

On the Decline of Delphic Divination in the Fourth Century BCE: Writing and its Discontents

In 352 BCE, the Athenians consulted Apollo at Delphi about whether the outer perimeters of the sacred land owned by the sanctuary of Demeter in Eleusis should continue to be leased and cultivated. Before this consultation, the sanctuary leased perimeters of its sacred land for the maintenance of its temple, a practice that raised tensions between the Athenians and the Megarians about the boundaries of the sanctuary's land. The Athenians asked Delphi whether the sanctuary should continue to lease these lands. An inscription records how the Athenians consulted Delphi. (I follow the reconstruction of the historical context of IGii2 204 in Bowden 2005: 91–93. See also Osborn and Rhodes 2003: 272–81.) Their method is unique among the 600 or so oracles attributed to Delphi (collected in Parke and Wormell 1956 and Fontenrose 1978). I argue this Athenian procedure, and in particular the Athenians' use of writing, suggests why Delphi was less consulted in the fourth century BCE.

The Athenians adopt a procedure that reduces Delphic divination to a matter of selecting a jar and that reduces Apollo's response to an answer that precludes debate among the Athenians. The Athenians inscribe two pieces of tin, writing on one that it would be better to lease the land and on another that it would be better to leave the land uncultivated. Each tin sheet was wrapped in wool, tossed in a bronze jug and then separately placed in a gold jar and a silver jar. Three Athenians ask Apollo the god to choose one jar. Upon their return from Delphi, the Athenians open the chosen jar in public and read it aloud. Hugh Bowden notes the "considerable time and effort" and "striking...theatricality" (Bowden 2003: 93) of this procedure, yet posits that it may have been the "standard practice" by which Athens consulted Delphi in the fourth century and even in the fifth. The Athenian reliance on writing, however, makes it unlikely that such a

procedure can be projected back into the fifth century, i.e. before Athens considered writing a tool that could enable, rather than obfuscate, political and religious procedures (Thomas 1992 and 1995). In my view, this procedure through its use of writing precluded the hallmark of Greek divination, namely “oracular dialogue” (Vernant 1991: 311), that is, a debate sustained by those who need to interpret an oracle in order to act upon it.

I examine the few mentions of writing in the practice of Delphic divination during the archaic and classical periods and the written collections of oracles used by Athenian itinerant diviners. (Recent treatments of diviners (chresmologos or mantis) include Bowden 2003; Dillery 2005; Flower 2008; Johnson 2008; Smith 1989.) I link the rapid disappearance of both Delphic divination and the activities of itinerant diviners in fourth century Athens to changing perceptions of writing, instigated by the codification of Athenian law in 410 – 400/399 BCE. (Thomas 1992: 146). In sum, I treat the Athenian consultation about Eleusinian lands as marking and explaining the decline of Delphic divination. This consultation suggests that writing was deployed by the Athenians to control Delphi. Writing need not have been used by the Athenians to constrain Delphi and obviate debate, but judging from this inscription it was. The Athenians silenced Apollo by limiting his response to their written word, and found his answer perfunctory and of little value. In this view, writing contributed to the decline of Delphi in the fourth century BCE. To my knowledge, this hypothesis has not been advanced in the ancient or scholarly literature on Delphi.

Bibliography

Bowden, Hugh. 2005. *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle*. Cambridge.

Bowden, Hugh. 2003. “Oracles for Sale” in *Herodotus and his World*. Edited by Peter Derow

and Robert Parker. Oxford. 256–74.

Dillery, John. 2005. “*Chresmologues and Manteis*,” in *Mantiké: Studies in Ancient Divination*.

Edited by S.I. Johnson and P. Struck. Leiden. 167–231.

Flower, Michael. 2008. *The Seer in Ancient Greece*. University of California Press.

Fontenrose, J. 1978. *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations*. Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Johnston, Sarah. I. 2008. *Ancient Greek Divination*. Malden and Chichester.

Parke, H. W. and Wormell, D. E. W. 1956. *The Delphic Oracles*. Oxford.

Rhodes. P.J. 1991. "The Athenian Code of Laws, 410–399 B. C." *JHS* 111: 87–100.

Osborn, R. and Rhodes, P.J. 2003. *Greek Historical Inscriptions:404–323 BCE*. Oxford University Press.

Smith, Nicholas D. 1989. “Diviners and Divination in Aristophanes Comedy,” *Classical Antiquity* 8.1: 140–158.

Thomas, R. 1992. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge.

Thomas, R. 1995. “Written in Stone? Liberty, Equality, Orality and The Codification of Law.” *BICS* 40: 59–74.

Vernant, J.P. 1991. “Speech and Mute signs” in *Mortals and Immortals*. Edited by F.I. Zeitlin. Princeton.