the world. The oracle was also consulted often for commercial ventures and colonization efforts, as well as personal questions of all sorts, and so one might also imagine that a whole history of Greece could be observed through Delphi – a history covering political movements as well as economic and social structure. Viewed in this way, Delphi really seems to be the center of the Greek world and much of Greek history.

Yet not only did Delphi bear witness to a great deal of Greek history through the Pythian oracle, it also had a great deal of power to change Greek history. When the oracle was given, people listened and took it seriously. When

the Alcmaeonidae bribed the priestess to tell the Spartans that they must overthrow the Athenian tyranny, the Spartans proceeded to do so against their wishes. As Herodotus describes, “The Pisistratidae were good friends of theirs: but no matter – the commands of God were more important to them than human ties” (Herod., *The Histories* 5.63). The demands of Apollo thus carried a lot of power. If Apollo told a city-state to do something, they most likely would comply. In another case, Apollo orders Athens to return the Delians, and they correspondingly do so. As Thucydides describes, they “brought back the Delians to Delos, moved by ... the commands of the god at Delphi” (Thuc. *The Peloponnesian War*, 5.32). There was a lot of power in the fact that Greeks believed that the oracle was absolute. The idea that the oracle couldn’t be wrong, and that its command must be followed was expressed even by philosophers such as Socrates. Plato relates Socrates’ views in his *Apology*, in which he has Socrates responding to the oracle’s claim that Socrates was the wisest. “What then does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest,” Socrates says. “He certainly cannot be lying, for that is not possible for him” (Plato, *Apology* 21). Whether or not Socrates himself actually believed this, he was certainly affirming the common view about the oracle in attempting to assert that he was not an atheist. The oracle accordingly, had power over all of Greece, and in this way was central to Greek history.

In many ways Delphi can be seen as a central symbol of panhellenic Greek society. While most of Greece was composed of small independent city states who were often enemies of one another, they were still held together by a common language and common religious beliefs. While an Athenian would have thought of himself as primarily an Athenian, and a Spartan as a Spartan, he would probably have had some concept of being part of the larger Greek society as well. The fact that there were terms like “medizing” and that there was a common effort to expel the Persians show this panhellenism. Delphi, as well, is

an example of the Greeks coming together for a common cause. As one of the four great panhellenic sanctuaries where festivals and athletic games took place (the others were Nemea, Isthmia and Olympia), Delphi saw people pour into the city every four years. The games brought contestants and spectators from all over Greece and even brought foreigners. Success in the games gave the athletes much prestige and honor, and they would have been met with respect throughout all of Greece. The nature of the games was very sacred and ritualistic, and control over the games gave a lot of power to Delphi.

Delphi was set apart from the other sanctuaries though, in that it also was the place of the temple to Apollo and numerous treasuries. This was another great attraction which brought together people from all over Greece. For example, in 548 BC, and again in 373 BC, the temple to Apollo was destroyed, the first case due to fire, the latter to an earthquake. In both cases though, the temple was rebuilt through contributions from all over Greece, as well as Egypt and Lydia in the first case (http://iam.classics.unc.edu/loci/del/16_hist.html). As Herodotus describes, when “the Delphians went round from city to city asking for contributions, Egypt was by no means least in giving assistance” (Herod., *The Histories* 2.180). While the context of this passage was of a discussion of Egypt, it is clear from this excerpt that the Delphians would expect contributions for their sanctuary from all parts of Greece. Certainly massive amounts of wealth flowed into the city, and through panhellenic contributions, Delphi was also able to build numerous other public buildings. In the 5th century BC a stadium was built and later, in the 4th century, a theater was built. There was also a public gymnasium, a magnificent building called the Tholos, and no doubt many other buildings (<http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21110a/e211ja01.html>, 12/08/2004).

Perhaps more significantly, city-states from all over Greece set up treasuries in Delphi, erecting grand monumental buildings dedicated to the gods. Thus in one central location, city-states representing all of panhellenic Greece

built together in relative peace. Enemies and allies alike shared the sacred ground that these treasuries were built on, showing just how highly the respect for Delphi was across all Greece. A great example of this is that after defeating the Athenians in the Peloponnesian war, the Syracusans built a treasury in Delphi right across from the treasury of the Athenians (<http://www.aroundparnassos.com/history/>, 12/08/2004). Essentially, these treasuries were buildings to house dedications. Through the dedications, many historic events could be seen, marked down at Delphi through some offering or another. A part of the plunder from many major battles was always set aside to be sent to Delphi. One example of this from Herodotus tells how after the Greeks had won some victory over the Persians, “they then turned to the division of plunder, and sent to Delphi the ‘first fruits’ set apart for the purpose; from these was made the statue, eighteen feet high, which had the beak of a ship in its hand, and stands beside the gold statue of Alexander of Macedon” (Herod., *The Histories* 8.121). Again, talking of a victory by Pausanias, Herodotus writes, “when all the stuff had been collected, a tenth was set apart for the god at Delphi” (Herod., *The Histories* 9.81). Dedications were a way to show off to the rest of the world, to show just how victorious a battle was, or to show just how wealthy a city-state was. Siphnos, for instance, was one of the richest states of Greece, and built a magnificent temple to show off their wealth. Similarly, individuals with enough success made dedications on their own. For example, Polyzalos, a Syracusan, celebrated a victory at the Pythian Games of 474 with the dedication of a bronze statue, now famously known as the ‘Charioteer’ (Hornblower, *The Greek World* p. 46). Another example comes from Herodotus, who describes a man at one point as “Euelthon, who dedicated the remarkable censer in the Corinthian treasure-house at Delphi” (Herod., *The Histories* 4.162). The idea that the various dedications in Delphi marked a city-state’s success for all the world to see adds to the understanding of why Greeks saw Delphi as the

