

How to Restart an Oracle: Politics, Propaganda, and the Oracle of Apollo  
at Didyma c.305-300 BCE

The Sacred Spring at Didyma dried up when the Persians deported the Branchidae to central Asia at the conclusion of the Ionian revolt c.494. It remained barren throughout the fifth and most of the fourth centuries and thus prophecy did not flow. However, when Alexander the Great liberated Miletus in 334, the spring was reborn and with it returned the gift of prophecy. After nearly two centuries, the new oracle at Didyma was not the same as the old one. This begs the question, how does one restart an oracle? The usual account is that Alexander appointed a new priestess, who immediately predicted his victory over Persia and referred to him as a god. In the historical tradition, largely stemming from Callisthenes, the renewed oracle is thus linked to Alexander, but words are wind and tradition can be manipulated. There are issues with the canonical chronology: Miletus reverted briefly to Persian control in Alexander's wake; the Branchidae, the hereditary priests, still lived in central Asia (Hammond 1998; Parke 1985); and, most tellingly, construction on a new temple did not start for another thirty years. In fact, the renewal of the oracle only appears after Seleucus, who supposedly received three favorable oracles in 334, found the original cult statue and returned it to Miletus (Paus. 1.16.3).

In the satiric account of the prophet Alexander, Lucian of Samosata declares the oracles of old, including Delphi, Delos, Claros, and Branchidae (Didyma), became wealthy by exploiting the credulity and fears of wealthy tyrants (8). Accordingly, Alexander and his friend concoct a scheme to found their own oracle and reap the profits. Lucian goes on at length about Alexander's tricks to overawe the masses, but one important lesson is the necessity of having accurate predictions in order to gain a foothold in the oracular circuit. Lucian is skeptical of the oracles, noting the tendency for vague proclamations, and says that Alexander issued

clarifications of prophecies and even expunged earlier incorrect predictions (e.g. 26-7, 33).

Further, this new oracle traded on the reputation of other oracles by redirecting queries to Delphi and Didyma (28-9). Though Lucian's context in second century CE was not the same as late-fourth century BCE Didyma, his representation of the process provides a useful parallel for examining the steps that were likely taken to restore Didyma's prominence.

Most of the scholarship about Didyma glosses over the interim between the refounding in 334 and the reconstruction of the temple c.300 and treat the relationship between Seleucus and Didyma before 305 as quasi-historical (Fontenrose 1988; Grainger 1990; Hadley 1969; Parke 1986; Parke 1987). There is limited evidence for Didyma between these dates. The cult likely existed (Greaves 2012), but the oracle does not seem to have been active. Even the earliest offering lists found at the temple are dated to the 320s largely on the belief that the oracle was in existence since 334 (Dignas 2002).

The single largest factor in accelerating Didyma's return to prominence was Seleucid royal propaganda that linked their dynastic legitimacy to the prediction of Seleucus' future greatness. On the one hand, royal acclaim was accompanied by large financial donations in 300 and 299 that correspond to the new construction, so there clearly was a link between the king and the temple. On the other, I show that the intersection between the oracle and Seleucus also belongs to after 305. The oracle largely lay dormant for another three decades after its canonical restoration. The more probable launch for the restored oracle is therefore between 305 and 300, at the same time as when there emerged the tradition that Seleucus' rise was foretold there. The participants played on Alexander's legacy in order to further solidify their legitimacy, and, in so doing, invented a tradition that linked the two. How does one restart an oracle? Rig the system in order to get major prophecy correct.

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