

Taster Session 2025/2026

Exploring the Oracle of Delphi

Dr Giulia Frigerio
(G.Frigerio@kent.ac.uk)





Myself
Dr Giulia Frigerio
PhD in Cognitive Archaeology



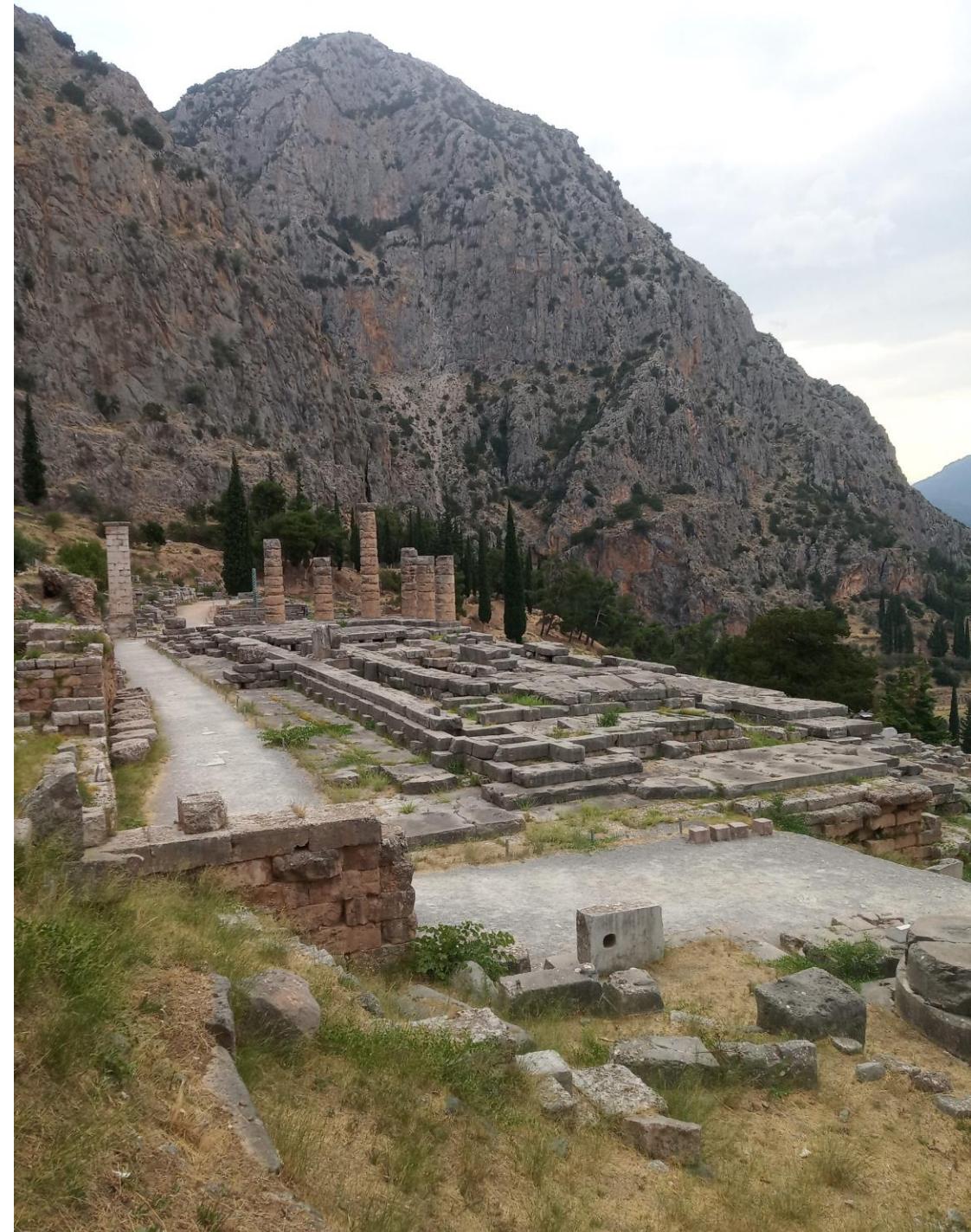
BRAINSTORMING

What is an oracle in your opinion?

How would you imagine an oracular experience to be?

The Oracle of Apollo at Delphi

Inspired divination in Ancient Greece, often referred to as "mantikê" (μαντεία), was a practice through which individuals sought knowledge or insights from the divine, often concerning the future or guidance in critical decisions. This form of divination was rooted in the belief that certain individuals could channel divine inspiration or messages from the gods.



The oracle of Apollo at Delphi

The Oracle of Delphi, located on the slopes of Mount Parnassus in central Greece, was one of the most significant religious sites in ancient Greece. It was dedicated to the god Apollo, who was believed to communicate divine prophecy through the Pythia, the priestess who delivered cryptic messages in response to inquiries from individuals and city-states.