“navel of the world.” These were definite signs, and when after a certain battle in the 9th year of the Peloponnesian War, “both sides set up trophies and sent spoils to Delphi” (Thud., *The Peloponnesian War* 4.134), it was unclear exactly who was victorious.

The desire for Delphi to be accessible to all Greeks and for the treasure there to be kept sacred was an important one. This is well illustrated in a peace treaty between the Athenians and the Spartans during the Peloponnesian War. Before the terms of the peace that affect one side or the other are even given, two terms are set out to protect the access to and the treasure of Delphi. The following passage from Thucydides gives the terms.

“An armistice was accordingly concluded by Sparta and her allies upon the terms following:

- *As to the temple and oracle of the Pythian Apollo, we are agreed that whoever so wishes shall have access to it, without fraud or fear, according to the usages of his forefathers. [2] The Spartans and the allies present agree to this, and promise to send heralds to the Boetians and Phocians, and to do their best to persuade them to agree likewise.*
- *[3] As to the treasure of the god, we agree to exert ourselves to detect all wrongdoers, truly and honestly following the customs of our forefathers, we and you and all others willing to do so, all following the customs of our forefathers. [4] As to these points the Spartans and the other allies are agreed as has been said.*
- *....”* (Thuc. *The Peloponnesian War* 4.118)

The war itself had not been centered around Delphi, yet protection of Delphi was the first thing mentioned in this treaty. This certainly points to Delphi’s importance to both parties involved and their mutual desire to see its sacredness

preserved. Despite the war between them, they recognized that Delphi, as the center of the world, belonged to all of Greece, and should be protected as such.

Politically, Delphi was represented by a panhellenic association of city-states called the Amphictyonic League, or Delphic Amphictyony. The Amphictyony governed the sacred area of Delphi, whose territory was independent from the surrounding area of the Phocians. The Amphictyony had the power to institute fines and declare sacred wars, often pertaining to claims that the offending party cultivated sacred land. Having control of Delphi, which was so centrally important to the Greek culture, was thus a source of much power. Consequently, control of the Amphictyony was a source of struggle between city-states. One case of this is given by Hornblower, who states that “it was arguably in order to secure more direct control of an amphiktionic vote that the Spartans founded a new city at Herakleia” (Horn., *The Greek World* p. 28). Hornblower then continues on to argue that struggle for influence at Delphi played a larger part in the First Peloponnesian War than some might believe.

On the other hand, while there was struggle between states over *control* at Delphi, protection of Delphi as a panhellenic site was agreed upon by both sides, as already illustrated by the terms of the treaty given above. In a sense, the care of Delphi was seen as an obligation of the whole of Greece. The Sacred Wars, although often politically motivated for other reasons, generally were fought in order to free Delphi from the Phocians, who at various times took over Delphi and its sanctuary. Plutarch describes how Solon gained popularity “with the speech he made on the temple at Delphi, to the effect that the Greeks should not stand idle while the Cirrhaeans violated the oracle, but should come to its assistance and help the people of Delphi defend the god. In fact it was because they were won over by his arguments that the member-states of the Amphictyonic League went to war” (Plut., *Solon* 11). Thus the argument that Greeks must protect the sanctity of Delphi was a convincing one, and an

argument that perhaps most Greeks would have agreed with. Delphi belonged to all of Greece. They all contributed money to its upkeep and they contributed troops to its defense.

As a symbol of panhellenism, Delphi's influence and greatest period followed closely with the rise and prominence of panhellenism. The history of the Pythian oracle goes back at least as far as the seventh century BC, when Delphi was declared independent, and the seat of the Amphictyony was moved there (http://iam.classics.unc.edu/loci/del/16_hist.html). Delphi's fame only continued to grow with the prestige of the oracle, through the Persian Wars, through the Peloponnesian War, throughout the ages when Greece was defined as a collection of city-states. It was in the period after the panhellenic age that the oracle thus started to decline. While there were still lots of visitors to Delphi and the oracle in the period after Philip controlled all of Greece, the number of people declined (<http://www.aroundparnassos.com/history/>). This would be the trend for the rest of its existence, despite efforts from people like the Roman emperor Hadrian, who undertook some building in Delphi in the early 2nd century AD.

While Delphi was not the center of an empire like Athens after the Persian Wars, or like Sparta or Thebes after the Peloponnesian War, it was the center of a greater culture of all Greeks. It was the center of the religious world, and the center of a history which lasted longer than any empire the Athenians or Spartans may have had. Delphi, truly was a place worthy of its title.