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 Athenian 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. 2003. “Oracles for Sale” in Herodotus and his World. Edited by Peter Derow