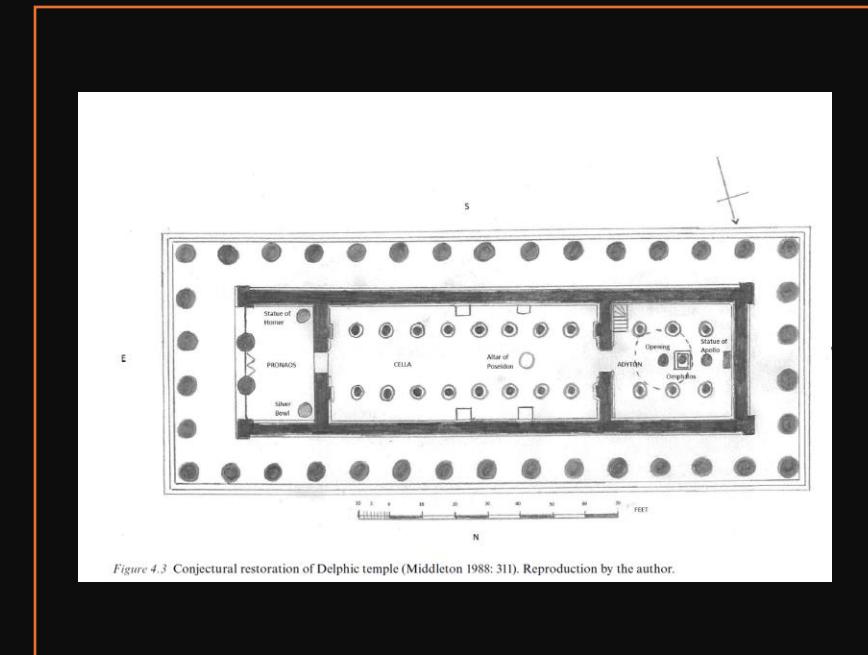


Figure 4.3 Conjectural restoration of Delphic temple (Middleton 1988: 311). Reproduction by the author.

Classical sources

HERODOTUS, PERSIAN WARS 155 (ca 430 BC)

155. There Polymnestus, a notable Theraean, took Phronime and made her his concubine. In time there was born to him a son of weak and stammering speech, to whom he gave the name Battus,¹ as the Theraeans and Cyrenaeans say; but to my thinking the boy was given some other name and changed it to Battus on his coming to Libya, taking this new name by reason of the oracle given to him at Delphi and the honourable office which he received. For the Libyan word for king is “battus,” and this (methinks) is why the Pythian priestess called him so in her prophecy, using a Libyan name because she knew that he was to be king in Libya. For when he came to man’s estate, he went to Delphi to enquire concerning his voice; and the priestess in answer gave him this oracle:

“Battus, thou askest a voice; but the King, ev’n
Phoebus Apollo,
Sends thee to found thee a home in Libya, the
country of sheepfolds,”
even as though she said to him, using our word, “O King, thou askest a voice.”

Classical sources

PLUTARCH, ON THE OBSOLESCENCE OF ORACLES, 438A-438C (1st cent. AD)

51. “Whenever, then, the imaginative and prophetic faculty is in a state of proper adjustment for attempering itself to the spirit as to a drug, inspiration in those who foretell the future is bound to come; and whenever the conditions are not thus, it is bound not to come, or when it does come to be misleading, abnormal, and confusing, as we know in the case of the priestess who died not so long ago. **As it happened, a deputation from abroad had arrived to consult the oracle. The victim, it is said, remained unmoved and unaffected in any way by the first libations; but the priests, in their eagerness to please, went far beyond their wonted usage, and only after the victim had been subjected to a deluge and nearly drowned did it at last give in. What, then, was the result touching the priestess? She went down into the oracle unwillingly, they say, and halfheartedly; and at her first responses it was at once plain from the harshness of her voice that she was not responding properly; she was like a labouring ship and was filled with a mighty and baleful spirit. Finally she became hysterical and with a frightful shriek rushed towards the exit and threw herself down, with the result that not only the members of the deputation fled, but also the oracle-interpreter Nicander and those holy men that were present. However, after a little, they went in and took her up, still conscious; and she lived on for a few days.**

Christian Sources

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, STROMATA 1.20 (3rd cent. AD)

But some of these thieves and robbers, as the Scripture says, predicted for the most part from observation and probabilities, as physicians and soothsayers judge from natural signs; **and others were excited by demons, or were disturbed by waters, and fumigations, and air of a peculiar kind.** But among the Hebrews the prophets were moved by the power and inspiration of God.

Modern sources

SCIENCE

Delphic Oracle's Lips May Have Been Loosened by Gas Vapors

By Tom Cohen · May 13, 2019 · 6 MINUTE READ

CULTURE

WOMEN

Puff, Puff, Past: The Oracle of Delphi Inhaled Deeply

How this ancient Greek witch saw the future with a little help.

HT BY TOM COHEN · MAY 13, 2019 · 6 MINUTE READ

Live Science is supported by its audience. When you purchase through links on our site, we may earn a

Home > News

New Theory on What Got the Oracle of Delphi High

By Heather Whipps · October 31, 2006



For Delphic Oracle, Fumes and Visions

By William J. Broad

March 19, 2002



See the article in its original context from March 19, 2002, Section F, Page 1 | Buy Reprints

Education ▶ Schools Teachers Universities Students

World news

Delphic oracle was ancient glue-sniffer

MAGAZINE ARTICLE

The American Conservative

High Times at Delphi

By Taki

The Oracle of Delphi—Was She Really Stoned?

Read the full article as it appeared in *Archaeology Odyssey*

By Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and John R. Hale · October 30, 2020 · 27 Comments · 15080 views · Share

What is your opinion?

- Was the Pythia sincere?
- Was she under the effect of drugs?

→ COGNITIVE
ARCHAEOLOGY!

